

## blood-bound camellias

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| Relationships:   | <a href="#">Dazai Osamu/Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Dazai Osamu &amp; Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Characters:      | <a href="#">Mori Ougai (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Ozaki Kouyou (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Hirotu Ryuuro (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Oda Sakunosuke (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Akutagawa Ryuunosuke (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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# blood-bound camellias

by [sapphirestormout](#)

## Summary

*I could do so much more with you*, he'd sworn, studying Sheep-stained bracelets — longing for a claustrophobic place in his skeptical ribcage. To wound from the inside.

*See?*, he would have said, from that carcass. *You bleed too*.

Or: Soukoku, in three acts.

## Notes

Welcome to this attempt — ***Please read***, before we start. Thanks ;)

1) **English is *not* my first language**; I beg you to forgive any particular mistake you will find in this story — and please **feel free** to let me know in the comments if it's something too atrocious!

2) When I first started writing this story, Stormbringer wasn't a thing at all — the first fanmade, very confused translations began coming out with the entire first arc already written. But having since then become my favorite novel, I absolutely wanted to include everything that it brought forward about Chuuya, Asagiri's beloved spring (and mine). The only detail I couldn't get rid of, and that I ask you to remember, is that **in this universe, the events of *Stormbringer* happened 6 MONTHS after Chuuya joined the Port Mafia — not a year**. That's all!

3) While this story is an attempt at narrating what might have happened in Dazai and Chuuya's three years of partnership, apart from events referred to (but never extended on) in the Bsd Wikia, everything is made up by me, and it's certainly ***not meant to be taken as obligatorily true or realistic***. Just my interpretation of facts!

4) This story is divided in six parts; all of them will be posted in this singular fanfiction. Five of the six parts are already written. Updates will, hopefully, not be too sporadic. No beta we die like Odasaku.

5) ***Do not*** copy past this work into any other website. Do not print. Bad past experiences.

6) Feeling like I should preface that this story does end with Dazai leaving the PM, which makes the Happy Ending tag more of a... “omg this is a prequel and they're on a weird ass honey moon in a french prison rn thank god” feeling. Let's say Canon Compliant lol.

7) Kudos and comments are always appreciated!

Enjoy!! :)

# ONE

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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### 異能特務課

*Special Division For Unusual Powers.*

*Archive 124. Yokohama, JP.*

-

*On The Righteous And Binding Command of Santōka Taneda.*

*Second In Command: Sakaguchi Ango.*

*File Number: 510003*

*Reports Dated: From Year \*\* To \*\**

*Topic: Double Black [双黒].*

*Ability Users Involved:*

*Dazai O. [T.S.] [Identification Number: A0000];*

*Nakahara C. [K.C.] [Identification Number: A5158 // Error. Please refer to file: Prototype A2-5-8].*

*Compressive Estimated Damage Worth: 550.523.249.200 yen.*

*Comprehensive Estimated Kill Count: 98.078.002 people.*

*[Please refer to file: The Formation of Suribachi City; the Nine Rings Conflict; the Dragon Head Conflict; the Annihilation of the Bishop's Staff; the Frostbite Season; The Yokohama Cleanse...]*

-

*On the matter of the Port Mafia's most feared and powerful asset, the Yokohama harbingers of devastation [...]*

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## **ACT ONE**

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*[...]*

*and they say the rain*

*each time it comes*

*brings autumn that much*

*closer [...]*

**[autumn poem, nakahara chuuya,**

**first stanza]**

Three days after the body of the late Boss was buried in the Bay, as *per* tradition, a package was left on the doorstep of the new Head of the Port Mafia.

“You should allow me to take a look at that,” his young companion pointed out. Narrowly *hungry* eyes brushed by the fireflies-sagged jar on the makeshift nightstand, only barely interested in the midnight-rain soaked box. “If I’m lucky, it might be a bomb.”

Mori Ougai huffed.

Not a far-fetched theory — weirder, *deadlier* things had been abandoned where mafiosi hoped his feet would walk, ever since the old Boss had been set aside. Some were sensible; other ones got an easy laugh from his disinterested accomplice.

“I refuse to disarm another bomb from under your seat,” he tutted. “You truly have no care for my possessions, do you? I had to order new editions of more than half of my biology archive, last time.”

Privately, the boy couldn’t have cared less. The medicine books lining the glass cases of the clinic had only been *somewhat* interesting for a blink — Mori had taken them off his hands the moment he had seen him trace skinless drawings and broken bones, and then set his eyes on his own limbs.

*Boring.*

The doctor abandoned the package on the desk; grabbed the firefly-jar instead, shaking it, amused by the intent way the boy's eyes followed the motion.

Offhandedly, he asked: "Whose grave did you steal it from, anyway?"

He blinked, slowly. His eyes were a tad too wide for his face, and his front teeth curiously crooked; something about his appearance was unsettling.

He had turned fourteen only so very recently; he'd been tied up to the Hospital bed in the corner of the two-stories building only a few hours before — belts wrapped around his spasming limbs; a piece of fabric — once a bridge between his jaws — now bitten and loosened at the edge of his chin, covered in blood and drool.

*Safety measures*, Mori had explained, over his whines. Then he had studied the gash he had given himself against the rusty bars of the bed, and picked up his stitching set.

*That's ugly. Why did you leave a scar?*, the boy had whined some more.

He had smiled. *Because it's you.*

"Steal what?" the boy asked.

"Your name."

Dazai Osamu blinked some more. "Unfair."

"Unfair?"

"You stole yours off the Boss' corpse. I only did the same."

*Port Mafia black*, he'd told him — handing him the suit he'd worn as blood stained the walls. Clothes and eyes and blood. A one-way ticket to the one place no hitchhiking had ever brought him to. Only the doorstep of a doctor with no frontiers.

"Who said I was going to blame you?"

"Oh," He perched up. *Attempted* to, before the restrains shoved him back in place. His eye — only one of them, unbandaged — was still on the fireflies. "You're going to kill me, then. Yes?"

He had been waiting for a reward for his quiet obedience. At the root, failure *was* him — as much as the water the man had sweated to drag him to the bed and keep him *alive*. The doctor never did expect him to stutter. Of course — he had mostly forced that habit off his tongue. He wondered what face the man would make if he fell back into it.

"I can't recall," the doctor wondered, "Did you want something written on your tombstone?"

"I thought the Port Mafia refused graves."

A small smile. The doctor loomed with the ease of someone much taller; the moonlight framing his silhouette had a crimson edge to it — someone must have killed someone under the Yokohama moon. “You’re not Port Mafia, are you?”

The boy shrugged. It didn’t really matter; the porch had smelled of death, so he had let himself fall. Shadows looked the same everywhere.

“If I end up not having a grave, you can carve it on my corpse.”

“I’m sure you will. A corpse isn’t much to leave behind.”

“It is, if it’s no one’s to inherit.”

A hum.

It wasn’t much, truly. On his first day in that unlikely *inferno*, he had received a coat. *An end and a new beginning*, the man had told him.

*Beginnings don’t interest me.*

*Ah — the end has to start somewhere, though. Does it not?*

Collaboration, perhaps. Butterfly and a pin, unwilling accomplices — except that Mori had planned for it, and Dazai had stood next to the blood graffiti on the wall, and let them stain his own bandages, and lied. *No luckier thief than that of a man who doesn’t want a thing*. Someone had to have started the process; someone had to be undergoing it. The only logical conclusion, he thought, was: both of them, neither.

Mori opened the package with little fanfare, messily cutting the edges — the work of an overexcited child under the New Year’s lights. The boy wondered *where*, exactly, Elise went off when there was no need for pretense.

All they got out of it was a red scarf.

“Oh,” Dazai laid his cheek on the sweat-damp pillow, allowing the sick warmth to seep through his bones. Inside the abandoned jar, one firefly flickered weakly — buckling to the bottom. “Guess hanging myself will have to do.”

Mori Ougai put it on, and that was it.



*scene i.*

*[quietly blew right through]*

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The dog Dazai had dragged home had been acting up *spectacularly*.

“Was starting a fight all that necessary?” Mori asked, leaning against the doorframe. He studied the dried trails of blood under his nose with a critical eye; only *politely* amused.

“If you don’t teach them young, they will pee on the carpet until their last day,” Dazai replied, still skimming through the sea of papers he had abandoned on the hardwood floor. “I bought a training manual. If Kouyou’s punishment wand doesn’t have him straight, I shall take care of it.”

Of all the rooms of the Headquarters, the old Boss’ bedroom was the darkest — mocking the still persevering New Years’ lights outside the Chapel-like windows. Reading had hardly ever been *easy*, what with the only-partly working eye and the echo of failures from childhood — Dazai often felt the urge to tease his shortcomings, though.

*Can’t talk and can’t read*, she had used to scoff. *One wonders how you’re meant to get by.*

*That’s where you’re wrong.*

“I told you, six months ago — that aggravating Slug should have been placed under *my* orders from the beginning,” Dazai insisted. The marker he was using had been stolen from Madame Tanaki’s secretary desk; she would want it back, empty or not. Always so materialistic. “He didn’t even hit *you*. Be glad.”

“You boys’ car privileges are still revoked.”

“That’s just unfair. He can *fly*.”

Mori stepped inside.

Because he was a coward, he knew not to show it — he ranked his eyes over the long-since vanished stains of blood on the walls, slow and urgent; a good intentioned sinner.

He had been damned more than a year before; his eyes were still on the boy by the window.

“The fight against Verlaine left a complicated toll on the city,” Mori reminded him, one hand on the bed’s column. Something about that place never let him stand on his own feet.

“Chuuya, in particular — He can barely talk from screaming his throat raw, wears more bandages than even *you*, and has just lost his past, his brother, and his friends.”

“Two of those are easily recoverable, though.”

In his hands, the documents went — *on the matter of Paul Verlaine and Black n. 12*. Then, scratched and rewritten — *on the matter of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine*. Then — *Transcendents*.

Dazai looked up, blankly. “Aren’t they?”

The Boss tilted his head. “You know.”

It wasn’t a question, so he didn’t answer. It wasn’t all that important. Mori was there, so, of course — Dazai wouldn’t stop thinking.

“Why *Slug*, anyway?”

“All those wounds he gave himself slowed him down unnervingly,” he replied, obnoxious. The world had looked particularly bright from the roof; Chuuya had barely been a dot in the sky, bleeding profusely — a blessed rain. Cursed, maybe. “Still do. Didn’t you see? He almost missed me when he threw himself over the table to beat me to a pulp.”

“Perhaps if you hadn’t suggested giving him up to the authorities as a terrorist?”

“*And*, I fed him a slug I found in the rubble, when he passed out on me,” he continued, “I don’t think he’s aware, though. He’s been so boring these last few days. Is mourning truly that vexatious?”

Gloved fingers ruffled his hair. He leaned into it — back, into, *away*. “Did you have fun partnering up?”

“Not at all,” he chirped. “Who’s Fukuzawa Yukichi?”

Mori paused.

Mori didn’t *pause* — he corrected himself. He let people think he had been taken by surprise. Dazai had been attempting to steal that little trick for a long time, now.

“An enemy,” he said, eventually. Masterful — Dazai would be a muse until the day he died, and an entertainer even as a corpse. “Unless it was needed for him not to be.”

There weren’t many things Mori needed. He used to make lists of it, spinning on a stool, mixing chemical components in a child cup he had stolen from Elise’s grasp — *an Ability Business Permit; a child who held himself disgracefully; for the Government to stop stalking them, for Dazai to talk more, less, slower*.

He considered.

“Enemies grant more advantages than allies are able to, often,” Mori added, unnecessarily. “Sincerity regarding intentions is a given. You can hardly not trust someone who has attempted at your life with that same life, can you not?”

He hummed. There was no desk in that room — or he would have sat underneath it, as he did around every table at the HQ, like the cockroach no one could quite step on hard enough.

There was nothing to gain, or he would have insisted.

“Dazai,” Mori called, “There’s nothing you can do.”

His shadow seemed to grow on the wooden floor, stretched bizarrely by the absence of sunlight. Its edges were a border; *on the other side*, he thought, *was his pointless disappointment*.

Dazai had dragged gold at a greedy man’s feet, and there was nothing to do but count banknotes until paper cuts bled him out.

“I don’t need him,” he let the man know. Just as unnecessary. “I can get you where you wish to be on my own, and you know it too.”

“I do,” Mori confirmed. “I know better, too.”

“It’s not worth it.”

His skeleton was as light as moon tears — the throat-clenching *trust* a fool in a choker had placed upon it wouldn’t make it gain a pound.

It had made him *magnetic*, that was all. Had made a dog the most human thing around.

*All he is*, Dazai considered, *is another chain on my feet*.

“No reason to settle for second best, when I can have what you two did in that valley. *You* know it. No need to be childish about it, is there?”

Verlaine’s picture stared back at him.

*I don’t know how to not be, about him*, he did not say. Dazai wasn’t stupid. It had been men who wanted him dead and men who bowed to him and fools who did neither; and then Arcade lights and someone whose orders-voice cracked in between vowels too.

Strategically fundamental and fundamentally annoying. *I don’t want him here and I don’t want him to fall from the sky and I don’t want him to break my nose again and I don’t want you to look at him*.

“You won’t let me die, as long as he’s around.”

Mori nodded. “No, I won’t.”

“I’m not waiting for your permission, though.”

“Kill him, then,” He shrugged. Dazai thought, lips trembling only *so* — that they were each other’s closest thing to a line in a testament. “Slash your throat over his corpse. We don’t dig graves in the Mafia, but I will ask them to disperse your ashes by the same shore.”

Not even that freak of a doctor would have survived cutting Dazai’s brain open to take a peek. He knew; he had tried.

Mori Ougai was, quite simply, a fool.

“Alright, then,” He gathered his papers; gathered the former Boss’ ghost from a grave bed — because he had killed him once, and he had killed him *twice*, and he would kill him again. “I wanted to ask — Why did you put Verlaine in the Ivy Dungeons?”

The man did not speak.

Then, inevitably, “They’re my favorite.”

“Oh.” He tilted his head to the side. “That is very stupid.”

“Is it? What’s your favorite spot?”

“In our territory?”

“Yes.”

Dazai drew a smiley face on the paper. It looked distinctively bored. “I don’t have one.”

Mori smiled, too. Nonsensically, he thought — *good job*.

Later, he made his way to the West Bay, where the waters were the greyest and the smell seemed to linger on clothing with each step.

Few passersby appeared — mostly unlucky workers, whom the holidays refused to quieten; occasionally, a wandering couple or two, huddled under an umbrella and painted red and gold by the festive illuminations. It was a romantic season, he knew; it had hardly helped him find a suicide companion. Most wouldn’t die at Christmas, if they could pick.

There was a corpse at the edge of the port.

Interested, he leaned on the railing a few feet upon it — pressing his upper body down until the metal sunk painfully against his waist. With his heartbeat pulsing in his wrists, he hummed.

A woman was crouched next to the body, pale hands fumbling with the filthy red crater on his chest, and his exposed ribcage. The man’s jaw was moving — whatever he was saying, Dazai was too far to hear his last words. Whatever it was that reflected the dim moonlight in the woman’s palm, it was too deeply soaked in blood for him to see.

She brought a phone to her ear, and simply said: “Now, V.”

Lifetimes and seconds raced across beautiful features, framed by dirty blond braids — she could have been even younger than Dazai, or she could have existed longer than that Western Bay had. All he knew was that she was smiling.

Gentle fingers rested on the corpse's eyes, lowering the eyelids. She mouthed something, holding her dug up treasure close to her chest — *religiously*. With ease, she pushed the body over the edge of the stone floor, watching it dangle between the waves — and disappear, quietly, through the bruise-painted sea.

Holding his feet up, Dazai wondered about the point of saying *hello*, sweetly and promisingly, to a dead man walking.

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## ONE MONTH LATER

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### *chapter i.*

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*Case number: 18009567*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. were summoned to the HQs, Building One. Under the orders of [...]*

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Dazai was good at cutting loose.

Despite numerous proofs of said fact — ranging from Mori's exasperated sighs at the empty space next to him, to the infamous *Spain Accident* — his ribs, pressed so *viciously* against the rain-wet wall of the alley he could read the graffiti on the stone even with his eye set on the road, didn't seem to agree.

"Hasn't this gone on *long enough?*"

Beads of sweat gathered at the edge of ever present bandages, mixing with the raindrops — he held his breath, sinking his nails in the wall until his heartbeat slowed down. He was still perfecting the trick, to be fair; still, the sudden *lightness* of his body was addicting. The sound of distant steps joined the voice battling the storm; it sounded as out of breath as he was. They had been running for centuries — only his pursuer's age could challenge the *obsessive* attention Dazai had dedicated to memorizing every inch of Yokohama.

The steps got closer. His fingers spasmed uselessly against a nonexistent trigger. Nowhere to go.

*Unless.*

"Hey!" the voice snapped, right as the too-long edges of his coat brushed the tips of their reaching hands. *Almost* — but too late.

Dazai paid it no mind, climbing up the rusty ladder of some abandoned emergency stairs. His feet landed brusquely enough to rattle his teeth, scraping across the roof of the nearest unstable building — and then he was running again, stalked by the clouds turning the sky into a silver rainfall.

Despite the mudless ground the roofs allowed him, the jumps got *dangerously* close to *Mori-will-whine-and-bring-a-cast* territory soon enough — he slid down the nearest pipe, landing right in front of a running taxi.

"*Watch where you're going!*" the driver snarled, over the symphony of horns of the road.

Dazai slid down his hood; he dove into the midday traffic, squinting with only one eye at the blurred world. He refused to venture to the sidewalk — it had been crowded *before*, under the threatening sky; and it had stubbornly *remained* so, even when umbrellas had begun not to

fit. Too many people were never as good of a disappearing prop as mafiosi insisted they were.

He only missed *it* for *one* reason — the icky, uncomfortable feeling of rain sticking against the sheep-patterned socks he had bought as a joke and kept out of boredom, justified by old Port Mafia sayings. *Never wander around with blood sticking to your shoes.*

A flash of familiar purple lit up the storm.

Unmerciful, a closed umbrella — powered by an Ability that died the moment it hit him *right on the back*, leaving him whining and half-bruised to the kitten-like grab of his pursuer's annoyed hands — shattered the rain.

He whined, disappointed.

“Honestly, Dazai,” Hirotsu Ryuro heaved, gloved hands *strangling* the steering wheel of some car he would bet he had hotwired. Perhaps he was imagining Dazai's throat, instead; in any case, no one in the Port Mafia ever really touched him. “Was the swim in the pond necessary?”

“*Shh*,” he tutted, pointing at the half-soaked book on his lap. “I'm trying to read.”

“Now you want to read.”

“Maybe it was my aim all along. *Red light!*”

It wasn't — but the startled halt he performed still bruised the man's knees.

Capture had come in the shape of the creak of whatever *pre-War* engine had once brought that vehicle to life successfully; Dazai wouldn't have called any part of that show a *torture for information* — but the swaying hips of the dancer-toy hanging from the rear view mirror were slowly devouring his sanity.

He scribbled it on the corner of his book. A consideration for the torture methods dissertations Mori *loved* having him write.

“Not to mention the ruckus you caused to Squad 104,” the man insisted, swerving through the traffic. There was always a fragrance of sorts around the Commander of the *Black Lizards* — cologne and viscera, and second hand-smoke. “The disrupted funeral, the attention from the police — what were you even doing in that fish market storehouse? Have you been locked up there for the last three days? No one could find you.”

“I know Mori gave you a disgraceful job, but you don't really *have* to find me,” Dazai let him know, helpfully. “In fact — I bet everyone would have *so much* more fun if you didn't.”

“Respectfully,” the man insisted, “Sending the entire organization in a frenzy every time the Boss summons you is — *unprofessional*, to say the least.”

“And inconvenient for you?” Dazai guessed, more gleeful than the storm outside should have allowed.

*Unfair*, he considered. The last time he'd truly caused a *frenzy*, he'd pointed a gun to his temple in the middle of a boring meeting with the third-to-lowest rank of Intelligence. But Mori had stuck him on *the table*, after — it had been weeks since the last true *frenzy*.

Munching the line between respect and annoyance was mildly exhilarating — waiting for it to snap violently enough to bring the Boss' loyal Commander to —

"Very much so," Hirotsu muttered. Hope died like a flame — he was too stubborn to ever lay a finger on the Boss' precious —

*Butterfly*, he considered. The man's clothes were covered in mud — even his monocle hadn't been left unscathed by the flower shop he had catapulted the two of them into. *Little butterfly on the wall*.

"These days, I have two of you to locate — in case you've forgotten."

Imperceptibly, his fingers tightened around the red edges of his guide.

"Ah, yes," he said, plainly. "Makes *Run from the handler* much more exciting, don't you think?"

"That is certainly a way of putting it." The Commander's eyes darted to him.

Strikingly cautious, always — long gone were the days of curiosity, sneaking looks to the boy who kept knocking on every door, hoping Mori would let him take part to boring meetings. Fourteen and fifteen were only so different.

"What does Boss even want?" he huffed. "There are no uncompleted tasks, no meetings I've purposefully missed, and no breaches in my new security measures. I've *checked*. I haven't even played any new pranks," Little white lie of its own right, but he doubted the old man would care about the surprise he'd left for Executive Ace. "I refuse to play dress-up with Elise again. I don't *care* if she's mad at him."

"I believe it's something a bit more serious than that."

"Oh," Red shone bright in the corner of his uncovered eye. "Do tell me more."

Dazai was out of his seat a beat later.

His feet slipped down the concrete, pushed by the motion — glowing hands were slammed on the edge of the driver's door, startling Hirotsu to the point of convenient distraction.

"*Damn you, Dazai!*"

He sprinted down the bottled-up lines of traffic, abandoning Hirotsu's curses and the barks of sneers from the newcomer behind.

[*The world handler — he sometimes mused — inevitably brought vaguely pet-like premises and consequences with it.*



*As such, he had been more than happy to use that title in regards to the other cursed half of that unwanted nannying, and his clear need for a muzzle of sorts. Mori wouldn't have liked the use of such practices against the mouths of his dearest investments, though — so, a dog-sitter would do.*

*God knew Nakahara Chuuya needed one].*

“You need to stop hijacking the syndicate's encrypted line to make me do your chores!” the boy screamed, leaving obvious indents on the roof of every car he was using as a foothold to catch up with him. “Wait until I tell the Archivists you’ve been messing with their shit!”

“Which revenge method is that?” he called, instead of saying, *I didn't know if you'd come.*

“Two hundred and go fuck yourself!”

*Where have you been for the last month,* was another candidate — but he wouldn't have dared. Lest obsession got mistaken for care; lest boredom got mistaken for obsession; lest he got mistaken for a match to the *neurotic* way Chuuya's eyes tended to follow him.

[You misunderstand, *Mori had told him, patting his head.* He's *your* handler too, Dazai.

*An ungrateful job.*

*That had to be Hirotsu's view on the matter; not that he would have ever dared to describe it as such. He was a smart man, who recognized threats as instinctively as thunder. Smart men — he knew — were to be trusted as far as you could throw them.*

*Sturdy as he was, the old man wouldn't even reach the other end of the street].*

The sky thundered. They ran.

*The Alley* — as their collective, partially sarcastic efforts had decided to refer to it — was located several neighborhoods after the Port Mafia Headquarters. The thirteen stone steps that led to it began abruptly, between an old apartment complex and some bar with an indigo neon sign that washed the stone in its bluish shade. The space was suffocating; the roof-ed dead end was framed by broken pipes, raining a thick curtain of water that mostly hid the alcove from sight.

At the price of getting soaked.

“Piece of *shit*,” Chuuya muttered, shaking his head like a wet dog, slamming a fighting boot on the pipes, nonetheless.

They squeezed in. He wouldn't have been able to sit on the ground with his legs straight — his shoes would have bumped against the metal fence door taking the place of a *dead-end* wall. There was nothing behind it, unlike what they had thought — but they'd found other uses for it.

“Move your ass,” the redhead hissed, “Gramps’ gonna find us soon, with the trail of destruction you left behind those fat feet of yours.”

Then, right as Dazai sorted through his pins, he proceeded to punch a hole through the rusty doorknob of the metal wall-safe.

“I was about to pick the lock from that,” he informed him, helpfully, as he did each time.

“You can do it next time,” Chuuya replied, just as habitually. His glance lingered a second too long. “You have a peach flower in your shitty hair. Where is it?”

“What?”

“The *painting*. Where is it?”

“Did they stuff your ears in whatever kernel you were locked up in for a month? I *meant* —“

A huff. Gloved fingers puckered something from his fringe; instead of crumbling it, Chuuya let the broken flower float to the ground. “Well?”

Dazai extracted the thin package from the back of his pants, tearing the princess-themed paper he had wrapped it with apart.

It was a small thing — wet from the run, but rusted in ways that only spoke of time. *Still life* was portrayed through dark strokes; fruits and plants and wilted flowers Chuuya only analyzed for a bit, before shoving the painting into the case.

His sleeve rose. A scar blinked.

He thought of red lighting in the sky.

Rain tapped gently onto the pipes; Dazai, whose body seemed not to know how to react to the notion of *something* it was being subjected to, blurted out: “Hirotsu is going to have to pay tickets for half the city.”

“Suits him.”

He gasped. “An aspiring Executive refusing to pay respect to his superiors? How scandalous.”

A vein in Chuuya’s temple pulsed.

The trio’s forced coexistence, under Mori’s smiling orders, had not been an easy feat — all three of them were too mistrusting for it. Dazai and Chuuya’s alliance had never been vocalized; only signed on the concrete they would practice rounds of *Run from the Handler* on.

“You slashed three of his wheels before we left,” Chuuya snarled. His hands struggled to keep the bundle of *stuff* inside the case — silverware, collection stamps, knives, padded cuffs, deck of cards. “Maybe the first reasonable thing you’ve done in your life.”

“Is that how you talk to the man doing you a favor?”

*“A favor my ass. You lost three consecutive rounds at *Zombie Apocalypse III*. You landed yourself in this treasure hunt bullshit business.”*

Trickling strands of hair were plastered to his freckled face. He had been trying to keep an ugly ponytail alive ever since joining; now, cut off at its root, its remains laid on his nape, soaked and muddy, like a wound. There were only so many ways one could look at Nakahara Chuuya — evaluating a threat, or dodging a flying kick. Or searching for him over the edge of the national average height.

“You’re not getting out of your debts so easily,” the boy muttered, like a second thought, as he punched the case-lock in again.

*Which ones?*, he didn’t ask.

They both knew the Flags weren’t on him. They both knew Dazai had been willing to pause the end of the world. They both knew he had played *Hopscotch* as Chuuya’s veins tasted electricity.

They knew Dazai had looked at him, one day, and had yet to look away. *In the good and in the bad of it*, he imagined Mori sighing.

He didn’t know if people were supposed to look *different* after a month of absence. No one who had left for that long had ever returned — corpse or curse. Kouyou’s still not-quite trusted fingers had begun to snap the *street-kid-hunch* out of him. His gaze was distant — settled on people Dazai had seldom met, and never cared to mourn. Settled on a boy who’d stolen his face but given Chuuya thief-guilt anyway.

“Sure,” Bandages always got scratchy under that weather — he got rougher. Chuuya had started wearing a leather jacket again; the scars he was hiding underneath had haunted Dazai’s mind for a whole month. “Because if it’s *my* atonement, Chuuya’s not to blame.”

His jaw was clenched. A bead of water fell from his eyelashes; it landed on that hard line.

“How much is left?” he asked. *Silence* was an unlikely result in any car crash occurring between the Mafia’s youngests. It sounded slightly less mean than: *how come you aren’t done mourning yet?*

“A shit ton,” Chuuya replied. Dazai didn’t know how to feel about the hideous hat — even less so, about the familiar chain hanging from it. “Might be done by Spring, though.”

*“Maybe, if you hadn’t vanished to some tacky French hat store for a month —“*

“Kouyou sent me to the border,” Not even the sapphire tinge of that place was enough to placate his firework palette; he was as headache-inducing to look at as always. “And fuck you, the hat is cool.”

“The hat is *so* not cool. There are no words to describe just how *not cool* the hat is.”

“It’s *not* — Like *you* have been around! What’s this I hear about you becoming a stalker?”

Dazai whined, long and bored, sliding down the nearest wall until his legs were bent and his tie half choking him. “Mori’s decided his spies aren’t enough eyes and ears around the city.”

“If you’re not careful, the Demon Prodigy will find out,” Chuuya mocked. “The Demon Prodigy is listening. The Demon Prodigy is in the crack of all our asses. Have you been going around with a chainsaw and a fucking mask?”

There was solace in being despised before being feared — it was not rewarding. Ghosts were *often* feared, but rarely were they cursed.

He hoped his soul wouldn’t linger, anyway.

“They talk about you too.”

“They aren’t even sure it was *me*, ” The boy brushed the matter aside. It was true — maybe because Mori wasn’t sure he could bet on a second round, he had been hesitant to claim the mess that had gone down in December. “Last thing I need. I’ve been back for *two hours*, and everybody’s been asking about the *famous King of Assassins*. ”

Dazai wondered if he noticed the way the name lingered on his tongue; unwilling to leave. Then, inconsequential, he said — because it was true, and obvious, and there were things Dazai *knew* not to touch: “Some of the Flags’ people blame you for it.”

Chuuya stood so still his outlines trembled.

*Dim*, he concluded. The local dog looked strangely dimmed out. Either a mourning attire — or Arahabaki’s tightened grip, after tasting air not enclosed by human lungs.

*That could be an issue.*

He spat out: “Stay out of my —“

Purple broke through from the top of the stairs, along to the roar of the thunder, framing hellbent eyes.

They weren’t quick enough.

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“Honestly, Dazai.”

*Double strike*, he thought.

Mori's face peeked under the edge of his office desk — where Dazai had stuck his *offended* body, the moment the guards had slammed the doors shut behind them. Only the latest of the dead things to crunch under there. “Do you guys *truly* need to exhaust poor Hirotsu like that?”

A huff came from the other side of the desk. “It wasn't even *my* fault.”

He snapped up. “That's such a *lie* — “

His head hit the makeshift roof.

Mori shook his head, sighing. “I suppose the Commander knew the risks. At the very least, you two aren't quick to find reliance,” A wink; a little hidden interaction, because he liked those. “Trust a man only as far as you can throw him, correct?”

*That's what I said*, he didn't let him know.

“You should tidy up,” Dazai offered, instead, unprompted. “You have *so* much room these days. Invest less on those gloomy curtains you like so much, and get someone to clean dust off these shelves,” He forced himself to sneeze. “Suicide by *cold* doesn't sound appealing.”

“Your recent interest in tidiness will never cease to amaze me,” Mori's eyes flickered to his mud soaked socks. He didn't blink at the childish design; only offered him a pair of shoes from one of the drawers.

A *single* size too big, of course. At their root, they shared pettiness.

*Would you mind standing up?*, he didn't ask. Renunciation wasn't his kind of death. *You will ruin your back. You will scare poor Madame Tanaki. Indecorous. Mean. Is it the headaches again, Dazai?*

With a bored sigh, he extracted himself from the desk.

Only an offensive number of *two* of the *Black Lizards* assigned to constant-Mori-watch stood at the doors, unconcerned with the halfway traitors they were meant to keep from running out. He waved cheerfully at Sama, Mori's well known favorite — she didn't even blink, but her dirt-blond eyebrows twitched.

Before allowing him to go stand a good distance from Chuuya's quietly seething frame, the doctor made sure to offer him one of the thickest dossiers on the desk — resting all his weight on its edge. His skin itched. *Tiredness*, he considered. Watching things of the world get touched by him was bound to grow exasperating, at some point.

Not one to keep the dog waiting on the porch, Dazai leaned down, pointedly, whispering: “I *almost* forgot you were there. Ever thought about putting a bell on that collar of yours?”

His eyes stayed forward. “Go fuck yourself, Bandages.”

He roamed through the pages in his hands — loudly. The leather of the boy's gloves creaked.

Boredom was a thorn in his side; so tightly intertwined with his ribcage it sometimes felt like an embrace. On the verge of puncturing his lungs — on the verge of being extracted. *Stuck*. Unfortunately, Dazai was made for obsession.

“Say,” he added, “Are your torture *ouchies* all healed up?”

Chuuya's head snapped in his direction as if electrocuted. “*You—*“

“*Ah-ah* — don't go and feel special! Being tortured is somewhat of an entrance exam for the Port Mafia.”

“Yeah?” He challenged, with the same tone he had used to formally accept the *Unofficial Deadly Dazai and Chuuya Prank War*, months before — much to the entire syndicate's chagrin. “Wanna retake yours?”

“Then,” Mori interrupted, abrupt enough to straighten them. “What's this I hear about you two hacking the encrypted communication line, now?”

Eerily coordinated, they fell silent.

Lectures had existed even in the *Before Hatrack* — a vague parenthesis of time, peaceful and weary; a chest that did not know the taste of a boot cutting its breath short and splitting life in two parts — but they had grown *irreparably* in the *after*.

*No clone*, he had once insisted to Mori, half high on painkillers, *could ever be* that *annoying and still lack an off button*.

“...for two Executives candidates,” Scolding did to Mori's features what spring did to dead flowers. It couldn't birth anything — it could, still, cruelly highlight the contrast. The smell of rotten usually became tasteless. “You boys need to understand that power *alone* will not get you where you wish to be. Bringing honor to your organization is a duty you accepted when you joined. Whether you wish to cause them or not, your childish antics do nothing but create *obstacles* to your aims,” A smile. “I would expect better from some of my best strategists.”

“*I'm* a strategist,” Dazai muttered. “He's just a dog with convenient rabies.”

Chuuya's gloved palm printed itself on his nape, almost sending him flying forward. “And you're a walking mummy some *idiot* didn't lock well enough inside a shitty tomb!”

Mori stared at the ceiling.

Some people in the syndicate, he had heard, — because lately he heard *everything*, as he did before; but with *permission* — called their coexistence an investment. Most were simpler men — they only called it a bother.

“We didn't even sabotage the line, anyway,” Dazai spoke up. “I simply created another channel, and made sure the main one would *occasionally* play Elise's favorite cartoon jingle.

To lighten up the men's days!"

Chuuya's teeth creaked. Unenthusiastically, he encouraged: "And it's the twenty four hours long loop too."

"Lovely, right?"

"I'm sure."

"*Plus*, you've been saying they rely on the line too much — This is the perfect occasion to force some autonomy."

"Someone should fix the in-ears, by the way," Chuuya added. "Why are they shaped like pears? They hurt like a motherfucker."

"*Thank you* boys, for your fore-thinking," Mori's eyebrow curled, blocking Dazai's lips from delivering a mockery. "Unfortunately, we cannot afford it, as of now. Especially considering..."

He trailed off.

Thunder shook the floor-to-ceiling windows, painting shapeless golden shadows on the endless shelves behind the man's back. Over an exchanged glance, they frowned.

Chuuya dared: "*Considering?*"

The man cleared his throat. Dazai breathed, very slowly.

"Do better," Mori ordered, at last. "I'm afraid that, otherwise, measures will need to be taken. You don't want to lose more privileges, I'm sure — You've just returned, Chuuya. Given recent endeavors, I'm expecting great things from both of you."

His smile grew distant. *Ask him where he was*, Dazai thought about whining. *Ask him why he left, he won't lie to you. Ask him to tear his skull open for me to get a peek and he will do it.*

*Great things.*

From the corner of his eye — only for a mere blink — he could have sworn he saw black smoke wings, erupting from the silhouette next to him. He wondered if his bones screeched at night. If being caged was different from being vacant.

*(With a show of trust, he thought, came something sharply more obstinate. Dazai didn't care about being worthy of something he hadn't asked for — maybe it was the obsessive blinking of a man whose dog had almost been run over.*

*A need to keep an eye on him, which he would have despised. A need to despise him, which he would be looked at for).*

The Boss concluded, smiling like the thin moon: "I'm certainly looking forward to some more collaboration. It would be a shame if you allowed something as childish as *dislike* to

interrupt your current winning streak, yes?”

Eyes low, they exchanged a glance.

*Stupid*, Dazai thought.

Uncharacteristically blind, even, from a man who lived off understanding. They had been racing against each other since the first granule of debris from Suribachi City had landed on his tie. It was the only way he'd ever managed to convince him to go along to his unimportant desire for a normal enough intake of air and two pairs of joysticks; by betting he *wouldn't*.

“Well, then,” Mori clasped his hands. “I’m sure you understand. I will see you at the next briefing. Dazai, I want those security plans I asked for on my desk by tomorrow —“

“That’s *so soon*! I had this poisonous mushroom I wanted to —“

“— Chuuya, you can refer to Kouyou for the next troubles we’re going to need your help with. Until then, you may continue showing us *wonderful* results in the jewel department,” The former doctor might have as well kicked them out, with the grin he offered. “*Please*, do try not to make my Commander lose his patience enough to quit.”

“If he hasn’t quit in seventy years, I doubt he will now,” Chuuya rumbled.

“Hirotsu’s not even fifty.”

“He *isn't*?” they chorused, disbelieving.

“Apart from car privileges, maybe we can find something else to take,” Mori continued, undeterred. “Perhaps *talking* ones. Maybe that Arcade you two seem to like?”

They kept quiet.

He pressed: “If that’s all?”

A mumble: “Yes, Boss.”

The doors opened.

“Oh,” Executive Ace blinked. “Would you look at *that*. The Demon Prodigy and the Jewel Prince walk into an emergency meeting.”

Dazai had always thought the man vaguely resembled a guinea pig — perhaps the coat hanger at the entrance of Building Four. The displeased curve of his mouth said everything they would ever need to know about his opinion of them.

“You’re the one who came in, actually,” he informed him.

“*Prince?*” Chuuya snapped.



A gelid smile. “Yes, isn’t it nice?”

“Certainly clever,” he tutted. “You could have informed us about your blood lineage sooner, though. Did you copulate with a dog?”

Matching disgusted expressions found him. They still didn’t quite manage to distract themselves from each other.

*Predictable*, of course — Ace made jewels from lives; Chuuya had made himself a life from jewels — smuggling affairs *no one* had conducted as efficiently as he had, in the entire Port Mafia’s history.

Not even Dazai himself. Allegedly.

A good explanation for jealousy — except it was much easier. As the man knew too well, Boss liked most people in the Port Mafia — no matter how *canine* — more than he liked Executive Ace.

It took them a moment to catch up.

“*Emergency meeting?*” Chuuya echoed, with a squinted look to Dazai, first — *did I miss something?* — and then Mori. The last *emergency* meeting between the Executives had concerned an assassin from France, and his so-called brother. “Has something happened? Ane-san —“

“Nothing you two need to concern yourselves with,” the former doctor was quick to say, amiably, laying one hand on each of their shoulders. Gently, but *firmly*, he pushed them towards the door, pretending not to notice Dazai’s curled eyebrow. “Just boring old Executives matters, yes?”

“You said we’re *candidates*,” Dazai pointed out, as obnoxious as possible. “Should we not practice?”

His grip tightened. “There are many candidates.”

“No, there aren’t.”

“*Yes*, there are. If we gave everyone *on-field* training; secrecy would be lost.”

“Besides, this isn’t a matter for children,” Ace intervened, as they brushed past his tacky coat. Gems were hidden in every stroke of his clothing, every unnoticeable detail.

Chuuya’s entire body seemed to *jolt* forward for a death grip, even with his hands still stuck in his pockets. “Call me a *child* again, if—”

He cleared his throat.

The boy clenched his teeth. “*Sir.*”

“When you say *corpses*,” Dazai insisted. At the very edge of the doorframe, he sunk his nails into the wood, *fighting* not to be pushed out. “Do you mean *our* men or enemies?”

“Corpses are corpses,” Mori replied, as if he had ever truly been a doctor. “Nothing you need to concern yourselves with.”

“But I want to *see them* — “

“I could help,” Chuuya offered.

“Victories truly get to youngsters’ heads,” Ace huffed, flaunting his steps towards the main desk. Dazai began to consider that *perhaps*, the bomb they had left in his office during a rougher round of the *Prank War* had gotten to him. “You are good enough assets, boys. But you cannot yet bring thirty three of our men back from death, can you?”

“*Thirty men?*”

Mori’s smile froze — sharpened. “Perhaps some *confidentiality*, Ace?” he called, fogging up the windows with his tone alone.

Chuuya hid a snort in his fist. Dazai studied the glimmer of entertainment in the Boss’ eyes — as familiar as the sight of his own bones; of butterflies on a wall — and he didn’t.

Paling, the man bowed.

If he could feel Mori’s gaze on him, he was smart enough not to attempt to meet it. Yokohama’s own *Taishan Fujun*, and his many reasons to be angry. His little efforts to be so.

“Forgive me, Boss,” he grimaced, too late.

“How did we lose more than thirty men without knowing *how*?” Dazai asked. “Have you checked their pockets? Is it *gruesome*? Do their faces show a bliss I can only *begin* to imagine? Maybe they went to the *Pomegranate* and found a woman to—“

Chuuya’s furious gaze snapped to him. “How is *that* your first thought, *honestly* —“

The doors were opened a bit more. With little care and an exaggerated sigh, Mori shoved them out — his scarf brushing the floor; his eyes hidden behind curtains of ink hair.

An old pose — mastered from nights with his hands still wet from this or that assassin sent to get him, or to irritate him, or to not be *useful*.

“Nothing you need to concern yourselves with,” he spelled out, one last time. Dazai felt him lie with the ease of the changing seasons. “Someone will let you know if I need your collaboration. Welcome back again, Chuuya. Oh — and *do* fix the communication line, would you? We might just need it, *very* soon.”

With that, and with his widest smile, he slammed the doors on their faces.

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It was, ultimately, Hirotsu's fault.

"Who the fuck does he think he is, anyway," Chuuya mumbled, bent over the pile of reports they had been tasked with typing into files.

It was an Archivist's job, though Dazai had been the one to introduce the *concept* of it, tired of dusty dossiers and glasses-wearing men — and Archivists were hardly mafiosi who could demand entertaining work. It was certainly a change from Kouyou's mandated calligraphy lessons — arising whenever they happened to irritate her just a bit *too much*.

It certainly made it harder to pile his work in Chuuya's hands. Computers were heavy.

"As if he's never eavesdropped on the upper floors. *Everyone* eavesdrops on the upper floors," His *tsk!* matched a thunder from outside, only slightly more vicious. "That's why they're *there*."

It was factually untrue, but Dazai could easily imagine how his time with the Flags might have created that belief. The *one* time he had seen Albatross from up close, the man had been eagerly pretending to read the texture of a fake plant by Mori's office.

"Yeah," He nodded, energetically, sprawled out in his seat. Mori would *hate* it. "That's why."

A flash of yellow and red popped up from the shorter side of the desk. "I don't see the point," Elise chirped, with that nails-on-chalk tone of hers, flattening one rosy cheek against the ink-spilled mahogany. "You should just hear everything, all the time, everywhere — Like *I* do!"

Chuuya opened his mouth. Wisely, he eventually opted out from explaining.

Spying on the meeting had been the natural conclusion to the circumstances, though — Dazai could only blame the other boy's intoxicating presence on his foolish decision to pick the easiest route. Being found crunching down and bruising each other in an attempt to stick an ear through a slot of the doors was all but *dignified*.

Elise had caught a glimpse of them — screeched their names, obviously, because she was a delight in pastel and Mori's clammiest grip. Hirotsu, still panting for breath, had only been merciful enough not to drag them by the ears.

"Yes, thank you, 'Lise," Dazai patted her head, yawning — because Mori patted *his* head, and he disliked it. "I've been telling Chuuya his phenomenal canine senses have gone rusty."

Every pen on the table jumped with his slammed hands. “And I’ve been telling *her* that she should do us all a favor and shove a doll’s foot up down that big mouth of yours —“

“He did tell me that,” Elise nodded. “And this is boring, so maybe I should.”

Dazai’s office was a square of pale walls and endless crimson carpets, optimal for hiding blood. It was, according to the voices, one of the fanciest in the Five Buildings — the most he had ever felt towards it had been mild curiosity, upon noticing an alluring hook on the roof.

It was mostly empty. Recent additions, though, had stained the pristine atmosphere — *Chuuya’s A Sore Loser* fliers he had yet to hang around the HQs, the lighter he had stolen from Hirotsu, Elise’s favorite doll, a scribbled drawing of blood Q had left there, and a *Dogs Not Allowed* sign Chuuya kept throwing out of the window.

“Why the hell does it smell like fish in here, anyway?” Chuuya retched, looking around. “Did you adopt a life-sized mackerel and stick it up your ass or something?”

“Crude,” he hummed, clicking absently on the mollified buttons of his game console. “Might be the expired fish I forgot to place in the vents.”

From his guarding spot in front of the doors, Hirotsu almost dropped his cigarette. “You *what?*”

“How did you forget?” Chuuya grunted. The pile of documents between them seemed to appeal to him even less than it did to Dazai; it probably had something to do with the *Grammar For Beginners* books he had noticed piling up in Kouyou’s office. “Was the smell that familiar?”

Dazai showed his tongue. Chuuya rolled his eyes.

*Eyes.*

*Corruption* had swept through Yokohama mercilessly, not unlike the snow beginning to fall from thunder-plump clouds. It had left changes in the wind — new gloves for Chuuya’s hands, twelve and half new pages in Mori’s files on him, and a burned iris in the boy’s left eye.

His new — somewhat *heavier* — gaze had no solution and no question; one eye as efficient of a cage for the sky as ever, the other the color wood might take if burned at the edges.

A hand appeared on the other side of the desk. “Dazai smells like guns, though. And crab,” Q informed them.

“That’s because crab is a delicacy.”

“I like salmon!” Elise intervened.

“You don’t even *eat*.”

“I’ll eat *you!*”

“Unlikely,” Crab *was* good, though. All of the empty cans under his bed were good, whenever he remembered to snap them open. *Favorites* were a more complicated issue. None of it ever stuck.

“No, he smells like dead fish,” Chuuya swore. He sent a furtive look to their sentinel. “Not the only dead thing around here either.”

The *GAME OVER* text blinked. “Not the usual dead thing,” Dazai hummed.

Q didn’t seem particularly interested in the intricacies of the convo. It was already a miracle they had uttered more than a senselessly eerie word the whole day — visits out of *The Room* mostly consisted in sulking around, absently scratching their arms, and staring Dazai down with those strangely shaped pupils of theirs.

They liked *Chuuya*, though — much to the boy’s badly hidden disappointment, whenever he caught the bloodthirsty child hiding under his coat. Dazai was simply tired of filing protests for unpaid nannying at Mori’s desk.

“I know many dead things,” Elise pointed out, blinking at Q with all the superiority of a *less-child-than-you* attitude. The line of her mouth wasn’t quite human.

Mori insisted she had been different, before.

Before the *War*, Dazai assumed. Perhaps her penchant for youth had begun when there were no more wounded to suck dry. As far as he had been able to extract from her distracted eyes, her only thoughts on the change were —

*Ah, blame him! If he hadn’t been so obsessed with that little doctor girl!*

The children were still talking. “You *do?*”

“Yes! Rintarou was a doctor, you know.”

Q bit their lip, fascinated. “Can I see?”

“Of course! If we dig around a bit, we can find Dazai’s old grasshoppers.”

He winced. “The ones you danced on?”

Chuuya made a face. “Why would you raise *grasshoppers* of all things?”

“I was hoping to one day find a potion that would turn me into a creature small enough to ride on them,” Dazai sighed, starting a new game. “A bit like you. And then, I would use them to jump to Saturn, and die of asphyxiation.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I truly hope you’re not referring to the size part.”

“Saturn is less dense than water,” Chuuya insisted. “Theory of flotation, jackass. If you put —“

“I know many oceans,” Elise swore.

Q gasped. “Do you?”

“Ane-san should have never given you those Physics manuals,” Dazai scoffed. “You’re turning into a full nerd —“

“I’m fucking *not* —“

“You can’t be the ominous gravity user *and* a nerd,” he whined, undeterred. “It’s gonna be bad for business. People will start fearing you might give them homework instead of threats.”

“How about I show you some —“

“Boys,” Hirotsu called, dryly. “The *reports*, if you would.”

*A little respect would do you good*, Kouyou was the only one brave enough to chirp, usually. Proper and beautiful; far away and smacked away from his hands before he could even imagine brushing against her kimono. He’d be more polite, he thought, if he had been left in her care instead. He’d be *blinder*.

What had Ace told Mori? *She has yet to say a word — yet to even scream. Being found next to a corpse shouldn’t cause such a close-off, I believe.*

*No*, Mori had agreed. *Not when she might have made the corpse herself.*

When he raised his gaze, Chuuya was already staring back.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to live?” he asked.

“I said I wouldn’t *die*, for now.”

“Boss doesn’t want us to interfere,” the boy insisted, eyes subtly set on their guard dog. “In case you didn’t notice.”

“Are you actually stupid?” Dazai asked. “Did that seem like the behavior of someone who doesn’t want us to *know* what’s happening?”

Chuuya stared. “Yeah?”

“He would have kicked us out before Ace arrived, if that were the case,” he insisted. “Mori knows when people are coming into his office — and he’s well aware of what Ace’s willing to do to flaunt his power over us.”

“Then why set up that whole show?”

Disgust pulsed against his temples; he laid his chin on his crossed arms, sighing long and deep. “Clearly, he trusts we’re just noisy enough to start collaborating — if it’s for the sake of finding out.”

Horror spread on Chuuya’s face.

Frustration was a close second. Not *denial*, though — and that was the only answer he needed.

“Elise,” Dazai called, offering his hand. “I will let you ride on my back for the entire week, if you fail to mention this to Mori. Deal?”

She hummed, tapping a finger on her chin — holding Q’s expectant breath hostage. Chuuya curled an eyebrow in her direction; she blushed so hard it matched her dress.

“*Alright*,” she sniffed, fakely bored. “But you carry Q, too!”

“Q’s reward is not being permanently locked up, like the naughty prankster they are,” he replied, ruffling both of their hair. “Now, if you’ll allow me.”

Chuuya’s sigh was visceral. He climbed to his feet, nonetheless. “Kouyou will murder me.”

*Should have been my dog*, Dazai considered taunting him with. Before his words could settle, though, his fingers threw the bullets he had extracted from his gun in the air — Chuuya immediately kicked them to the doors, sinking them deep and close enough to the outlines of Hirotsu’s frame to startle him into a half death.

Elise let out a shrill for the sake of it, as Q dragged the too-long sleeves of their shirt to their eyes, unsubtly spying between their fingers.

“*Boys* —“

A flash of red shook the whole room; old combat boots ran across the roof, shattering one of the floor-to-ceiling windows with ease — and Chuuya flung himself out, into the grey.

“Dazai,” Hirotsu warned, slamming a hand on the nearest seat to send it flying in his direction. He skipped away, under the kids’ laughter, rushing to the makeshift door. “Dazai, don’t you *dare* go to the dungeons —“

“Oh, she’s in the dungeons?” He blinked. “Why, thank you. I suspected it, seeing how Ace deals with torture — But I really wasn’t sure”

“*Dazai* —“

“Stay with Q, yes? You know they’re not allowed to be left alone.”

“*You* aren’t allowed to —“

With little forethought, he jumped out.

Thunder and lighting had abandoned the sky, leaving it smokey and soft. As wind whipped his lips to the point of tearing the skin, he opened his mouth and gulped every snowflake landing on his tongue.

Hopelessly, he exhaled.

Leather enclosed his bandaged wrist; a grip abrupt enough to make his shoulder protest — he dangled from the edge of the emergency stairs, hips knocking against the rusted metal.

Dazai looked up.

A shock of scarlet broke through the plump candor of the ether. He thought of blood, at first, because habit made the young — then, of the flowers some old man sold an alley from there. *Some people*, he admitted, *were just born to be where there was enough space to destroy.*

“Don’t you dare make me an accomplice,” Chuuya growled, hauling him up with no fatigue.

The racket of their shoes landing on the stairs seemed to rattle the whole building, startling some suited men behind the glass walls, as they slipped and raced down. Snow fell verbosely; he felt it seep over the edge of his flapping coat.

It took them twenty floors to find an open window. Dazai kicked the unlocked seal off, only *half* yelping when Chuuya pulled him inside by the belt. Hirotsu was nowhere to be found.

“Think he stayed with Q?”

“He *better*,” the boy scoffed. “I don’t want to deal with that bloodthirsty fetus.”

Some wide eyed mafiosi spluttered as they rolled onto the carpeted floors; they dashed to the stairs, unwilling to test their tolerance in a confined space — journeys in the elevator usually ended with stepped-on feet and pinched bruises. Eventually, they rolled into the *Entrance Hall*.

“Good morning, boys,” Madame Tanaki greeted, seemingly unconcerned with the harsh breaths out of their mouths. “Chuuya, you didn’t tell me you’d be back so soon!”

“Morning, Tanaki!” they chorused, quick to run past her to slam their hands on the furthest door of the room — pushing and snarling and *scratching*, attempting to tear the secret opening to the Dungeons open. “You look as radiant as ever,” he chirped.

Her confusion filtered through the ashtrays and chandeliers, perplexed even under their whines and threats. “Boys, are you allowed to go —“

“*Sure we are!*”

“Oh. Then should I —“

The door opened, sudden enough to send them flying back. They scurried for the stairs, letting it close behind them with a hiss, shutting the silver sunlight of the afternoon outside.



Dried mud and spiderwebs were the only upholstery down that endless path; the walls were sharp to the touch, wet with humidity — at a second look, and a second touch, the fractured rifts were shaped like desperate fingers. The steps could barely fit a single body; no lights led the way, apart from flickering yellowish LEDs barely dimming the shadows. Their texture was grainy and uneven; uncomfortable even under good soles — the one time Dazai had wondered about it out loud, Hirotsu had been quiet for a very long moment.

*It isn't mere cement*, he had said.

He had refused to add more.

Dazai wasn't down there often — Mori preferred to offer lessons where the sun would burn the image under his eyelids. When *Tainted's* glow painted the walls red, he only pettily nullified him twice.

"I can imagine better school trips," he commented, eventually, down that endless path. "Feel free to file a complaint for the ruined kindergarten experience. I won't read it."

A crack was left on the next step the boy's foot touched; not Dazai's bones, at the very least. "The closest thing a freak like you ever had to school trips must have been Old Yamamura's execution back in August."

"That *was* fun," Dazai confirmed. "No need to get defensive, though. What, didn't the Flags give you the full teenage summer experience? With all the time you spent with —"

His voice was clipped. "Get their fucking name out of your mouth."

A beat.

*Alright*, Dazai categorized. Lines to be drawn; cartography to be lined. Some things weren't made to bleed only by the hand of cruelty; they bled by the hand of mere sound, too.

*You are either promising or you aren't*, Mori had told him, once. An interlude to those endless chess games he would distract his overcharged brain with, uncaring of loss. *Every man lost is a loss. A bit more, if he's Port Mafia.*

*How dishonest*, he had replied, *we don't even bury our dead.*

"But the Sheep *must* have," he replied, instead — because it was safer, and some grievances became quiet sooner. "Did you guys wear matching jackets and visit the Museum of the Suribachi Disaster every second Sunday of the month?"

Chuuya scoffed. "You would be laughing if you knew what the Sheep were like."

He skipped two steps, confident in a quick death by smashed skull — changed his mind, and hung off the boy's wrist, ignoring his curses at the sudden darkness. "*My* school trips, not that you asked, were terrible. Some kid tried to jump into the shark pool before *me*, once."

Skepticism painted his snort. "What would *you* be doing in school? Showing off what mummies looked like to innocent brats?"

“Not quite. What *were* the Sheep like?”

“It’s been months,” A bleeding sun blinked to life, pooling all the way to the tarnished square frame of the entrance to the dungeons. “Who the hell cares.”

Reddish rays of led lights chased each other across endless stone walls, chained boulders, and a floor so deeply stained in blood it *creaked* under his soles. Dazai jumped, slapping his hands on the upper frame of the doorless threshold. None of the *Mori Corporations* efforts were there — no chandeliers or manicured hands from a woman playing secretary. Only the cat-piss-like smell of viscera.

And the wails.

Mostly echos — eerily similar to the winds lulling his home to sleep. Dazai haunted his own house everyday; those people haunted their graves.

“Shit,” Chuuya’s face turned sour. “It smells like death in here.”

“That *is* kind of the point.”

“Shut up.”

“Better or worse than the slums?”

“The jury is still out,” He paused, eyes settling on the central column. “I’m assuming that’s her.”

Her clothes fell around her kneeling frame like stomped out petals from the long-wilted — hands held over her head by the chains, legs spread as if broken. The dried blood had turned golden locks into reddish strands of dirt and mud.

As close as they stepped, she didn’t move.

*[“Not a single word,” Ace spit out. “The bitch’s resisted everything. I would think she was one of Kouyou’s whores, if her standards weren’t higher. She doesn’t even throw up — Which takes half of the entertainment out of it, too.”*

*“She’s certainly aware of the violence, but she doesn’t seem touched by it. No Gang tattoos, no Ability marks. Perhaps —” He hesitated. “Perhaps, if we could try to use Dazai’s Ability —”*

*“No,” Mori said, final. He was a man the way knives were blades. It meant — “No, keep him and Chuuya out of it.”]*

Two fingers pressed between his eyebrows, but a bit higher — clicking almost the center of his perplexed forehead.

“Stop frowning,” Chuuya ordered, making his unhurried, unhesitant way to the barely-breathing corpse. “You look stupid.”

Speechless, he dared: “Excuse me?”

“You said *she*’s the suspect for the murder of thirty of our men?”

The woman didn’t react to their impolite investigation — allowed them to study her scalp, force her eyelids apart, prove Executive Ace right when she refused to flinch under the touches. She was ageless; if anything, the blood made her look younger than she probably was — in a strangely *decayed* way; the painting of a deceased noble child, covered up by dry colors.

“Didn’t Ace say she had no tattoos?”

Chuuya’s fingers hovered over the dark lines on her shoulder — nine concentric circles, thin and deep, not wider than a man’s hand. “He may be a moron, but no way he’s *that* blind.”

Dazai squinted. “I don’t recognize that.”

“Could it be why she doesn’t feel pain?” he proposed, immediately aware of his memorization of all underground-related affairs. “An Ability?”

“I’m touching her right now. If it is, it’s not one that can be deactivated — if not by the User. Pinch her nose.”

“What?”

“*Pinch her nose*. I want to see her awake.”

The sheer offense on his features made him look the youngest he had since the Flags’ funeral. “Why don’t *you* do it, jackass?”

“Because you’re right *here*,” Dazai reminded him. “And you go around wearing tacky gloves. Maybe a little foresight, next time?”

Chuuya fumed. His hand twitched at his side — he leaned across the woman’s body, pressing two fingers on the sides of her nose.

Nothing happened, for two blinks.

On the third, the woman’s enraged hands were reaching out for his neck, sharp and abrupt.

“*Shit* — “ Chuuya jumped back, swept up by the frantic body jolting in their direction. More instinctive than thought-out, he kicked Dazai in the chest, sending him flying a few feet further from where he’d been crouched down.

The darkness caught fire — when he leaned on his elbows, Chuuya’s *Tainted* glowing frame stood between him and the prisoner.

Her body was tilted dangerously close to the ground, wrists tearing each other open a bit more with every push — foam pooled around her mouth, trailing down her chin. A flick of

Chuuya's shoe to her knee plastered her to the ground, gaining a hundred pounds more. Cheek squashed on the floor, she *growled*.

From the space between Chuuya's legs, Dazai studied her frantically-moving eyes.

"I do appreciate an energetic girl," he said, finally, standing up. He kicked Chuuya's in the calf. "Could you throw me a bit more gently, next time? You almost broke my back."

"One would think you'd be ecstatic."

"Dying by your hands sounds like a recipe for disaster," he underlined. "You would probably leave me with only half my head off. Look at how *poorly* you wake people up."

"You—"

"Alright then," He put his feet on both sides of the girl's legs, the tips of his shoes brushing against her fingers, and asked: "Good morning, beautiful. What were you doing with the corpse of one of our men?"

She growled again.

It was borderline *too* animalistic for a person, but too close to words to be anything else. She tilted her head back to meet his eyes, fighting the grip of modified gravity — and slammed her skull back against the rock.

"I know you can hear me," Dazai insisted. He snapped two fingers in front of her eyes; she blinked. "That's good. See? You can do it. What were you doing there?"

She crashed her head back so hard a new patch of blood appeared on the boulder. Sighing, Dazai tilted his body back to lean on his heels — and squished her fingers under the sole of his feet. Unexpectedly enough to make even Chuuya straighten, her hissing turned into a cut off scream.

He lifted one leg, abandoning all his weight on one shoe — his foot rubbed until it tasted the ground, snapping the bone on impact.

"Maybe you need a mental image," he considered. "I get that. You're tired. Christmas was right at the doors — Lights everywhere. Imagine my surprise when I saw such a pretty woman spend the holidays with a carcass. I heard you say something to him, by the way — But why greet the dead?"

A tactile pause came from behind him. "You mean you saw her too?"

"Tell you later," He stepped away from the crusted bone curling on the vomit-traced floor. Hopping, he checked the underside of his shoe — cleaned it on the cheek not pressed to the ground.

"It'd be nice to get an answer," He pressed the shoe down, as she retched. "I usually get one."

"Dazai," a voice called. "*Focus.*"

“Yes, yes,” He crouched down, cradling the woman’s head in his hands. He wiped two lines of tears from her cheeks. “Sorry about that. By the way, who was that *V* I heard you call after you snooped through that man’s chest?”

Silence.

He crushed her head against the ground.

Her nose shattered on impact, framed by a sickening sound. He kept her down, chains rattled in an effort to bend her arms. Sitting cross legged in front of her, chin on his hand, he offered: “Here’s what I think.”

“But don’t tell Ace, yes? We’re not supposed to be here, you know. I think you didn’t *get* captured. I think someone sent you here,” He tilted his head. “And I think they’re going to be *rather* mad if you talk — But madder if you don’t, and I offer my best efforts to your fragile bones.”

Imperceptibly, the woman stilled.

“Want to know why I think that?” He grasped her chin, meeting her gaze through the swollen, violet skin. “No one stays silent for *that* long over money — not Mafia’s money, especially. You don’t have a *vendetta*. I know you saw me at the Port. You didn’t say anything. And if you knew someone was there, and still let the name *V* slip, it means you wanted the Mafia to know *something* — That you let yourself be found next to a victim.”

He settled two fingers on her tongue, forcing her lips apart through wet coughs. “And you also wanted to put this *V* in a tight spot. Must be someone not really nice. Someone you haven’t spoken a word about to Ace. Someone I’m *sure* will not be happy about your current state.”

He ripped his hands out, patting her filthy hair as she threw up — right by his shoes. Chuuya scoffed.

“I didn’t even ask for your name.”

Tears streamed down her face. Her lips — while trembling — stayed shut. Sighing, Dazai stood up.

He raised his leg and *kicked*, slamming his foot into one of the arms the chains were holding — the limb snapped with a *crunch!*, tilting unnaturally against the boulder. With the next raucous shriek out of her mouth, the walls trembled.

“I doubt they didn’t do worse than this,” Dazai commented. “What’s with the screaming? Do I look more *intimidating*? Did you have stage fright? Did he tell you —“

“*Tenshi.*”

The quiet followed.

He broke it with clasped hands. “That’s nice. Finally. As in *angel*?”

“Tenshi,” the woman repeated, falling to the ground — howling when her arm tilted. “Tenshi, Tenshi, *Tenshi* —“

“We got it,” Dazai broke through. “*You’re* the angel, then. What are you doing down here? Not ethereal at all.”

“Scout,” she breathed out. “*Souls.*”

“How poetic.”

“He — *Book.*”

His face fell.

“The *book*,” Angel insisted. “He... *scout.*”

“I see,” he concluded. “Thank you, then.”

“The book — *Book, he* —“

Dazai stomped his foot on what was left of her hand. No sound found the strength to escape; all strings cut, the woman tumbled to the ground.

He wiped his hands on his coat.

“Hey,” he noted. “She *did* make a sound.”

Still standing where he had left him, edges of his pants stained in fresh blood, Chuuya’s nose scrunched up. “A name and something about a book,” He sounded unimpressed. “Is Ace that shit at interrogation?”

“The jury is still out,” he parroted. “But now we know she might just be as much of a tassel as our men. Moreso — *Mori* doesn’t know.”

““That how you treat victims?””

He shrugged. “When it’s work, yes.”

“Great. Don’t call our men *tassels*, jerk.”

*Who would distract Hirotsu and who would run first*, he thought. Who would kill the snipers on the roof and who would be the target. Who would know what kept people together, and who would watch from behind the glass.

“In any case,” he started to say. “We should go, before —“

A bullet pierced through Chuuya’s forehead, bursting into ruby-made fireworks.

That was how his brain registered it — the sight of living-ricochet was a somewhat new one. The quick sequence of projectiles stuck to the boy’s skin, as it glowed brighter and brighter, just enough to show every piece of viscera on the floor. From the stairs, their attacker gasped.

He was a tall man, not older than thirty. Black hair sprinkled in dust framed plain features — and the collar around his neck, metal littered in gemstones, reflecting small squares of colors on the dried blood on the ground. Without a blink, Dazai pointed his gun over Chuuya's floating frame — and his outstretched arm.

“Oh,” he said. The man choked when Dazai fired — ripping the gun from his grasp with a single bullet. “So poor Ace *did* get deceived.”

*[“Here's the thing,” Dazai wrote on the back of one of his reports, in the most elementary kanjis he could think of — keeping an eye on Hirotsu. “Ace will definitely lose face, if we start snooping around after Mori told us not to.”*

*“The bastard won't be happy. He lives to see approval shine out of the Boss' ass,” the shakiest handwriting he had ever seen insisted.*

*“More than that — He's already a man with distasteful habits. Strategic clumsiness would only worsen the voices.” Ace was one of the rebounds from the previous Boss — someone who had wanted power more than answers. Mori had no time to waste with incompetent people — he was reliable, to a certain extent.*

*His Ability made his habits predictable, though.*

*“The Madness of the Jewel King allowed him to flourish in the Casino business,” he continued. “He had rows of what are basically slaves to rule over the connections he makes for the Mafia — And he's not stupid enough to get addicted to his own game.”*

*“So what is it? Drugs? Sex?”*

*He snapped his fingers. “I'm sure you're familiar with the Pomegranate.”*

*“Ane-san's house?” Chuuya blinked. “I didn't know Ace was a client. Doesn't he hate her?”*

*“You could confirm his presence there better than me. I hear she trained you there for a while.”*

*“Stalker. But yeah — Can't say I've ever seen him, though.”*

*“I have my sources. Apparently, he's around whenever Ane-san's on a mission — I don't think he could stand the humiliation of Kouyou Ozaki knowing he appreciates any of her services.”*

*“But the girls...” Chuuya frowned. “They're terribly loyal. They tell Kouyou everything.”*

*“You partake in the gossip? Please be a dear and find out if any of them would be willing to —”*

*“Keep your dirty hands away.”*

*“They live in a prostitution house.”*

*“You’ve never been to the Pomegranate, have you?”*

*He hadn’t. “Anyway,” he sniffed. “Facts are — Ace has been there more than once. Enough to compare the women to his prisoners.”*

*Understanding painted his traits. “He said she acted like one of Kouyou’s whores.”*

*“How’s that saying we have?” he asked. “If you can’t find the Pomegranate, just listen. The women spend all their time singing, don’t they? But if the prisoner refuses to say a word to him — How is she similar to them?”*

*Chuuya stopped in his tracks. “He lied.”*

*“Isn’t it weird, how he mentioned her ‘not even throwing up?’” Dazai quoted. “I’ve seen him torture before — He always leaves the room when something like that happens. He says he can’t stand the smell. Maybe he didn’t want Mori to think him incompetent enough to make her spill her guts in the least helpful way.”*

*“You think she threw something up?”*

*“Yes,” he agreed. “But I don’t think he was the one who made her.”]*

*“You shouldn’t be here,” Dazai noted, as the man’s teeth prodded at the bruise from the gun’s rebound. “You weren’t supposed to be here yesterday either, though — when you lied to Ace about finding something in the prisoner you weren’t supposed to touch’s vomit.”*

*“You—” the henchman snarled. “I don’t know what you brats think you’re doing, but —”*

*Chuuya turned around.*

*He weighed the pros and cons of being offended by the startling ease with which the man’s face lost all of his aggressiveness. The shortness is much more recognizable, he let his hurt ego know. “You’re —”*

*“Are you going to finish a single sentence through this whole conversation?” Chuuya asked, unimpressed. “Let me guess — you’re here to see if whatever you found is back in the chick’s stomach. Don’t want Ace to know you lied about it being only vomit.”*

*“How do you —” His gaze flickered to the woman’s abandoned body. “Did you kill her?”*

*“I’m not pathetic enough to fumble with prisoners,” Dazai replied. Mafiosi never recognized him at a single glance — Mori was too greedy for something like that. Recognition spread slowly on his pale face, still. “You know, if you had given Ace what you found, he probably would have praised you.”*

*“Stolen the credit, too,” Chuuya added, scoffing. “But praised you.”*

*“You can check on her,” Dazai encouraged. “And then you come with us to solve some of our doubts, how about it?”*



The bullets still sticking to Chuuya gathered around his frame — more *purposeful*. “Not that you have a choice.”

Through stiff motions and curved shoulders, moving *slowly* under their watchful gaze, he walked around them — over the puddles of blood. He checked the woman’s mouth with trembling precision, lifting her tongue and removing some shattered teeth.

Not an inch of her moved.

Relief dropped his spine. “She ingested it again.”

“*It*,” he echoed. “Yes, let’s talk about it.”

Chuuya motioned towards the stairs, feet cracking a hole in the ground. The man’s eyes fell on the chasm. “After you.”

On their way up — tailing the man’s steps with Dazai’s gun pressed on his lower back — Chuuya leaned in close enough to whisper: “You have it, don’t you?”

*Scoffing*, he showed the silver cross in his hand — polished from internal fluids with the corner of his coat. “Do you take me for a fool?”

“Keep it away. Shit’s smells worse than you, seriously,” Hands low, they high-fived. Dazai got the brief, irrelevant thought that it might have been the first time he got touched in weeks. “And *you* still smell like mackerel.”

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The bar was called, very sensibly, *The Bar*.

The suggestion had come from Madame Tanaki herself, as she nodded approvingly at their effort at *friendliness* towards their much detested Ace’s men. It was a low cost *hole-in-the-wall*; every piece of furniture was a rusty green, and the lights flickered with time and effort. If the yawning woman at the counter found something suspicious about the way Dazai and Chuuya dropped the man between them in the furthest empty table, she didn’t get paid enough to ask.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Dazai said, still smiling as charmingly as he could, as the waitress walked away with their three non-alcoholic orders. “The two of us are still minors, you know.”

“And most alcohol tastes like shit,” Chuuya added, seemingly serious.

“You two think you can just sit here and do your shit with Ace’s most trusted?” the man spat out, through the sweat drops on his temples.

“Yeah, kind of,” The boy nodded. “Are we to assume Ace sent you to follow us? How lucky. You must have been scrambling for an excuse to go back to the Dungeons.”

“Don’t be naive,” Dazai replied. “Ace knows I don’t let people follow me.”

“You only found me because I *let* you, kid,” the man growled. As soon as he leaned forward, Chuuya moved the knife he had grabbed from the table an *inch* higher on his leg.

“Sure,” he conceded. “Let’s go with that. You let us find you — so we could capture you. Thank you for the collaboration!”

“Who even are you, anyway?”

Pushing his chin out, the man declared: “George Kingstain.”

“*George*. So exotic.”

“Never heard of you,” Chuuya said.

“Me neither. But you must be a talented man, George. Say — How did this situation play out?”

Kingstain worked his jaw.

“I’m not a fucking idiot,” he said, finally. His Japanese was unpleasantly accented. “You two are going to get me killed.”

“Will we?” Dazai blinked. “I haven’t even threatened you yet.”

“You look like big mouthed *infants*,” He squinted at the other boy, seemingly blind to his stiffened spine. “You’re Nakahara, aren’t you?” He snorted. “The Port Mafia’s social climber. From an enemy, to a subordinate — To an *Executive candidate*? One wonders *how* you do it.”

Chuuya fiddled with his glass, bored. “Counting jewels until your balls fall? Killing loud mouthed bastards? Wearing pricey suits?”

“Making powerful friends,” Kingstain let out a chuckle. “You’re very good at that. Executive Kouyou helping you out?”

“You’ll keep my Boss’ name out of your mouth, or you’ll lose your dick,” Chuuya offered, very efficiently. The man paled. “By the way, you seriously don’t know the bastard?”

“Please, please, don’t assume,” Dazai said. “My fans are few and spread out —“

“You’re the Demon Prodigy.”

Not a new appellation — if somewhat recent. Mori had probably not been the one to start the rumor, but he surely hadn’t put an end to it, either. Good enough of a permission slip; good enough of an order.

“How nice,” He wished he had his console with him. “You do know me.”

“*Of* you.”

“Same thing.”

“You know, the organization is overflowing with theories about the leader’s obsession with you. I have my own.”

“You’re full of ideas involving children and sexual favors, aren’t you? How peculiar.”

““You going to murder Boss?”

Chuuya stiffened.

A bit distractedly, he wondered which one stung more — the old sheep instinct to defend those who had taken him in, or the idea of Dazai *actually* doing it. All options of what he might do if put in that situation were delightful.

“Mori’s probably the one who spread that one particular rumor,” Dazai answered. “Not on my bullet list, though. You, on the other hand —“

“Can’t say I see it happening. People say you’re the *shit*, but they won’t tell me why,” Kingstain scoffed. “Weak sons of a bitch. What can a brat even do?”

“I’m great at handstands!”

“That’s such bullshit,” Chuuya intervened, sounding offended. “You have no balance.”

“Are you challenging me? Because I will do a cartwheel in your face right now. You’ve been gone a *long* time.”

“I’d like to see you try —“

Foolishly, Kingstain attempted to bolt.

Not bothering to shift his gaze, Dazai let his ankle hook itself around the man’s stool. He stumbled back on his seat, held down so *heavily* it could only be the work of *Tainted*.

“Are you an actual idiot?” Chuuya asked, almost genuine. “If you refuse to speak, all we have to do is go to Boss and let him know. And Ace *will* find out.”

“How will he feel about you disobeying his orders to mess with such an *important* prisoner?”

“The bitch killed thirty three of our men,” he bristled. “And he was only wasting time — Beasts like that deserve to have their throats slit.”

“That’s inefficient.”

“That’s fair.”

“Oh, *spare me*,” Chuuya twisted his wrist.

The next cut off groan to come out of the man’s mouth had even the waitress turn around.

He kicked Chuuya in the shins. “Can you *stop* making us look suspicious?”

“Even children get the basic concept of gaining information,” he hissed.

“This is taking too long,” Dazai downed the last of his drink. “George, what do you think about talking? I’m sure you’re not stupid — You must understand the situation you’re in. Or what my companion’s Ability can do.”

The man stared, teeth clenched.

“We want to know what the issue was with what you found,” He set the cross on the table. “And what you *think* this is.”

George’s eyes widened in recognition. Dazai hoped, in the name of the praises he had offered to Ace’s intelligence, for the *right hand man thing* to have been a lie. “You — You told me *to check the* —“

“You attempted to kill the girl,” Chuuya summarized. “She threw this thing up. You knew it was important, but you couldn’t report to Ace without him asking why you were there. Did she say anything about it?”

“And did she have a tattoo on her shoulder, while you were there?” Dazai asked.

The man tightened his lips. By the time the ice in his glass had melted, he said: “She didn’t. I’m not even sure she noticed anything was going on — She’s been acting fucking weird since the first day. Crying in silence. Until —“

“Until?”

“Until yesterday, when I went there,” A hint of awkwardness frowned his features. “I heard a voice. From the *thing*. ”

Their eyes fell on the cross.

“*This* thing,” Chuuya checked, skeptical.

Dazai hummed. “So it *is* some sort of communication device.”

“You *knew*? ” the boy hissed, ready to smash his fist upon it.

He raised a hand, blocking his motions. “I had my suspicions. Describe it to me.”

Kingstain tried to shrug, under *Tainted’s* grip. “All distorted and shit. Maybe it got — I don’t know, damaged in her stomach. I don’t get the point of putting it there. Not like she could hear it.”

“Technology is getting complex. Maybe it’s more sophisticated than it looks.”

“I don’t even know if it was a man or a woman,” George said. “Altered. It was saying something about — shit, about an angel, I think?”

The shield of gravity faltered a bit. He could feel Chuuya’s leg run up and down against his, under the table.

“And then just — *statics*. Maybe something about a book? I don’t remember. Something about her needing to wait a little more,” Kingstain gulped. “I put it in her mouth and left. I didn’t pay attention.”

“And the tattoo?”

“She didn’t have tattoos. Listen, I *really* told you everything,” the man insisted. “There’s no need to warn Ace or anything, is there? I can help you come up with an explanation for that cross, or —“

Dazai’s phone picked that moment to ring.

He didn’t bother checking; he brought it to his ear and said: “Yes, Boss?”

Kingstain’s reaction was visceral. He struggled against the hold of modified gravity, kicking the legs of the table until the drinks were spilled — Chuuya pushed his knife all the way down, pressing a gloved hand to the man’s mouth.

“Shut the fuck up,” he warned, not a hint of playfulness. “I’m slitting your throat. *Shut up.*”

“*I haven’t been completely honest with you,*” Mori announced, without an inch of remorse.

Dazai showed a surprise he wouldn’t see. “That breaks my heart. To what do I owe —“

“*My catch escaped.*”

He snapped his tongue. “Did she?”

“*She was broken out,*” the man corrected himself. Not exactly concerned. “*I know you’re with Chuuya.*”

“And I know it’s your fault if I am. Your little nonchalance act has gotten *so old.*”

“*Under the assumption of you having actually solved some of my doubts — there’s going to be an official Executive meeting, tomorrow. You and Chuuya could tell us all about it.*”

“Doesn’t it seem like a bit too many corpses?” he commented, “For two youngsters.”

Mori’s amusement filtered through, like a hand ruffling his hair. *“This whole situation might just become a bother, if we don’t make sure to gain the whole picture.”*

“What makes you think I have this solved?” he questioned. Chuuya was doing his best to reassure the waiter. The border had given him more freckles. “Maybe I’m stumbling in the dark here.”

*“Are you?”*

The edge of his seat dug into his nape. “You revoked our access to the meetings too.”

*“How lucky, then, that I am currently erasing that order.”*

“What do I get out of it?”

*“I will tell you what I haven’t been honest about,”* was Mori’s answer.

“I don’t know.”

*“I will also,”* he sighed, *“Allow you to stop hanging out with Chuuya.”*

Dazai paused.

A beat too late: “Don’t you have better detectives than two teenagers?”

*“Do you have something better to do?”*

“I suppose I might show up.”

*“You and Chuuya. He already knows too much. He’s going to find out more,”* Mori underlined. As if he had somehow heard his name being called, the redhead frowned at him. *“I doubt you need me to be outright about this, Dazai.”*

“About Fukuzawa, you mean?”

Another beat passed.

The silence between chess moves — a good strategy and a better one, and everything Dazai had done to give Mori’s eyes a glint. Everything he would *regret*, if he ever grew the habit to.

The man chuckled. *“The choice is yours.”*

“Don’t be naive.”

*“I’m not. You know too well how tense the situation has been since I took over. Chuuya is a fundamental asset, and he will always be one. This is my offer.”*

“My counteroffer is that you let me kill him,” Dazai replied. A god dying was as unrealistic of a fate as *few* other things; he wanted to see it so badly it almost made him ache. “And then

you let me kill myself.”

*“Still on the double suicide? I thought you’d said Chuuya wasn’t a suitable companion for such a mission.”*

“Yes,” he sighed. “That is exactly what I feared you would say.”

Ending the call, he stood, sweeping the cross off the table.

“Well?” Chuuya asked. The smile Dazai offered Kingstain got him to flinch in his seat.

He announced: “Great news, George. We don’t need you anymore, and your existence is a disgrace. But since you were *very* helpful, I have decided I shall be merciful.”

Dragging the man out of *The Bar* proved itself to be infinitely harder than getting him inside of it. When they finally managed to throw him near the dumpster at the end of the alley, the sun had fallen behind every skyscraper, turning the roads of snow into a soft, bleeding valley.

“I’d say it was nice,” the redhead concluded, hands on his hips. “But you’re breathing scum, and I still want to shoot you in the dick.”

“You bastards,” George growled, doing his best to fight the sheet of gravity still holding him to the ground. “You fucking — I’ll kill you, do you fucking *hear* —”

“Yes, yes,” Dazai cocked his gun and shot.

It echoed. Distracted by the trail of holes the bullets had painted between his legs, on the dirty concrete — it took Kingstain a moment to realize his arm had been hit. Before he could scream, Chuuya slammed his foot right on the wound.

The air around them trembled, like a mirage of sorts, shining a vicious red. In exactly seven seconds, George Kingstain had stopped struggling, abandoned in a pool of blood.

“Did you know both high *and* low gravity can make you pass out?” Chuuya said, satisfied.

“That explains why being around you makes me feel stupid,” Dazai commented, without really meaning to. He winced; hurried to add: “How long until he wakes up?”

“Between the wounds and the stress? A few hours. He’s not going to bleed out, is he?”

“Who do you take me for?” He frowned. “I didn’t even shoot him in the dick.”

Along with the sunset, quieter than the stars ever dared to be as they returned, they made their way back to the Headquarters.

Their feet sunk in the snow, neighborhood after neighborhood, a mimetic pair under the light from the shops’ windows. Blood dripped through the candor; no one would notice, as they stepped on each other’s feet, mistaken for scholars — for less bloodied beings.

*No one asks questions about one kid*, Dazai had always said. Two people took up more space. He loathed the idea of someone engarling his section of universe — the one so tightly wrapped around his shoulders, like a less heavy coat.

*But Mori Ougai was*, he reminded himself — extracting a bottle of head ache pills from his pocket and gulping down two — *quite simply, a fool*.

“No one ever taught you to *share*, asshole?” Chuuya spat out, at some point, pushing him out of the snowless space under the line of balconies, and almost slipping.

Not so hard to imagine; the most unrealistic words possible. Dazai had dragged him there himself. He mostly wanted him gone — wanted him in his line of sight, too. He wanted *nothing*, and the dog he had not been quick enough to collar was there to stay. Dazai could have stared right at the winter sun and it would have burned his eyes less.

“It wasn’t worth it,” Chuuya huffed, “Kingstain. We already knew the angel thing.”

“We didn’t know it was a device,” Dazai reminded him. “Or that whoever is on the other side planned to break the woman out — Which he did. The Executives will be glad to know.”

The boy nodded, distracted with the steps it took him to jump over a garbage can. Landing in cleaner snow, Dazai counted fourteen seconds — before he stopped, dead in his tracks.

Then: “The *fuck* did you just say to me?”

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The closest pharmacy to Dazai’s residence was a small glass box at the edge of a lonely sidewalk — the first building in miles.

The railing dividing the street from the sea was rusted and covered in old fliers, guiding an imaginary queue. He had only ever met *one* being who had had to wait to enter that forgotten drugstore — a quiet cat, fond of the sea.

*It’s either poisons that will keep me alive a few breaths more*, he had told him, *or the sea*. *Isn’t it better to lie to yourself?*

*I suppose*, he had lied.

That night, a box of bandages in his hands, a man was waiting by the railing.



“Are you all done?” he asked, polite.

If someone in the world had a right to be called *common*, that man was one of those people. Pale skin and vaguely caucasian features curled under dark hair; he couldn’t be older than twenty, and yet his wrinkles were from all but cheerfulness.

“All done,” Dazai confirmed.

The man held up his own bag. “What did you buy?”

“Bandages. And these muscle relaxants — they’re *supposed* to make death as painless as possible. Hopefully. You?”

He shrugged. “Social anxiety pills. Or something like that. I don’t know. They probably have a name. I mostly trust my doctor on this.”

“Terrible choice,” he sighed, dramatically. “I trusted a doctor, once. And I’m still alive.”

The man had a terrible laugh — squeaky and broken. “I can only pray the same will happen to me.”

Dazai leaned on the railing. He had often considered death by drowning — it sometimes seemed all but painless.

Still, he would probably try, one day. There were too many days — too much time.

“I’ll pray for you, then.”

The man mirrored him — a bit awkwardly. “So, why the bandages?”

“My little sister wants to become a nurse. I let her practice on me. Why the pills?”

“What do I know,” He scratched his scalp. “Some people are just born weird, I suppose.”

*Don’t I know.* “Nothing to do with Tenshi, then?”

The man stilled.

“Not to assume, of course!” he clarified, lightly. “There is something social, after all, in the art of standing and watching someone suffer for our aims,” His smile stretched until his jaw hurt. “But what do I know, right, V?”

He cleared his throat.

In a voice just as small as before, he said: “He is not very happy.”

A three way game, then. “Was *he* happy when you let the Mafia get their hands on his angel?”

The man refused to answer.

“Alright, alright. How mean. You will just leave me with the doubt.”

“*Doubt?*”

“Whether you decided to free her on your own or you were obeying orders,” Dazai explained. “I would ask Tenshi but, well. She’s not in my immediate reach anymore.”

“That’s nice, then,” V said. “You people are the worst kind of monsters.”

“She hasn’t been treated well,” he agreed. “Is calling us *monsters* easier on your conscience?”

“You’re assuming I have one.”

He shrugged. “You wouldn’t be here to warn me if you didn’t. Punishing yourself?”

Blistered fingers played with the handles of the pharmacy bag — systematic and *anxious*. “He is not happy.”

“Well, tell him *I’m* absolutely desolated.”

“I say this with the uttermost honesty,” V repeated, “It’s better not to make him mad. Just let him do what he wants.”

“Alright,” Dazai promised. “I will.”

V nodded.

It took him a few more minutes to gather the strength to tear his eyes from the sea; he hugged the bag to his chest. For the first time, he noticed the bright yellow shirt he was wearing — the cartoonish rendition of two soldiers depicted on the front.

“Well, then,” V concluded. “Goodnight.”

Dazai waved. “Bye!”

He didn’t watch him walk away. He stared at the white reflection of the moon, instead — and he started counting, fidgeting with the stolen cross in his pocket.

When he got to seven minutes and fifty one seconds, his phone rang. Nodding, he whined: “Mori, I was —“

“*Kingstain is gone.*”

He stilled. “How did you get this number?”

“*Are you kidding me?*” Chuuya replied. “*I’m being serious! Kingstain is nowhere to be found.*”

“I’m being just as serious!” Dazai insisted, horrified. “You need to tell me who gave it to you.”

*“I’ve had your number since forever, you fucking — I’ve called you before!”*

*“And I didn’t answer.”*

*“For fuck’s — Kouyou gave it to me.”*

*“Liar,” he accused. “Liar. Ane-san doesn’t have my number.”*

*“Have you ever considered that maybe you’re the one who doesn’t save other people’s numbers?”*

*“Why would I?”*

*“Can you use whatever’s left of your fish brain to listen? I’m telling you Kingstain is gone.”*

*“Oh, I know,” Dazai leaned back on the railing. “They probably took him a little after we left him there.”*

*“What?”*

*“Long story. Don’t worry about it.”*

*Chuuya’s pitch rose, making him wince. “Don’t worry about it? What are we supposed to tell Ace? And Mori? They’ll want to know about what we did.”*

*“Ah, don’t think too much about it. You will end up all wrinkled. And delete this number, alright? I’m not kidding. I’m willing to electrocute it out of you.”*

*“Would you fucking —“*

*“My choices are for the syndicate’s wellbeing. Try not to act like a spoiled child.”*

*“As if you give a damn?”*

*“Accusing me of not caring about my own organization? Far-fetched.”*

*“I’m not wrong,” Chuuya replied. A terrible conclusion — he would need to rectify it. Insisting cycle they were: the last of Chuuya was never the last of Chuuya, because the bet was constantly too good not to take. “You’d burn this place to ashes yourself if you could. Be there tomorrow, or I’ll hunt you down myself.”*

*Of course, he told himself. They had always been this — before month-long vacations and supposed lines of codes, too. Two Event Horizon looking for the nearest body to crash against — willing to wait for the perfect moment to strike. Patience was born out of necessity.*

*Patience, he considered, fidgeting with the silver cross, was born out of doom.*

## Chapter End Notes

so!! that was the start of it. see you next chapter :)

scene title from:

I put a twig of sweet osmanthus in my apartment room for two, three days. Its aroma comforted me in my loneliness. I feared the fading of this smell, so I kept my curtains closed. Yet a cold wind sneaked in through the crevices. And it quietly blew right through my lonely heart. It made me sad.

Oda Sakunosuke, “Autumn Halo” (Aki no Kasa)

# DAY

## Chapter Summary

*The moment one of the volunteers — still fumbling with the taxi drivers' corpse and the chaos of onlookers — attempted to put a blanket around his shoulders, Chuuya was out of there.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter ii.*

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*Case number: 03839387*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, under the orders of Executive A. (nominative state: confidential) and M. O., Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [...]*

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*It took him three weeks with the doctor to attempt to kill himself.*

*Or so he recalled. According to Mori, he had, of course, done the exact same thing two weeks and six days after they had met — two weeks and four days; two weeks; one; everyday since he had turned fourteen and almost every day before that.*

*Nothing made that day better or different from the others. Mori had caught up sooner, though.*

*The doctor was a strange man, Dazai would think, almost every morning. He had no real reason to care about his breathing lungs and beating heart, apart from his old job. He had no reason to care, but he still appeared viciously against any form of death entering his little sanctuary.*

*He had pushed his biology books in his direction, the first days — and taken them back when he had started tracing the skeletons too passionately.*

*“You teach me, then,” he had said.*

*“Teach you what?”*

*He had traced the wound on his arm. “Where it hurts.”*

*“This is a place to heal,” Mori told him. One of his hands caressed the air; it was a gesture he did too often, too distractedly, for it to not mean something.*

*“You’re a doctor,” Dazai replied. He caressed the air, as well; a belated reflection. He wasn’t looking for approval, wasn’t looking for anything at all — but Mori still nodded. “More death has been in this room than in any other corner of the world.”*

*It dripped down the walls — slithered in front under the doors. Tickled Dazai’s cheeks when he slept. Mori wouldn’t let him die.*

*“Let go,” he said, softly. Every string of his vocal cords was wrapped tightly around each one of Dazai’s bones; guiding him where he didn’t want to go. Getting saved wasn’t tempting, wasn’t what he wanted; and Mori Ougai was no benefactor. “Dazai, let go.”*

*“Only if you put that needle down,” he heard himself whine — a tad too emptily.*

*“You have no intention of stopping,” the man replied. Always one to explain before he answered. “I cannot.”*

*He’d destroyed that place a few times before — had crashed against chairs and glass bottles, trying to grab the last scalpel and slit his wrists open, to find the right dosage of pills that would get stuck in his throat, to cut his air off with a piece of gauze curled around his neck. It was true, but —*

*“It won’t hurt,” Mori swore.*

*“Oh,” Dazai said.*

*He pressed the finger on the trigger.*

*The gun was a weight on his mouth — sticky and annoying. He hoped to get a clean, round hole in the back of his head; hoped the bullet passed right through that opening and tore Mori’s forehead apart, right in that brain of his; hoped it bounced back and destroyed the mirror, because who knew if Dazai’s reflection was stubborn enough to linger — live on and haunt and be haunted — he hoped it worked, even just once —*

*No hole formed, but the syringe was stabbed into the side of his neck.*

*“Rule number one,” Mori told him, very politely. “If an addict is in the house, you don’t keep the drug there too.”*

*“That’s a lie,” he giggled, as the world spun and he fell, hands grasping at his sides. The way death wasn’t supposed to, it hurt — Mori Ougai was no benefactor. “Or you wouldn’t keep a child in your own home.”*

*Mori kneeled next to him. He put a towel under Dazai’s head, something comfortable to lay his thoughts on as his every limb lost feeling. “Can I take the gun?”*

*“Can I die?” Dazai asked. “Can you let me die?”*

*Mori pried his fingers open. Took the gun. “Do you want to die?”*

*That’s not the point, he could have screamed. “Yes.”*

*He stood up. “That’s a shame, then.”*

*“You said you would help. You said you would help, you promised you would help —“*

*“Listen to me,” Mori interrupted him. “Do you want me to tell you something that will help you?”*

*“You said you’d help,” he repeated, incoherently. He’d die for a glass of water, he thought. He’d die to choke on it.*

*“Here’s rule number two,” Mori stabbed another syringe in his throat, pressing down. Dazai caught fire. Dazai fell asleep. “No one is listening.”*

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“What do you lads *think* you’re doing?”

About Kouyou Ozaki —

*Diction* was among the first tassels Dazai’s naked eye had been intuitive enough to notice, when Mori had shoved him under her nauseatingly sweet gaze. It came with other lighting quick ideas — such as *stench of blood* and *pricey kimonos* and *hates you and always will*. Dazai had been molded to know when vowels would never turn into screams.

Unfortunately for them all, the *Lady of the Port*’s mosaic was, at the end of the day, just a piece of floor splattered in colors.

“Sorry to disappoint, Ane-san,” he chirped. Behind the doors she was trying to close on their faces, the *Hall of Light and Darkness* glistened dimly under moonlight, caged by the tongue-colored sleeves of her kimono. “But Boss said we’re allowed to come in.”

“It’s true,” Chuuya intervened, as if it pained him to. “Why else would I be around the bandaged freak?”

Her eyes fell on him — softened significantly. “Chuuya,” she sighed, “This, *again*?”

“Calm down,” the boy grunted. Respect was there, *somewhere* — certainly a begrudging upgrade from the skepticism he had bore for her during his first weeks. But Chuuya was always rather courteous with women, in a way that reeked of forgotten teachings; asking for Elise’s permission before holding her hand, and offering his coat to shivering subordinates. “I haven’t tried to sneak into a meeting in weeks.”

“Maybe because you weren’t here?” Kouyou pointed out. “Moreso, you didn’t even come to offer your greetings when you returned.”

“*Maybe* because I went looking for you all over the *Pomegranate*, but you weren’t —“

“Chuuya, you know you’re not allowed into the *Pomegranate* without me —“

“That’s a shit rule and *you* know it —“

She didn’t even blink. “Language, thank you.”



“People opened up brothels in Suribachi City too,” Chuuya snapped, “I keep telling you.”

“Executive meetings strictly involve *Executives*,” Kouyou insisted, the picture of pleasing politeness. The hard steel in the gaze she settled on Dazai managed to feel elegantly mocking, too. “Unofficial left hands excluded.”

“Mori told us to come,” Dazai insisted, bored. “I mean — Perhaps he should have left his *official* right hand woman know?”

Suspicion dripped from her squinted eyes in vagons; it gained her nothing but a surprised — “*Hey! Boys, do not* — “ when they pushed past her sentinel stance and tumbled inside the room, hurrying across the reflected squares of stained glass windows.

Conflict was forbidden in the *Hall of Light and Darkness* — among the reasons why Mori tended to go on a tangent regarding *Dazai and Chuuya* related matters in that place specifically, and a fact that Dazai mourned daily. He had always wished to witness his own blood through those colors.

“You almost begged me to send you off to some *peace and quiet* for a few weeks,” the *Lady of the Port* quoted, stalking towards them between the rows of suited seconds-in-command parting. “A strange way to define a war zone, but I wouldn’t want to cage you. And the first thing you do upon your return is *dilly-dally* with the devil?”

Chuuya spluttered. “I didn’t *choose* to do that!”

“That’s a bit rude,” Dazai whined. “I’m much more evocative than terrorists.”

“Boss sent us off to investigate —“

“Oh, did *he*, now?”

“*Indirectly*, yes,” With a hum, she pinched his nose. “Ane-san, that’s —“

“*Tat-tat*,” she tutted. “Both of you. What did we say about that disdainful title? Do I look like some nasty gangster’s living ornament that he calls wife whenever the brothel is full?”

Dazai considered agreeing, just to see her get mad. Then again, he wasn’t quite in the mood for her disciplinary calligraphy lessons.

“Ane-san, don’t be mad,” he said, in the most innocent act she would never believe. “How’s poor Chuuya to blame if he cannot accomplish anything without me?”

The boy flared. “And how’s *poor* Dazai even meant to *walk* with those shitty flapping fish fins of his without some *merciful fucking aid* —“

“Humility,” Kouyou broke through, gentle — staring Dazai down with eyes of steel, “Is but a dot on a canva.”

“Wasted ink all the same,” Dazai replied.

“It would do you good to remember your unfortunate allies, demon child.”

*[“Let us make this clear,” she had told him, and in her eyes was certainty of a deal already made. As if French assassins could ruin her sowing. She had harvested her field with midnight rain; perhaps unaware — except she did not know the word — no flower would ever be anything but wilted. “He is not taking him.”].*

Conflicting, he knew. The heart-wrenching *need* to drag her latest flower away from him, lest he turned him into something too dark even for her tastes — to push him into him, and make sure he would be just *corrupted* enough to stay right where he was.

*How unfair*, he thought, repressing a smile. Her eyes thinned. *You’ve known me longer.*

“Fear not, Ane-san,” Dazai shrugged. “I remember enough to keep us all afloat.”

“We must thank your unmeasurable wit, as always,” Kouyou smiled. “But I would rather people under my command didn’t have to walk around with death cheaters. Some deceptions are quick to stick to blood.”

Clearing his voice, a bit lost in that senseless match of theirs, Chuuya offered: “Talking about blood is prohibited in the *Hall*.”

A new voice appeared, a hint of tobacco following it. “In that case, I fear today’s conversation is going to be rather difficult to carry on.”

“Gramps,” Chuuya exclaimed. The glance he sent his way was unmistakable — *do we run?* “What are you doing here?”

“As surprising as the notion might result,” Hirotsu said, winged by a quartet of blank-faced Black Lizards, “I do have jobs that don’t include the two of you. My men were the ones who found the bodies,” He curled an eyebrow. “Assuming you found out *all* about that.”

The stared back, innocently.

The man was quick to give up on that lost fight; instead, he offered a vertiginously deep bow to Kouyou, steady like a grandfather clock. “Executive.”

“*Ojisan*,” she greeted — a bit more genuine in her amusement. “I shall hope your Lizards will fix this boring matter with the same swiftness they uncovered it with for us, correct?”

“I will be more than happy to help however I can,” he assured. “If Boss wishes so.”

“He will be more than fine with it,” she assured him, motioning to the corpse abandoned in the dead center for the *Hall*. “He has bigger problems than his Lizards having a bit of fun.”

The living exception to the no violence in the *Hall of Light and Dark* rule laid on the kaleidoscopic ground, no blood under his evidently battered body. Dazai could see signs of the time all over: frail skin, stiffened muscles, lips grey. The squares of colors painted the gash in the middle of his chest — showing off ribs and decaying viscera — in beautiful shades; the two lines of green and blue upon his wide open eyes made him look almost alive.

“To answer your question,” he heard Hirotsu say behind him, turning towards Chuuya. “Boss asked me to come here and —“

Dazai walked up to the body; crouched down next to it, prodding at its flesh.

He felt Ace’s gaze graze his back, insistent in its pretense of non-existence. The Mafia’s suited shadows tended to stare wherever he went — until they didn’t. He had heard every scoff in this world.

He brushed his fingers on one of the protruding ribs, feeling the scratchy surface under his skin. The tear stopped right under his breastbone — but Dazai thought that he might manage to grab his heart, if he tried hard enough.

*Silly*, he told himself. *What would you even do with it? Take it for yourself?*

A too-precise stain of black on the man’s arm caught his attention.

“No way,” Chuuya breathed.

He had felt him step closer; he didn’t move when he leaned over him, one gloved finger tracing the first circle of ink — startling bright against the dead skin. It was, undeniably, a tattoo.

Chuuya’s sleeve had risen, just a bit. Dazai’s eyes settled on the naked portion of his wrist — on the edge of a spiral-shaped scar, pink at the edges and white where it would hurt. He wondered if it was empathy, that *tugged* at his conscience — *empathetic*, him, in the way skin stuck to ribs.

*No*, he thought, *no, it’s sharper*.

“Boys?” Kouyou called, tentatively, still a few steps away with Hirotsu. “What are you doing?”

“Nine,” Dazai counted, along to the motions of the boy’s hand. When he looked up, Chuuya was pressing a finger to the creases in his forehead, blankly. “You — Alright. Nine circles.”

“The stomach?” he asked.

“There’s a tear near the viscera. Empty.”

A pause. “The mouth?”

He nodded. “The mouth.”

Before either of them could force the corpse’s tongue aside, the sound of steps echoed through the hallway. Like a well oiled machine — a new, still uncertain at times machine; but one Mori had sacrificed all to start up — every person in the room fell to their knees.

His visual reduced to Mori’s polished shoes, and Sama’s protective stand behind them, he couldn’t resist casting a glance to the other boy.

“Is that why you wear the hat?” he whispered. Stubbornly, Chuuya kept his gaze on the floor. “Trying to hide that bald spot?”

His head snapped up — the *quietest* murderous look in existence. “I don’t have bald spots, you fucking jerk. I’m not even sixteen!”

“Maybe you’re precocious!”

Mori finally stopped, sufficiently close to everyone, sufficiently far away. *Establishing a difference is the key*, he had once told him. *Though, I’m not very fond of locked things.*

He waited.

“Then,” he said, eventually — only when the bruises on every man's knees began to pulse. “Let us talk business.”

Fingers brushed against Dazai’s hair as he passed by — never touching his skin; never stupid enough to. A half pat wasn’t *new*, but Mori never did anything in front of the eyes of a crowd without a reason.

When he got to his feet and met Chuuya’s gaze, the boy’s eyebrows had flown up to his hairline.

Mori stood upon the corpse; a spiral of suits built itself around him — *mannequins with a good aim*, Tanaki had called them. Kouyou and Ace situated themselves a good number of steps closer to the center of that system, as far from each other as possible.

All very sorted; very organized. Dazai thought it sort of devastating.

“The Colonel isn’t back yet,” he murmured, dryly. “How long can a vendetta honeymoon be?”

They crowded at the edges of Mori’s butterfly wall, leaning on a column — not important enough to stand closer; too stained in blood spilled for his sake to stay further. He could feel Chuuya’s shoulder against his, tense and *ready*.

“Last I heard, he won’t return until the summer,” Chuuya replied. Ready for *what*, he couldn’t place. That utter energy stored inside him, bursting through the makeshift waterfall of *The Alley* and electrocuting his fingers — reaching for a naked part of him and stopping themselves halfway through. It had only been a month; it had only been five corpses. “He’s too busy following the last of *The Dragons* around the Kanto region. Won’t stop until they’re all liquified under his stupid soles.”

“Why hasn’t he picked any new Executives yet?” Chuuya added, squinting. “After —“ A pause; a complicated expression. “It’s been months. Doesn’t he want the good old five balance back?”

“He has,” Dazai corrected him. “Picked a new one, I mean.”

“Then why aren’t they here?”

“The third Executive is — an asset of sorts. Mori has decided to keep him a secret. Traitors could be anywhere,” *He will know*, he thought, nonsensically — because that was how it went, when one stumbled upon a too-curious god through the slums, and someone almost as good at *Shooting Guard II* as him. *He knows how you lie*. “I assume Ane-san knows. Right hand woman and all.”

Chuuya’s breath tickled his ear, leaving shivers-like footsteps in its wake. “Do you know who it is?”

“No.”

Hirotsu had taken a silent step forward, leaving the formation. “Yes, Boss,” he was saying, answering some question Dazai hadn’t caught. “They found them together. Having finally identified the gang of our — *fugitive* prisoner — ”

“Yes,” Mori agreed. “The assassin. Regarding our men’s corpses — Our current guest in particular. You said the forensic team believe he was dragged down into the sea by whoever attacked him.”

“It’s the only explanation, Boss. Blood prints didn’t show any stumbling towards the edge.”

“I see. Kouyou, the numbers?”

“Thirty three murders,” the woman answered. Dazai raised an eyebrow. Mori didn’t meet his gaze, but he knew he must have felt it. *I haven’t been honest with you*. “All of them had the same kind of gashes in their chest as this one here. Other desecrations, as well — but the wounds tend to rest around that area.”

“Thirty three,” the Boss echoed. “In?”

“Three weeks,” Ace intervened. “The longest pause was four days, but then we found four of them in one day. All the bodies were brought to the shore.”

Kouyou stuck up her chin, rolling her umbrella through manicured, blistered fingers. “Old tactic.”

“If I may,” Hirotsu intervened. “I do not think any of this was meant to be hidden. It’s all too similar in too little time, and almost all around the same area. It must be a message of some sorts.”

“Absolutely,” Mori agreed, unconcerned. He looked down at the corpse with a pity Dazai knew the men would whisper about. “And I’m sure that in a moment it will be clear to everyone who sent it. Hirotsu, you already know, of course. Kouyou?”

Blinking, but only once, the woman followed the raised gloved hand motioning her closer. He did not know what to prepare for — but he did it all the same, because he *knew* Mori’s face.

Deadly punctual, all the blood drained from Kouyou’s face. Pain flashed across her face like the mark of lightning-quick claws — Dazai had never seen such heartwrenching *ache* before.

The anger that immediately froze her traits was much more familiar. When she looked up from the ground she was kneeling on, the gaze she offered Mori *almost* made the man smile.

“You said they were eradicated,” Kouyou said, so calm her outlines were shaking.

“Last I heard, they had been.”

Ace frowned. “Who?”

The words climbed up her throat, leaving burning tears behind in their wake. He couldn’t see the blood dripping from her lips, but it hit the ground louder than a bomb. “The *Nine Rings*.”

Chuuya’s breath caught.

“What?” he asked. “Did you meet them?”

“With the Sheep,” His eyes were searching his mentor’s face, unanswered. “A bunch of weaklings. I think — Ane-san’s lover came from them.”

Dazai almost smiled. “*Oh.*”

Decadent tragedies were well known around the Port Mafia — especially when they could teach a lesson. Mori could have suffocated any and all murmurs when he had stepped on the throne — but despite refusing the prior Boss’ methods, he wouldn’t act against what was *useful*.

*Why renew the working floors?*, he had winked.

Kouyou could have blamed him for it — openly, perhaps; or whispering along to the voices who imagined a crown on her head. She never had.

“He wasn’t a mafioso?”

“No. He left the *Nine Rings* to join,” Chuuya shook his head. “To get Ane-san out.”

“...*eradicated*,” Kouyou was saying, facing one wing of the men surrounding the eye of the storm. Rage was a rather cold emotion on her; her men shook with it. “I received reports. I took care of it *myself*. Why, pray tell, is there still *anyone* in this city with the foolish gal to call themselves one of the *Nine Rings*?”

Silence.

Kouyou didn’t snap. She didn’t kill, and she didn’t *shout*, and she didn’t attempt to erase the curve of her mouth. The single step she took forward startled every shoulder she wasn’t screaming in the face of. “Answer me.”

“Apologizes, my lady,” one braver soul spoke up, with a thread of voice. “We — We were under the assumption that —“

“I don’t need assumptions.”

“We believed —“

“Your beliefs might need some observance,” she insisted, crystal clear. “Unwavering faith might lead to blindness. Scorching hot curbs too, if this damn season allows it.”

The wall of men paled.

“Let them go, Kouyou.”

Her fury took a less pleasant shade. “I swore to reduce those cowards to ash,” she told Mori, the tilt of her head only *somewhat* unstable. “I thought I had *done it*. You said — How long have you known?”

“Three weeks,” The man raised a placating hand. “Kouyou, be rational.”

Her smile turned into stone. “Be *rational*?”

“You know the *Nine Rings*, ” he continued, undeterred. “You have always known there were possibilities that no eradication would be final.”

“Are they that powerful?” Chuuya frowned. “The Sheep took care of them in a few days.”

*The Sheep had you.* “They’re uninteresting,” Dazai replied. “They have a thing for bloodbaths, but nothing more. Their *system* is their strength. They have this old seal — Anyone who gets ahold of it becomes the new Boss, automatically. So, even if you killed every last member of the current syndicate...”

“If a new man found the seal, they could step up and regroup,” the boy sighed.

Dazai kept his eyes on Kouyou — watched that conclusion reach her mind, pushing her shoulders down, imperceptibly. “So now they’re killing our men and tattooing their symbol on them? *Why?*”

“I believe they might have an issue with me.”

Glances were exchanged. “You, Boss?” Hirotsu dared to speak up.

“Certainly,” Mori echoed, easily. “As many are unfortunately stubborn about in the underground, the *Five Moons* alliance included — They don’t recognize me as the rightful Boss of the Port Mafia,” He smiled in Kouyou’s direction. “They have also taken bad to your eradicating mission, which I allowed. This bundle of information has apparently made them rise against us.”

Awkwardness seemed like too common of an emotion to find a free seat inside that room, but Dazai watched it drip down the ceiling and onto everyone’s clothes. Mori smiled like a kid.

A shared belief around most hands that had held a gun at least once, certainly — after Dazai had been named head of the *Secret Force Squad*, he had been tasked with extermination of every subgroup who had dared to whisper that belief a bit too loudly.

He had spent long nights in that boring loop — organizing missions, torturing fools, reforming the frankly *antique* methods of the Mafia, making sure not a rat would step under Mori's door unwanted.

Hearing all of that, though, Chuuya's only skeptical response was: "Why the fuck would Boss sicc a mental fifteen years old on his enemies?"

A headache knocked on his forehead. "You could at least be *grateful*," Dazai muttered. "I just told you very *private* information. Almost nobody knows I'm head of —"

He stepped on his foot. "If you keep shouting it, they will."

Ace was still scoffing. "The *Nine Rings* have never been a paragon of success. How come they managed to inflict this much damage?"

"Maybe you should ask that to your men," Hirotsu replied, blankly. "Most of the men were found in your territory, weren't they?"

Chuuya snorted so loud it was undignified; the Executive gritted his teeth. His voice was tense over a faceless mask, when he said: "I say this the uttermost politeness, Commander, but you should learn to pay more respect to your superiors."

"Respect is to be *earned*," Kouyou hissed. "Twenty men in three weeks, Ace? Maybe those collars of yours are making your men lose their minds. Every man we lost was an *asset*. Our deal with *Le Directeur* is already in shambles —"

Ace laughed, unamused. "Which your *pathetic* squad was in charge of!"

"It took them three hours to be notified of the disappearance of the captain," she reminded him, eyes flaring up. "And now —"

"That is enough," Mori interrupted them.

They shut their lips. Still seething, Kouyou snapped her head to one of her men instead, throwing an order under her breath. He bowed, shoulders trembling, and ran out of the meeting room.

With a thoughtful hum, Mori continued: "All facts on the table, then. Thirty three deaths, all of them somewhat strategically and commercially relevant. Any higher in our hierarchy would have been an outright war declaration — It would have alerted the *Five Moons*."

A rumble passed through the room. The union of the most relevant syndicates in Yokohama was very rarely spoken out loud. Meetings between the *Moons* were rare; attacks against them even more so.

That the *Nine Rings* would tip-toe around their borders, Dazai knew, meant they were *sure* of what they were doing.

"As of now, a wide scale reaction on our side would be judged —" Mori clasped his hands; nudged the corpse, pensively. "*Exaggerated*, I suppose."



“Exaggerated?” Chuuya whispered. “We’re the *literal* Mafia.”

“What was it that your Sheep said?” he replied. “*Don’t attack unless provoked?*”

A strange taste of confusion frowned the boy’s features. He insisted: “What, Boss is now forgiving?”

“Yokohama is built on balance,” He shrugged. “Syndicates have to keep the hostilities to a reasonable level, if they don’t want the city destroyed.”

*Something* was still stuck on the Hatrack’s face. It surprised him. Chuuya’s bones were made with the soil of the city he so loved; it had been clear and vivid from the tallest roof, watching him become a void for the sake of a valley. The womb of his lonely childhood.

“But we’re the *literal Mafia*,” He blinked.

“What I’m curious about, though,” Mori was saying, “Is their purpose.”

Ace cleared his throat. “I thought you had said you were their target, Boss.”

“I said they don’t *approve* of me. If they wanted me dead, they would attack me and my men. I might still be the final prize — but first they want to gain something else.”

“Control of the Port?” Kouyou suggested. “As of now, all their targets have caused malfunctions in our oversea affairs.”

“Destruction of an organization through its gains,” Mori echoed. “The previous Boss left our finances in a — *deplorable* state, I’m afraid. Attacking that wound is certainly clever — I do wonder how they knew, though.”

Some bird passed by the stained glass windows — a startling ruffle of wings, bumping against the steel of the structure. In the utter silence, some flinched.

The word *spy* hadn’t even been muttered, but Dazai felt it ring in his ears.

Chuuya — more-or-less head of the foreign jewelry affairs — sent him a sideways look. “I can’t believe your over-controlling ass would let information go where you don’t want it to, and I know *I* didn’t do it.”

“Classified,” he confirmed. “Only Mori knows what I came up with to solve the finance issues.”

The boy sniffed. “Made me bring information to him in the middle of the damn night, with *fourteen* guards following me everywhere.”

He studied the murmuring crowd, squinting.

A pair of eyes met his own.

“Well,” Ace commented, rather pointedly — staring right into their half-darkened corner. “Perhaps we should ask our youngest accountants, shouldn’t we?”

Flowers following the last drop of sunlight — every head in the room turned to them.

Chuuya stepped forward, stubborn.

He felt himself sigh — deep. “Suspicious of the capable? How typical.”

“*Perhaps* we should ask the man who let our men get murdered in his territory,” the other boy spat. “Worry about what else you might have let out.”

“I’m an *Executive*,” Ace scoffed. “What, you brats sincerely believe Boss would have given this seat to the first untrustworthy person around?”

“Keep your enemies close and whatnot. At the very least, *I* would,” Dazai offered, helpfully blank. “Truly no other sensible reason for me to hang out with my darling Chuuya.”

The boy choked on enough poison to fill his old crater home to the brim. “I’m not *your* darling anything, you *repulsive* —“

Mori clapped his hands — only once. His smile was sharper than the protruding ribs on the floor. “I was just about to interpellate them as well. These two, are, after all, the last and only people to hear a word out of our disappeared prisoner’s mouth.”

The gazes studying them got sharper.

Respect was much to ask; he would settle for fear, or general discomfort. He had been skirting all around the borders of the Port Mafia longer than Mori had been on his throne — some creepy, scarred cat that liked to hang around blood a bit too much not to cause a few shivers here and there.

They all knew he was dangerous. They just couldn’t pinpoint *why*.

“She didn’t say anything about the *Nine Rings*,” Chuuya clarified, once he was done recounting the events of the dungeons — some details unspokenly agreed not to mention. Dazai could feel the details of him being carved in those men’s skulls, ready to be discussed as soon as they left that room.

*Did you know he has one eye that’s just —*

“She did have the tattoo, though, according to Dazai,” Mori said. “These talks of recruitment are more than reasonable — the *Nine Rings* are regrouping. This *V* Dazai heard her talk to must be a collaborator.”

“But the tattoo wasn’t there before yesterday,” Chuuya insisted. “And she wouldn’t respond to the torture. I doubt the bastard is just more talented.”

“I don’t,” Dazai intervened.

“How do you know the tattoo wasn’t there?”

Ace watched them hesitate with growing glee.

“I’ll get to that,” Dazai said, eventually. “What matters is — Why would she let herself be captured?”

“Is she a mole?” Chuuya added. He could imagine him on top of a discarded box, somewhere in Suribachi City — talking with such seriousness that all those wannabe gangster kids’s eyes would shine. “But if we assume they already knew where to hit —“

“The woman willingly offering herself to capture is just a theory,” Ace replied. “We cannot take it for a fact, only because she managed to escape — As intuitive as our Dazai Osamu might be. ”

“You should,” Dazai intervened. “It is a fact.”

“You’re smart. We’re all aware. Still —“

“We know more than you do, as of now. You couldn’t even torture it out of her,” Chuuya scoffed.

“Chuuya,” Kouyou called. She tapped two fingers under her chin, eyebrow curled. Whatever that signal meant, it worked: the boy grunted a bit more, but straightened.

“This is a deeply formal setting, boys. Some respect is to be given,” Mori agreed, smiling stupidly, after a few moments of assuring silence. “If you could tell us what’s missing?”

The mention of George Kingstain got Ace’s shoulders to stiffen; the summary of his suspicions over the way the Executive had framed his experience with the prisoner got him a few nasty glances. “This was in the prisoner’s mouth,” Dazai still concluded, staring forward, throwing the silver cross onto Mori’s spotless gloves. “George Kingstain seemed in a certain hurry to verify she had ingested it again.”

Hirotsu’s eyebrows brushed his hairline. Judging by Chuuya’s disbelieving scoff, he wasn’t the only one.

“This is a theory,” Dazai assured, innocently. “Perhaps Executive Ace might have not wanted to tell Boss his prisoner had finally started reacting — and that, *regardless*, he still hadn’t managed to make her talk.”

“But Kingstain heard a voice speak through the scale. Something about an *angel*, which the woman confirmed to be her name,” he added. “And something about her having to wait a bit more. And now — she’s gone.”

“This,” Ace stuttered, after silence reigned for a few seconds. “This is *presumptuous!*”

“And *correct*, I bet?” Chuuya intervened, crossing his arms. His gloating was almost visible. “It all adds up, and your right hand man confirmed it.”

“Don’t be mad. He took advantage of you as well, you know,” he said. “I suggest a thorough exam of your current men. Maybe the collars really *do* slow the circulation down.”

Kouyou coughed, hiding her mouth behind the handle of her umbrella.

“You have *no right to* — “

“It’s not unheard of,” Mori interrupted him. His eyes had not left Dazai yet, contemplative and the tiniest bit amused. “Many members of high-stake organizations are microchipped in some way. It was never my taste, but,” His smile cut his words off. “One could argue Ace’s collars act the same way — He can communicate to his subordinates through them.” A pause. “So this *Tenshi* of yours had a peculiarly shaped device in her stomach. I’m curious about what makes you think this diverges from our *Nine Rings* theory.”

Dazai paused. Next to him, Chuuya opened his lips — and closed them again.

“Hirotsu,” Mori called. “Did any of the men you found have something akin to that cross?”

“No,” he answered. “Some of my Lizards work with the forensic team. They had nothing.”

“But he *did* have the tattoo.”

“Correct.”

“Which would make Tenshi the exception in her own organization,” Dazai said.

“Why would only *her* tattoo disappear and reappear?” Chuuya insisted. “It might be a fake.”

“No,” Kouyou corrected him. The bad taste in her mouth was *tactile*; still, she spoke with certainty as she explained: “The *Nine Rings* were known for an infamous, secret Ability User in their ranks. Many have died to protect their identity. Their Ability works through tattoos — They can vanish and reappear at will; be used to communicate. They only *freeze* on the members’ skin when they die.”

“Perhaps only the most dangerous members are given a microchip,” Mori added. “See, boys? We could run in circles.”

Chuuya stared down at the corpse. “But —“

“There’s something more.”

The former doctor’s gaze on him was only *so* exasperated. Only *so* hiding something behind it. “Do tell, then.”

“I heard Kingstain follow us as we made our way down the stairs of the dungeons,” Dazai offered, hands behind his back. Chuuya’s head snapped up. “I couldn’t understand how he had managed to find out about our suspicions even before I’d voiced them — before I had seen Tenshi at all. He was the only one around when she threw up the cross. We don’t know anything but what he told us. He couldn’t even recall if a man or a woman had spoken through the microchip.”

Chuuya stiffened. “He was lying.”

“Was he?” Ace humored.

“He said something about a *him*, at one point. I’m sure of it.”

“Maybe it was instinctive,” Dazai agreed. “Or maybe he was lying. But I think whoever is on the other side of this cross might have established contact with Kingstain — Maybe even got Tenshi to have him ingest another cross. Perhaps it’s an Ability — control over a person’s reactions.”

“It would at least explain why Tenshi seemed so unbothered by the pain,” the other boy pondered.

“He might not even be aware of it,” Dazai added. “And now that he’s gone — maybe he was taken by whoever came and freed Tenshi.”

“Impossible,” Ace intervened, a venomous note painting his words red. “Kingstain deserted.”

Dazai’s hands twitched. “I beg your pardon?”

“He *deserted*,” the man repeated. “He left a letter at the base; took a good chunk of jewelry with him. The security system was damaged.”

“When was this?” Chuuya insisted.

“Yesterday night, I assume.”

“People don’t just *leave* the Port Mafia,” Dazai felt like reminding him. “I have come up with endless, *boring* plans to assure that.”

Ace’s smile was as patronizing as they went. “Perhaps you aren’t infallible, Dazai.”

“We left him in a dumpster, passed out and with a bullet in one leg,” the redhead replied, speechless. “How the *fuck* did he get up and do all that in so little time?”

“He was probably helped. I knew he had been thinking about ammutinating — I have had men ready to follow him for months. Fear you two would report him must have motivated him.”

“As for Dazai’s theory,” Kouyou intervened. “I’m afraid there’s a much easier solution.”

“Is there?”

The woman sent him the dirtiest look she dared to wear under Mori’s watchful gaze. Then — she moved it to Ace. “I can just think of one particular man, who’s not particularly fond of you two — who could, just coincidentally, communicate with George Kingstain through a very convenient collar.”

Ace scoffed. “You have no proof or whatsoever —“

“He probably ordered Kingstain to follow you two to give you a scare,” Kouyou said, contemptuous. “He did the same with me, once. Of course, it didn’t take. As if I would let myself be scared off by some collared mutts —“

“Whether this theory of yours is correct or not,” Mori concluded, throwing the cross in the air — catching it as it fell. “It still doesn’t change the facts — the *Nine Rings* are challenging us. We, of course, are not to let them.”

All eyes fell on the corpse.

Dazai saw one or two ants crawl their way up the naked bones; mused over how long it would take them to devour the body entirely. Most probably, he thought, he had lived less than he would be eaten for. Frustrated, Chuuya insisted: “Boss, I *really* don’t think this is just —

“Chuuya,” Kouyou called, as delicate as ice — as *sharp*. “As of now, you are indefinitely suspended from your current duties. The jewelry deals will pass on to someone else.”

Astonished, the boy blinked. “Ane-san?”

“You are to deal with this situation. I want you to reserve it your utmost attention,” she continued, undeterred. “Ruthlessly, too. Make sure they don’t get any idea of returning from ashes again.”

“But —“

“This is an *order*, Chuuya.”

He quietened, irritation bubbling underneath. He bowed his head, only once.

Mori observed the exchange with a too obvious hint of mirth. “I’m delighted we have reached an agreement. You have all heard and are allowed to spread the voice: the Nine Rings are to be annihilated.”

“I thought a response would be considered an *exaggerated reaction*,” Dazai commented.

He smiled at him. He knew that was the right way to describe it: smiled *at him*. “It will. Sometimes, though, the balance is to be disturbed,” A wink. “Only for a while.”

“Are we to simply forget all they just attempted to pin upon me?” Ace exclaimed, laughing a humorless scream. “Accept that two *kids* came here and spread God knows what insane theory about my —“

“I suppose we will, yes,” Mori responded. “We have no other choice, after all.”

“*No other choice?* We —“

“Of course, the situation would be different,” the Boss was quick to add, offering Ace an apologetic smile, “If the woman had not been broken out right under your nose.”

Ace froze.

“You wish for me to ignore the boys’ words?” he observed, through the held breaths of the room. A pause in murmurs; the knowledge of when it was better not to be noticed. “I can. Hiding a failure is not the greatest crime a man can commit. Three mistakes still lay on your table, though: the woman was under your surveillance. Dazai and Chuuya weren’t supposed to *investigate*. The territory was under your guard. None of these ended up particularly well, did it?”

“Boss,” Ace started.

“It truly is not that terrible.”

*You lack redeeming qualities*, Dazai had once explained to the man, patiently, as he stitched him up. *You landed yourself in a lair of dangerous men. You will have to learn how to be one.*

Genuine surprise had over taken him. *Am I not one, Dazai?*

*No*, he had laughed. He couldn’t feel a single part of his body; he wasn’t quite sure of how to turn the side to throw up. *You’re a coward with sadistic tendencies.*

“I apologize,” Dangerous words for a man to say this many times in so little days, he knew. “I will not let it happen again, Boss.”

“You will punish whoever is to blame?”

“Of course. Of course, I —“

“Perfect,” Mori sighed, relieved. “So will I. Hirotsu, if you might escort our crowd out? The meeting is over. Kouyou, you’re welcome to stay. I want to know all you remember about the Nine Rings. We will depart for Tokyo as soon as we’re done here. You know how I *love* midnight travels,” He tilted his head to the side. “Should Executive Ace still wish to come along *after*; obviously, he will be welcome.”

Ace choked on his next breath.

Dazai heard muffled comments rise through the crowd. They disappeared as fast as they’d come. The hilarity in Mori’s eyes had nothing welcoming inside itself; at his root, he was a man who wouldn’t hesitate to pick a second victim.

“Certainly,” Kouyou bowed. The man she had sent out had returned; he met her eyes with an alarmed expression, still attempting to spit words out when Hirotsu began directing the crowd out.

“And if you may allow me to enter your jurisdiction for a moment,” the man added, turning towards Chuuya again. His eyes traveled from him to Dazai, distracted, hands still reaching

out to the nearest piece of meat. “I didn’t forget, boys. As promised, my — ah, *contrary orders* to stick together have been lifted.”

Dazai met Chuuya’s gaze from the infinite, imperceptible distance between them.

“Chuuya, you may keep reporting to Kouyou,” he concluded, intertwining his hands again. “She will inform you of any and all jobs I need you to take care of. Congratulations. You’ve been *officially* promoted to the action field.”

The boy bowed, removing his hat. “Boss.”

“As for you, Dazai,” he added, eyes still set on more material concerns, “I’m going to need your precious opinion on how to solve the losses the freighters’ delay brought. I’m interested in those infiltration channels you’ve been working on.”

He hung his head low — they would mistake it as a bow; he knew, because they always did. Mori never misunderstood a thing — he made meanings all on his own. “You can repay me with some of your stocks of cyanide,” he said, at last.

“You are all free to go,” The man’s eyes fell on his Executive again, digging the room deeper into the earth with each breath. “Sama, do bring the Archivists along. We need to deal with this little matter here.”

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About ten steps from the sidewalk, somewhere around the blood stain that refused to be rubbed off the stone stairs of Building One, Chuuya took a leap.

His body lit up red as he floated in the ink-dark air — a child’s lost balloon and a careless bird; a sight so familiar it did not warrant the burn of his nape as he tilted it and *stared*. The marble of the stone railing cracked under his feet, as he landed on top of the light pole at its end, disrupting every moth clinging to the flickering light.

It wasn’t an *invite* — but Dazai would never receive anything quite as similar from someone quite as unwanted. With a sigh, he hopped the distance between them and dropped on the second to last step.

The snow had somehow not been drained by the scorching sun of the previous day; silver-tinted white stubbornly clung to the leafless trees lining up and down the road, and to the mostly black vehicles parked in front of the building. A blindingly yellow taxi broke the



formation; the miraculously allowed *one* , waiting to bring Chuuya back to his apartment — *per* Mori's orders.

“So,” the boy started. “They didn't believe a word we said.”

Entire seasons and decades passed in front of them, riding the back of the sprinting cars. It was not early enough for Yokohama to sleep; it wasn't quite early enough to call the few shadows around alive.

Dazai hummed. “No.”

A beat. “They don't think the cross is suspicious.”

“The term Mori used is *common*, ” he noted, extracting the prize from his pocket. He had swept it off Mori's hands when he was too busy, along with one of Hirotsu's lucky lighters; not that the man would have *allowed* him to, if he had not wanted it.

Chuuya dangled his legs, untied shoelaces dancing along with the hissing wind. “And George Kingstain deserted?”

“It would appear.”

Skin deep city noises filtered through the winter wind, scratching his ears and lips alike — distant honks mixing with the faraway rumble of the Bay, waves and petrol, the kids playing with chalk friends and their men slipping banknotes in policemen' pockets to step away from chalk ghosts.

It all smelled of smoke and insides; it all tasted of those sweets Madame Tanaki brought on weekends. Yokohama was grey the way the sea was colorless. On a day he would be left *alone*, he wanted to die right there.

“Whatever,” Chuuya concluded, eventually. His eyes were already counting trajectories for each man he would stomp into the ground. Dazai would have never brought someone unready for war in his lair of razor-line lifetimes.

“I'm going to ask you a question,” Dazai spoke up, eventually.

His glance was derogative. “It goes, *can I ask you a question*, moron.”

“I can,” Dazai waved the matter away. There were better, more unreachable things to fight for — none of them quite as supported by the curiosity in Chuuya's unmatched eyes. “When we met, and Mori temporarily recruited you — why did you go along with the search?”

Chuuya blinked. “*Why?*”

“You knew Arahabaki couldn't be found,” he insisted. “You knew the legends were lies.”

“They aren't lies,” he specified, scrubbing his sole against the stone. His blue eye was strangely sharp — lines too gentle to be fragments, but too clever to be ripples. “They aren't malicious. What did you want them to assume about the big bad explosion?”

“Don’t focus on the irrelevant.”

“Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“Is it divine ego?” he wondered. “Is it sabotage? Did you want to watch all your dubious believers lose their faith, when we didn’t find anything?”

“I wanted Boss to let go of my fucking friends,” Chuuya snapped. “And I wanted to see if my shit luck would prove itself once again, by having some dude affected by *shivers-in-my-timbers syndrome* know more about my past than I did.”

A car passed by; a child plastered her fingers on her window, crying loudly at something Dazai could not hear.

“It’s not even a stupid god, anyway,” Chuuya muttered — half a scoff. “It’s just numbers. Assholes’ stole his name, too.”

*What else did they steal?*, Dazai didn’t ask.

Eventually, the boy cleared his throat, lips tight. “Well, whatever,” he echoed, hands deep in his pockets. Either disapproval or frustration had made the gloves insufficient — and he could not believe something so pointless could appear so layered. “See you, freak.”

He laid his chin in his hands; sat up straighter, the way the Boss’ weird *something* was supposed to when he was kicked out of the adults table. That was how it went: *goodbye* until *hello*, and some Arcade games in between, and some liquified brains on their fingers, then *goodbye* again.

Dazai saluted. “Hope it’s my funeral.”

Muttering suited men conversed on top of the stairs, throwing offhanded glances in his direction whenever a cloud hid the moon.

He would have reminded them the sky was not his to control yet — he would have boringly stuck his own gun down his throat and watched them panic over the safest way to not be blamed for it. Most of all, he would have left that city, walked until the concrete wasn’t as familiar, and drunk snow until he dropped on some misremembered grave, splintered at the seams like he was.

*[Conflict, she had sworn, conflict — you can bite it from the air].*

He did none of these things. He threw the one eye he had to the line of skin between Chuuya’s glove and sleeve — scarred and familiar and *unbleeding* — and kept his eyes there when he pulled the taxi door open — when he *pushed*, first, because he always messed up the things children learned first.

With a hiss and a winter-cold puff of blurred air, the ground caught fire.

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The moment one of the volunteers — still fumbling with the taxi driver's corpse and the chaos of onlookers — attempted to put a blanket around his shoulders, Chuuya was out of there.

It did not take long to find his short silhouette through the columns of smoke, the red-and-blue shadows, and the unnecessarily grievous crowd that had gathered at the feet of the HQs — though Dazai had to make his way underneath armpits and over puddles of petrol turning the snow rotted.

By the time he was out of that bubble of panic and sirens, Chuuya had clung to the roof of some columned portico, making his upside-down way towards nowhere at all.

“Bullshit,” he was muttering, a tad too loud and a tad too *accented*, in that way none of them knew how to place and he never talked about. “*Bullshit!* I’ve fought the *Nine Rings*. They had no talking crosses and vendettas against taxi drivers!”

“No point in yelling to the sky,” Dazai informed him, cleaning the underside of his shoes against the concrete. “It’s empty.”

His next step shook the whole portico; he felt the sudden need to grasp the nearest part of him and drop him to the ground — so he did.

Muttered curses and an only *half* failed attempt to kick him in the shins later, Chuuya climbed to his feet, watching fire-fighter vehicles sweep past them, painting the night scarlet.

“They know too much if they're trying to get rid of *you* specifically,” he commented, as they pressed close to one of the columns, when two police cars roared by. No one paid any mind to them — there were pros in age; and pimples, too. “But Mori will tell the men someone was trying to play a prank on you.”

Chuuya scoffed. “*Someone.*”

He conceded: “Me.”

“That’s not like Ane-san,” He squinted, patting dust and debris off his hat. “She smells threats like a hound. There’s no way she doesn’t understand something is *wrong*.”

“Did she look reasonable to you, just now?”

“She grieved for too long not to be affected.”

“Of course you’re defending her.” *Grant others the mercy you will not give yourself*, Randou had said, long before his house burned — Rimbaud had too, he assumed.

His jaw settled. “Of course *you* wouldn’t get it. They took everything from her. She just wants me to help her get her revenge, once and for —“

He sighed, long and exaggerated. “And *that’s* the problem, isn’t it?” He hooked two fingers on his choker, and began pulling him over the traffic — far, far away from the serpent’s lair. “Even after *all this time*, you still think it’s *Kouyou’s* orders you were brought here to obey!” Dazai chanted, uncaring of the choking sounds coming behind him. “Or Mori’s even — or Hirotsu’s, though neither one of us has ever been particularly on board with that, have we? As I do, however, recall us establishing through a *terrible* game of *Smash Smash!*, you are *my* dog.”

“It’s been *months*, ” Chuuya spat out, prying his hand off, vicious. “Let the damn dog jokes go.”

“Do you prefer the *personal maid* ones?”

“You cheated at that shit anyway.”

“You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t from me,” he cut him off. “I think it’s pretty reasonable that you should obey *my* orders, first and foremost.”

“*Fuck you*. I joined of my own volition.”

“I was a fundamental step to that will!”

“I don’t see your point,” he insisted. “It’s not like you said anything to try to convince Boss —“

“Of course I didn’t,” Dazai interrupted him. “I’m not an idiot. Use whatever is left of your brain and tell me: doesn’t Mori have too much on his hands to worry about *theories*? He needs to establish his power, and mafiosi want proof of strength,” He directed an exasperated look to the clouds. “And just now, he found the *perfect* occasion to give them what they want: a respected organization to annihilate. Not to worry you, but you’re gonna have to develop even the smallest form of intellect — *if* we do this.”

“Do *what*, asshole?” Chuuya asked, just as irked. “*We* don’t have to do anything! The order was lifted — if it was ever *given*. I don’t have to watch your stupid face for a second longer.”

The open window of the next police car to pass them filled the air in statics and radio-voices. “— *required to circle the perimeter, the guards of the Mori Corporations insists it should not be more than a simple* —“

Leaning against a street light, eyes settled on the car, was a man in a tailored grey suit, murmuring into a familiar earpiece system. In his attempts to look casual to the passersby, his eyes almost landed on them.

They fell quiet.

Moved automatically, too; to the more crowded, interior part of the sidewalk, where the winter coats and unstained faces would hide the mess of dust and scratches Chuuya was sporting. His knuckles knocked against a naked wrist, and *something* seemed unsure of whether to appear or vanish from Chuuya's shoulders.

*The Demon Prodigy has eyes everywhere*, the voices were apparently saying, this time. He thought it pointless. He *was* eyes; they all were, when a red scarf demanded it.

"I don't appreciate being left with no choice on my collaborators," Dazai whispered, eventually, eyes forward and head low. "My preferences have hardly ever changed the circumstances, though."

Chuuya made a face. "We don't *collaborate*. We get stuck in situations."

"I'm aware. Is this not *a situation*?"

His silence was contemplative; he dirtied his shoes with his soles every few seconds, as if incapable of staring at something so polished.

"Whatever," he said, at last, straightening. His fingers closed around his wrist; he pulled him in the opposite direction, almost running an old man over. "I was starting to get bored, anyway."

Chuuya's apartment complex was some ten stores building in the inner ring of the Port Mafia's territory, with conspicuous looking inhabitants and a blood red *X* on the gate — signaling *whose* protection was to be faced.

Through familiar black cars and suited, Dazai couldn't help but be surprised by the general *coziness* of the neighborhood. A whiff of long-since eaten homemade food reached his nostrils; the balcony of the last floor was still decorated in Christmas lights, and its forgetful owner was studying the sky with a rusty, cheap telescope.

He thought back to his own living quarters, and his grin ripped some skin.

They sneaked by, managing to reach the endless sequence of automatic doors of the garages undisturbed — there, the boy clicked on a small, half broken remote and waited for the second to last door to open.

"No," Dazai concluded.

Before he could calmly make his way out, Chuuya grabbed him by the tie, turning him around. "The hell you mean, *no*?"

"I mean *no*," he repeated, staring at the vehicle occupying the center of the room. "As in — *no*. Never. Not even if you pay me your weight in gold. Though that would be little more than an ant's, I assume."

He expected the slap on the nape, so he didn't flinch as it came down. "Stop being ridiculous."

“Am I speaking Cantonese?” Dazai wondered. “I *know* how to speak Cantonese. I *beg* you to let me know if I’ve accidentally started talking in Cantonese.”

“*What?*”

“Chuuya,” He snapped his fingers right in front of his face. “Hatrack. Slug. Foolish dog you are. Look at me. I am *not* getting on a pink motorcycle with you.”

“It’s not pink! It’s clearly *red*!”

That metallic beast was bigger than what any fifteen year old should be able to *climb on*, let alone drive — Chuuya himself being anything but a paragon of growth precocity. The wheels and the handlebar were a deep, sleek black, but the rest of the bike was painted in a very peculiar shade of scarlet — if one wanted to be gentle about it.

“Have you ever seen something hot pink?” Dazai asked. He pointed at the bike. “*That’s* hot pink.”

“Lay off, it’s the light!”

“No need to be so offended. Don’t tell me you have personal beef with colors as well.”

“You’re the one who complained about getting on a pink bike, not me —“

“No, no,” he bit, “You misunderstand. I’m not getting on *any* bike with you.”

“I’ve seen you throw yourself under moving cars for *fun*,” the boy replied, disbelieving. “You tried to choke yourself on the sweets on Hirotsu’s desk just a few years ago. Yesterday you *begged* Madame Tanaki to stab you with her pen. But riding a motorcycle is where you draw the line?”

“Precisely,” he confirmed. “Are your legs even long enough to reach the pedals, anyway? Because I *truly* don’t think they — hey, *hey*. No. *Stop!*”

Uncaring of untold rules of the syndicate — Dazai’s skin being amongst the *untouchable* territories, particularly to Ability Users — Chuuya did not hesitate to bodily drag him inside the garage. What followed was a blur. Nails scratched and bones rearranged themselves, as each sharp corner of their bodies bloomed blue and purple by the vicious kiss of old furniture and motorcycle parts.

“Stop —“ Chuuya insisted, breathlessly, “ — being —“ Dazai kicked back until he hit what had to be a facial bone, “ — so fucking *difficult* —“ With one last yank around the knees, he managed to haul Dazai in his direction, tearing his hands away from an half destroyed night table, as he screeched, “ — *all the time!*”

“*I hate you!*”

“This was your idea!” the boy growled. “Deal with the *goddamn consequences!*”

They bumped against the bike. It did not manage to move the beast aside, but it did activate its emergency alarm — roaring insistently against the walls of their skulls. “Don’t make me tie you to the seat!” Chuuya snapped, dragging him towards the vehicle. “*Don’t* make me — !”

“I’ll take a damn *taxi!*” Dazai whined, pulling his hair. “I don’t even care if it blows up! I’ll welcome it!”

“Taxis aren’t allowed in the Under Port!”

“Neither are *pets!* Neither are —“

He paused.

In an uncomfortable embrace of limbs, he sat up, blinking at Chuuya’s ruffled form. “I didn’t tell you about the Under Port.”

“As if it’s not fucking obvious?” the boy scoffed, blowing hair off his scratched forehead. “You want to check if the other thirty two men are as undead as the one in the Hall.”

Dazai stayed quiet. Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “No way your genius ass didn’t notice. The guy was still breathing. *A little*, yes, but —“

“Of course *I* noticed,” Dazai relied. “It must have been my Ability, or someone at forensics would have noticed it. But *you?*”

“Ain’t you *hilarious.*”

“Why didn’t you tell Kouyou, then? Or Mori?”

Uneasiness draped over his features; he cleared his throat. “I don’t — It felt like they wouldn’t do anything about it. I don’t know. They refused to listen to anything we were saying, so —“

“And Mori would never approve of us involving Q in official assignments,” he concluded.

Chuuya blinked. “What does the brat have to do with it?”

He dropped his forehead against the side of the bike. With little more than resignation, he sighed: “You’ll see when we get there.”

“Where did you even get this thing?” he asked, as soon as Chuuya’s foot sank on the pedal. The bike roared to life, rattling his bones all the way to his teeth. “Did you seriously spend — *I don’t know how much* of your blood money on a pink bike?”

“Not *pink,*” he insisted. “And no. Albatross gave it to me.”

A name built to hurt. Said quietly — yet, not quite; said *loudly*, certainly, with some spite for the world. *Look at me talking of the unspeakable.*

Dazai had never seen his eyes even *brush* the ground. He did not know who he was so eagerly expecting to see; what mirage he wasn't ready to miss. Not a ghost; perhaps someone to blame, or a cloud just clear enough.

"The one who talked all the time," he said.

Chuuya turned his head, blinking.

"I had spies on you," he answered, with no input. "For weeks."

"You had spies. On me."

"I just said that," He pinched his side. "Don't make that face. You get all psychoanalyzing on me whenever we're in the same room; I just have better methods."

"How nice," His driver from hell leaned forward, hands tightening around the clutches. "Hey. Wouldn't it be super *fun* if this was actually my first time riding the bike?"

He froze. "What?"

"Hold on tight."

"You're lying," he insisted, voice cracking between the syllables. "What? Chuuya. Chuuya, you're *lying* —"

He did try his best to rationalize it, as the motorcycle ate and ate and *devoured* the night traffic, painting the city on both sides in the most blurred, nauseating colors — all his brain registered, though, was an unusual feat of demise.

By the third pedestrian they had almost ran over, he could feel his last meal climb its way up his throat at a rhythm that challenged Chuuya's evil laughter. The moment they got stuck in a small congestion of cars they weren't able to slalom through, he came to regret his decision to hold onto the underside of the seat.

"Don't you dare!" he snapped — because the boy's shoulders had stiffened, and Dazai *knew*. He jumped forward, wrapping his arms around his waist. "Don't you *dare*!"

"Come *on*," Chuuya lamented, trying to tear his arms off. He braked so heavily the bike *squeaked*, but somehow managed to turn the next corner without hitting anyone. "It's fine, it's just quicker!"

"You're not making this bike fly!"

"The traffic is so bad —"

"You're *not*!"

"I've done it so many times!"

"You said it's your first time driving it —"



“I was *lying*, assface!” Chuuya accelerated. “Let go of me!”

“You don’t even know if it would work with me here!”

“It *might*! You’re cutting my air off!”

“*Good!*” he shrieked. Sneaking his hands deeper underneath his shirt, he tightened his grip until the boy choked. He sunk his face in the boy’s jacket and screamed into it: “I’m not *dying with you!*”

The *Under Port* — the most infamous portion of the two thirds of Port the Mafia owned — rested underneath the enormous platforms dividing the sea in greyish units. Getting there was a strenuous path: past numerous metal gates and more automatic barriers, past the busy men and the carts of goods, and then — *under*.

Deserted as the area was past midnight, the couple of guards at the entrance offered them skeptical looks as Dazai emptied his stomach over the railings, under Chuuya’s tapping foot. They were quick to straighten up, though, the moment he handed them Mori’s *Silver Oracle* — slightly torn at the edges, and stained of chocolate.

“Please,” they stuttered, “Let us know if you need any help.”

“Improbable,” he replied, as Chuuya dragged him over the gate, “But do tell, do you perhaps know the rate of successful suicides committed in the area?”

Empty carriers had been abandoned down the dozen feet long platform, along to irrelevant pieces of paper and dropped goods. The chained boats were as enormous as always; as quiet and lazily threatening as they gently danced to the moon-reflecting waves. They were still some of his oldest memories: a hand tight around his smaller own, the golden ring on the fourth wrinkled finger, and a boat wider than the sky leaving the port. *Are you ready to watch it blow up, my boy?*

It took the lookout several minutes to answer their knocking on the carefully hidden door. The vertical tunnel of darkness that welcomed them was framed by LED lights — behind the man in a bright orange one-piece equipment suit, studying them.

When he spoke, fog blurred his mask, and his voice was little more than a robotic creak: “Show me.”

Unnecessarily — considering just how often he came down there to check on Q — Dazai raised Mori’s seal.

*Where proofs get erased and men and enemies alike are gifted a last greeting*, he had been told, the first time. *To be fair, the Under Port is much more than a crematorium.*

They descended the metal ladder to the very heart of the earth. The air grew humid and sticky with each step down; just to make sure Chuuya would not pass out upon him, he slapped his ankles every few seconds, granting himself one curse or two. The lower they went — the closer the screams grew.

A bit further down the hallway they landed on, the guard was waiting for them. Metallic walls and rusted floors welcomed them, interrupted by security doors and lines of LEDs. At the end of the corridor, a bright warning sign read: *DO NOT ENTER ANY OF THE ROOMS WITHOUT EQUIPMENT.*

Persistently, the one unchanging, guaranteed melody of that funerary house traveled through the walls, screeching unpleasantly inside his ears. A cacophony of untalented singers with dreams too expensive to abandon. It would fade to the background soon enough, he knew. All that was death did.

“You people should really invest in earmuffs,” Chuuya concluded, rattling his knuckles on the nearest porthole. Pitch darkness greeted him from the outside; polluted waters and night poisoned waves.

He spied into the windows, welcoming the familiar landscapes — men and women in orange equipment, their gloved hands prodding and pulling at malnourished bodies on Hospital beds, trapped inside rooms with the firework-like glows of Abilities.

Somewhere in Mori’s office was a list of every Ability User they had come into contact with; when it was enemies, their paths were few: joining, or being *convinced* to join. The ones who did neither left the Under Port in other ways. Usually, as organs to the Black Market.

“Oh, look,” he called, obnoxiously. “Let’s make a bet. Is he getting her hair out of the way while she throws up, or is he going to shave it off? Ah — Too late. He shaved it. Let’s find someone else.”

Repulsion settled Chuuya’s jaw. *Does it make you mad*, he did not ask, *does it make you nostalgic?*

“You sure look at home in this shithole,” he spat out, eventually. “Anything to do with those school trips you were muttering about?”

“If you count that time I locked myself here for three weeks.”

Bewilderment made him blink. “Why?”

Dazai recalled — sitting on that old floor, cold and surgically clean. No waves and no heartbeat and no breathing pattern; the screams were too loud to let anything filter through. There was blood on the walls and there was saliva on the windows. There was the sea, outside. “I thought being so close to Hell might let me find it.”

“It?”

“Longing for life,” He twirled around, just to hear his shoes squeak. “Fear of death. I suppose that might just be the same thing.”

“No,” Chuuya, stupid as he was, retorted, “It’s not.”

“Want to ask the corpses?”

“Those aren't corpses.”

“No,” he agreed. The guard in orange was making his way back to them; holding onto the edge of their suit — and turning the man's hands into fists because of it — was Q. “The morgue is *that* way.”

“What did I do?” the child demanded, oozing off sleepiness, the moment they were close enough to cling to Chuuya's pants instead. “I did the homework Mori wanted. I did all my rosaries! No punishment.”

*Q*, the Boss had once said, *tries too hard to look like a child*.

“Light up a bit, Kyū, would you?” he huffed. “I'm not the devil incarnate.”

“Ain't that a scoop,” Chuuya mumbled.

The child blinked, uneven pupils passing right past him to land on his favorite *not-quite-adult*. “*Nii-san*. Did you bring me a hat?”

He made a face. “Now you want to look like him, too? And with something as tacky as those head warmers of his?”

“Couldn't find one small enough,” the boy replied, easily, angling a kick to the back of his knees. “You'll get it. Be a little patient.”

Contentment looked all but comforting on their round, red-cheeked face. But they were seven, and they had been laughing inside a bloodied box in an alley when the Mafia had been alerted about a mess at a local school, and Dazai had read somewhere that most children tended to grin in the face of it all.

Their arms brushed the sky. “Up, up.”

*They* never did have a problem with touching him. Nullification had more to do with their doll than their skin; and they were too young to understand most of the syndicate feared Dazai's flesh for a bit more than its thievery manners.

With a sigh, Dazai leaned down to pick them up.

Vicinity with the Mafia's blood-thirsty card created uneasiness in most; Chuuya, forever a paladin of his own *just don't kill the kids* crusade, would go as far as to meet the creature's eyes, — and relax the curve of his shoulders the moment they were no longer around.

*(When they had added bandages to the doll they never went anywhere without, Dazai had not questioned the inspiration. When Mori had offered him whiskey to numb an old scar and said, “They remind me of you,” he hadn't questioned whether it explained his reluctance to kneel in front of them and call them a victim).*

“Well, then,” he concluded, dragging his palm across the nearest windows, just to leave a stain. “How do you feel about helping your *nii-sans* out?”

They made their way through the maze of the Under Port, cocooned by the raw symphonies and the cold metal of the stairs railings, as he explained his plan to Q in little terms. The child didn't appear much interested, as they rarely did when it concerned a part of work that didn't want them to get hurt and hurt in the process — *instead*, they amused themselves with squishing their cheek on Dazai's shoulder and reaching out to play with the chain of Chuuya's hat.

"That's where the bones go," they would say, sometimes, pointing lazily at some darkened corridor. Whenever they recognized one of the faces passing them by, they would whisper, "That's the woman who threw my lunch on the floor," or, "I saw him kill a man even smaller than Chuuya *nii-san*."

Near the end of their journey, they propped themselves up and announced: "That's where they bring the family."

It was the only term Q would accept to bestow to the Port Mafia. "*Body in acid, remnants in the sea*," he recited.

"They never come out," the kid shrugged. "Like the men who touch me."

He elbowed Chuuya in the side. "Say, did the Sheep have any funerary customs?"

A huff. The boy activated his Ability with a jump, bathing the darkness in a reddish light that dragged a giggle out of Q's throat; not one to be outdone, Dazai sat on the railing and slipped down. "What's with you and questions about the Sheep?"

"I'm forever astonished at the universe's ability to gather such a conspicuous group of the stupidest children on earth and leave them all in one place. Only to put the *dumbest* one of them in charge," Dazai answered, without skipping a beat. In a surge of improvisation, he grasped one of Q's hands, leading the two of them in a *valzer* down the floor. "Present kids excluded!"

"I'm not *stupid*!" they protested, stubbornly holding onto their doll. Their eyes studied their motions, trying to read a meaning in them.

*Isn't that atrocious?*, Chuuya had asked, on their first introduction, hearing about their Ability. After being asked what that word meant, he had corrected himself — *doesn't that hurt?*

Like all unnecessary things, he could not remember what their answer had been.

"Your gang was a lost Kindergarten classroom, though, wasn't it?" he mused. "Funerals must have been *fun*."

"The kids were safe," Chuuya insisted. But what was a *kid* to him, Dazai wondered? He doubted that walking storm had ever referred to himself as such; who had he considered young enough to deserve protection without the need to earn it? "I wouldn't let them die."

Dazai hummed. "A shame they didn't do the same for you."

The metal of the next railing creaked, bending in a half under Chuuya's next step. Q dangled their head in his *casqué*. Laughter, still; shrieks, still.

A moment later, he said: "Someone would lit up a fire in the deepest part of the crater. People would sit on the roofs and watch the body burn until dawn. We threw shit into the flames — our favorite catch from the month. Symbolism, or whatever they passed it for."

He hummed. "Kids do adore it when other kids lose their toys."

"The youngest I can remember was five."

"Achieved freedom so early? I'm envious."

"I was eight."

"When you witnessed it? Legends start young!"

Chuuya pulled Q's fingers off his face, where they were trying to fit into his mouth. "When they tried to hold my funeral."

*Asking would be easy*, he told himself. Asking would have been *too* easy. Dogs had no stories to tell; curiosity was a personality defect in the corpse of a butterfly, and Dazai had long since fought enemies who did nothing more than arise something akin to humanity in his lungs.

"If getting buried in the kingdom of the Sheep is that easy," he said, instead, "I almost regret not accepting to join."

The eagerness burning his lungs waved. Dazai could feel it preen when it received greetings back, behind the stubborn need to pretend questions weren't a thing of this world.

Seesaws were home to cowards, so neither one of them said a word.

"I've never seen a sheep," Q intervened.

Chuuya snorted. "Me neither, Cruella."

"*Cruella?*"

"You know," He searched Dazai's gaze to ask for help; when he found nothing but matching doubt, his face fell. "You *know*. Evil dog killer. That ugly face you two are making is not because she's genuinely *horrible*?" More silence welcomed him. "Like, *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*? The movie?"

Inadequacy scratched some unliked part of his brain; something too young to stick around. "Of course you'd know all about canine cinematography."

Q was still blinking. "What's a dalmatian?"

"I can't believe my eyes!" a deep voice rumbled, the moment they reached the furthest corridor from the entrance. "If that ain't the old man's little bitch. Looking for dead assholes

to practice on?”

“Guard 32!” he exclaimed, cheerfully, opening his arms for a hug he wouldn’t receive. Q yelped as they jolted around, deciding to abandon the circle of his hold and land on the ground, offended. “How nice to see you again. Still getting off rats’ screeches?”

People either came and went in the Under Port, chased out by the never ending atmosphere and glacial temperatures — or they refused to leave, stubborn in their belief that whatever could survive the mud should stay where it was dirty. Guard 32 was neither; he simply had too much fun to ever consider changing stations.

He laughed, just once — a dying cough from a beer-shiny mouth. “Might be funnier if the rats were some of Executive Kouyou’s nicest ones, once in a while.”

“Don’t be so picky.”

“Bet one of *ya*’ kind would know about it.”

Dazai bowed. “I, my dear friend, am a lover of all women.”

“And yet, look at you,” Guard 32 let his eyes roam down and up Chuuya’s figure. A dirty fringe covered an abnormally wide forehead; the edge of a burned off strand seemed to press against the glass of his mask. The Port Mafia and its many vows — a line of blood for a child killed in battle; a burned piece of hair for a lost loved one.

*How strangely delicate*, he had once mused, head in Elise’s lap — because Mori was out, and he was never quite receptive to Dazai’s commentary on the Hell they had picked. She had been braiding hair pins through the strands; she hadn’t seemed particularly concerned with his skepticism at the gentlest notes in their syndicate’s death march. *How selfish*.

*No one steals more than a thief with a window*, she would have said. It seemed mean — the Port Mafia took and took and *took*, and then it dared to demand to miss it. *No one longs more than those who know what they are lacking*.

“I mean, he don’t even *look* like a girl.”

Chuuya’s flinch lit him up in threatening crimson all at once, tearing him out of his thoughts. “*Excuse me?*”

“Don’t mind him,” Dazai sighed, pinching his ear to get rid of the dramatics. “He has a thing against boys with long hair.”

“It got *ya* to shave that damn mane, didn’t it?” Guard 32 howled. “Get a few more scars and then you might actually start looking less like a pussy.”

Q opened their mouth, as if very eager to ask what a few more things *were* — Dazai had the presence of mind to put a hand in front of their mouth, shaking their head. “I appreciate the input. If you’ll excuse us, we need to check on those bodies you’re guarding,” He leaned forward. “Boss’ orders, you know.”

The man hummed. He was chewing on something, possibly just a nervous reflex; food wasn't allowed down there, either out of fear the prisoners would manage to steal some or because the rancid air might just ruin it. "The sons of a bitch are getting the acid treatment soon. What could ever be that important, suddenly?"

"Boss is meticulous, you know that," Dazai waved the question away. "All three of us are well used to the smell of expiring comrades."

Skipping Q's silhouette completely — as most people who worked in the Under Port knew how to do — the man observed Chuuya, again. "'You a newbie?'" he asked.

"No."

"You don't look familiar."

"Because we've never met," Chuuya replied. "It was a damn good life. You smell like shit."

"*Ha!* I like this one. Who knew they made your kind fun these days?" Guard 32 turned to open the door, handling the heavy levers with quick, mnemonic motions. "You got ten minutes. Any longer, and I'm gonna let you join in with the corpses."

Dazai gasped, clasping his hands. "You'd really do that for me, 32? You *really* would? Have I spent so many years underestimating your kindness?"

As he got pulled inside, he made sure to smile to the man until he could not anymore, feet almost bumping against the doll Q was dragging along. The guard positioned himself on the threshold of the door, blocking their way out of the morgue.

The room was smaller than Dazai remembered. All was in shades of rusted silver and dying men's teeth, from the ceilings to the iron tables lined up in long rows. The bodies upon it were covered by white sheets; the hems reached towards the grey floor like low cost ghosts costumes.

Funerals were standard procedure in the Port Mafia; it was all their dead were conceded, though. No body and no ashes and no graves; only the waves. *Giving yourself to the syndicate*, as the shadows retorted, *was a permanent affair*. Things crueler than death would not breach the contract.

The heavy cage around them muffled the screeches and the cries; the new found quiet *pounded* against his skull. Valleys and lakes were sculpted by sheets upon corpses; if he looked at them too long, he knew, his hands would begin to itch.

So close, so far.

Chuuya squinted. He was shaking, his usually cold body doing its best to adapt to the temperature of the room. Seemingly of the same opinion, Q whined, pressing themselves under his coat. "Which one?"

"Does it matter?" Dazai hid his freezing hands in his pockets. "Just find the shortest one. We'll go by empathy, what do you say?"

No matter the punch, they did end up making their way to the shortest man in the room. Only thirteen of the lined up beds were occupied; Dazai supposed the rest of the victims had been taken care of. No plates and no documents; when Chuuya tore the sheet off the body, Q perched their chin on the edge of the cold metal, offering just enough wonder to satiate the unmourned.

The same wounds they'd seen on the corpse in the *Hall of Light and Darkness* greeted them: a torn chest, naked ribs, and deteriorating organs left to the sight. The details changed with a deeper look — the man's jaw had been smashed and dislocated; two sides of his throat laid apart on the table, pages of a book.

"Pretty," Q sighed, enamoured. Dazai could see the man's vocal chords in a bed of blood and bones; if Chuuya hadn't slapped their hand away, they would have sunk it in. "That's what a good job looks like."

The strangely worded conclusion made Chuuya and Dazai's eyes meet; good diction denounced an echo of some ordering words — perhaps Mori's. To find beauty in the *successful* seemed a boring concept for a child; then again, few things must be prettier than not being punished.

"Is that what you say in your rosaries?" he couldn't help but ask. There were stranger things than a mafioso with faith; stranger, he assumed, than a kid with it.

But Q was both and was neither; he couldn't imagine them praying to anything but that doll of theirs, and to whatever bullet might one day kill Dazai and let them wander as boundless as they dreamed of.

"No," Q shook their head, pinching his nose when he got close enough to make them giggle. "I say sorry. Like Mama said. No other way to make them pretty, not for me."

In a room of carcasses, he wondered what Mori might say — were he to ever fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. He would have laughed, perhaps; sent him to a corner or strapped him to the table; not said a single thing, but scribbled on one of his notebooks as he wailed on the floor. *Do not stain it*, he would have added, *unnecessary damages are indecorous*.

"What are you waiting for?" Chuuya said, eventually, nodding towards the body. "Touch it."

*No Longer Human*, blessedly, felt like nothing at all. The doctor had asked him to describe it only once. *Loud*, he had thought, and hadn't said, because of it. Or *draining*. Sticky; lonely.

Under his palm, the corpse's chest rose and fell.

Q tilted their head to the side; Chuuya wasted no time in dragging him to the next table and tearing the sheet off. Then the next, then the other — then all thirteen of them, the results the same under Guard 32's curious gaze.

"Alright," he concluded, at the thirteenth body. "This isn't normal."



“No shit,” The boy ran a hand through his hair. “So, what’s this? You’re nullifying whatever makes them act dead. But how are they still alive in these conditions?”

“Perhaps whatever Ability I’m nullifying also acts as a method of conservation?” he offered. “A, *on the brink of death* kind of power. Mori once had an apprentice who could only heal people when they were about to die. It could be something similar.”

“Isn’t that too much for just one Ability? Keeping the body intact *and* alive, in this state?” Chuuya frowned. “Could your Ability nullify more than one Ability in one go?”

“Hey!” Q stage-whispered, sneaking between the redhead’s legs, almost making him lose his balance. “What do *I* have to do? When’s my turn?”

He glanced over to Guard 23, pausing.

Before he could even turn that gaze in his direction, Chuuya’s mouth stretched in the widest grin his skin would allow. “Oh, *yes*,” he whispered, eyes already settled on the prey. That amber eye of his twinkled, burned to the root by Arahabaki’s caged desire to exist. “I’ll distract our friend. You do your shit.”

He picked Q up, placing them upon the latest table; in the corner of his gaze, he saw Guard 32 raise his rifle higher with each ground-breaking step Chuuya took towards him, hands in his pockets and spine curved. When new screams joined the cacophony, he left them where they belonged — in the back of his skull.

“Work your magic on him, yes?” Dazai told Q, taking his hands off them and their doll. “Let me see if there’s any brain left inside this weird box.”

“That’s not a *box*,” the child noted. The grip of their chubby fingers around the doll was predatory. “Mori says we need to be resp — *repect* —“

“*Respectful*,” he completed. “Mori says a lot of things. You might have noticed.”

“They’re always ugly when they look at me,” Q added. Her hands pulled the man’s face, stretching his features into sharp, *scared* ones. “I make them not ugly. They never look at me when they’re dead.”

“Dead people don’t care about us,” Dazai explained. “We can philosophize later. Get on with it, or I’ll tell that nice lady you pestered earlier not to give you dinner.”

Q insisted: “Am I evil? Like Chuuya *nii-san* said. Make ugly faces because she’s *horrible*.”

That Chuuya was to blame was all but a surprise. “Evil kids are kids who don’t obey orders,” he offered, too busy to lie. “Unlike me, Chuuya won’t want to be your friend, if you’re evil.”

They squinted. “Liar,” they said, quietly.

“What?”

“You’re not my friend.”

He nodded. “But you still don’t want to be evil.”

With wide eyes and a whine, the child pressed an arm to the corpse’s chest, right until blood bloomed through the dirtied bandages they refused to change.

*Dogra Magra* took no time to come alive; it bled down the walls, crawling in through cracks the absent look in Q’s eyes had caused all on its own. The doll had been ripped apart; its button eyes settled on their victim with borderline *alive* attention — the corpse sat up and *screamed*.

No sound came out; his vocal chords had long since been slashed, and the fingers he had wrapped around his own neck would have blocked any effort. He watched him slam his own head back on the table, forehead crushing the metal — the crack that echoed in the room was almost louder than his guttural, unnatural gasps.

There was no one to attack, not after Dazai had swept Q off the table and backed off; as such, incapable to stand on destroyed limbs, whatever his mind was showing him poured all his viciousness on himself.

*Cerebral functions*, he concluded. A man tearing himself apart and still not screaming out in pain, but simply in Q’s induced mania; a corpse who couldn’t *feel* it.

*Like Tenshi*.

“Oh,” the child breathed, half hiding behind another table leg. They were shaking; their smile was too wide. “Is he mad at me?”

“That’s enough,” he concluded. The man trashed and kicked and fought the leather restraints; he kept his eyes on him as he ordered: “That’s enough, Q. Give me the doll.”

Another whine. A flash of black passed by, vertiginously fast — enough to roll his eyes back into his skull. His body flinched back, bumping painfully against one of the metal tables — only for his eyes to welcome the sight of a familiar leather jacket, spread in front of him like a shield, glowing scarlet as it was pierced by a quick sequence of bullets.

*“Mackerel!”*

He slipped under the metal table, emerging to the other side just in time to get a glimpse of the chaos — Chuuya stuck to the ceiling; Guard 32’s corpse right by the door, piled with the passed out bodies of some other guards who must have intervened; the orange silhouette of one last man, charging towards him with his rifle still fuming — and grab the knife Chuuya had blindly thrown his way.

A piece of concrete — a *tile* from the roof, he thought, shining red — sank right upon the man’s rifle, dropping him to his knees with a shocked curse; Dazai tossed the knife in the air, grabbed it as it fell — and slashed his throat.

Droplets of blood squirted to his face, as the guard landed face-first onto the floor with a wet squelch. Still stuck underneath a table, Q’s hands covered their mouth.

“Shit catch,” was the first thing Chuuya said, disgusted, landing on the floor. “The motherfucker had some gravity repellent Ability and an allergy to mummies,” He kicked his body aside, as unconcerned as he would never be if those bodies on the floor were true members of the syndicate. He groaned. “ *Great*. Now we have to mop the floor.”

The fallen guards were deposited underneath white sheets; the equipment they had stripped off of them was hidden in the hole in the ceiling Chuuya had caused. Murders were already a too-bright announcement to Mori’s never ending eyes; Dazai *knew* they would be found out.

Still they mopped the floor, and they attempted to push Q’s latest victim’s organs back where they belonged before his makeshift funeral.

“Not like that,” he lamented. He reached a hand out, pushing Chuuya’s own away from the portion of skin he’d been about to tear. “That will damage the aorta, and then not even your Ability will keep the waterfall of blood in.”

“What are you, a doctor?” the boy scoffed, but he allowed him to guide his fingers down the corpse’s chest. His hand felt bizarrely broad under his own, thin and littered in Elise’s colorful band aids — unlikely harmless in his weak grasp. He studied the red maze under their palms.

“I did live with one, for a while,” he said. “We need to drain the blood. They might not come in here for a day, but there’s no way this thing won’t bleed all over the floor by then. We could *maybe* get away with it — if they burn the corpses without counting them. But they *will* get suspicious if they find a mess.”

“We can’t,” Chuuya insisted. “We don’t have the right stuff. Most we can do is — I guess I can block the largest ways with — I don’t know. Get me some screws.”

He blinked. “*Where* , exactly, am I supposed to get screws? You think they won’t *notice*?”

“I don’t know! I’ll unscrew the carriers, or something.”

It was a messy work at best; Dazai ended up using the boy’s knife to move all the skin to the side and allow Chuuya to use his Ability, pushing the stolen crews up the largest holes of flesh and viscera. By the time they had closed every reachable way, the man’s corpse appeared on the verge of imploding — luckily, it did nothing more than shake a little, once Chuuya tentatively let go of his Ability.

They stood side by side, judging.

“It’s *so* going to explode,” the redhead sighed.

“I mean...”

“It’s *so*,” he insisted, “Gonna explode in some jackass’ face.”

“They don’t even look at the bodies before dissolving them,” Dazai insisted. “They won’t find out. They’re so bored by their own work — at most, they’ll think someone is trying to play a prank on them.”

“But —“

“When have my plans ever failed?”

A groan. “Whatever. Let’s just get out of here. The noise is driving me mad.”

They had to steal some sheets from one of the cabinets to quickly clean themselves up. Dazai couldn’t do anything about the stains on his shirt, but he made sure the coat covered most of the mess — Chuuya picked up his jacket from the ground and put it on with a huff, after smacking the dust off of it.

“Be grateful,” he muttered.

“For your cheap tricks?” Dazai lied, right to his face. “Never.”

He turned to face the wall and removed the blood-stained bandages around his eye; put them back in the opposite direction. When he turned to face him again, Chuuya’s eyes moved away from him faster than light, all the curiosity buried underground.

A cold hand landed on his cheek.

A breath passed. Gentleness, he thought, later, *would* take some time more to be seen for what it was. Time he did not have; he stiffened, burning, tickled from the inside out by liquid snow and fireworks.

Blind to it all, Chuuya violently rubbed the last traces of dried blood from his skin, hard enough he feared an entire layer of his face would come off. “*Ouch, ouch, ouch* — “ he whined, trying his best to get away from the deadly grip.

“Is cleaning yourself such a hard task?” the other muttered, doing his very best to tear his cheek apart. “No need to constantly look like you just climbed out of a sewer.”

“My soul is dirty,” he replied, mostly to annoy him. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Sure it is,” the other conceded, distractedly. Something deafening, something *vacant* between his ribs — it peeked, a worm abandoning an emptied out carcass. “We’ll scrub it against some pointy surface, how about that?”

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“Done so soon?” the guard at the entrance asked, purely to fill the silence, as soon as they stepped into his visual field.

“It was nothing much,” Dazai offered. “You know how bureaucracy is.”

He shrugged. “I suppose.”

Chuuya’s exhale was a storm on his face, heavy as it was. They made their way to the ladder; he allowed the boy to go first, and turned his most polished expression on the guard. “Thank you for your aid,” he said, cheerful. “No need to tell anyone about this little trip, alright?”

“Boss’ secret business?”

“Something like that,” He leaned forward. “But don’t tell anyone *who* could tell Boss either, alright? The poor man works too much. No need to worry him with such business.”

“I have to report to the Boss every week,” the guard replied. “Everyone who gets in and out of this place has to be written down. This place wouldn’t work as well as it does, otherwise.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” He nodded, eyes wide. “But see, I really can’t let you write down our little trip. This whole thing,” He gestured from them to the silhouette disappearing in the dark of the tunnel, “Has to stay secret. To *everyone*, got it?”

The man frowned. “Kid, I’m telling you I can’t.”

Dazai tilted his head. “I’m telling you have to.”

Gloved fingers tightened around the rifle; suspicion took over the guard’s traits. Either he had heard the threat underlining his words, or the whole affair had started looking too crafty to him. Whichever it was, he kept his eyes on Dazai and reached for his communicator, asking: “32, what did the visitors —“

He slammed his foot on the man’s shins.

The blades hidden between two layers of sole sunk inches deep; he went down with a choked out scream. Before he could touch the ground, Dazai grabbed his collar, plastering him against the wall. A grip around his wrist got his weapon to land on the floor. He stuck his gun up against the man’s jugular, listening to it throb.

“Do you know how *easy* it would be to just say *yes* when someone asks you to do something?” he asked, with a sigh. “Useless stubbornness grates on my nerves.” He tapped the gun. “It makes me irrationally *annoyed*.”

“Who do you think you —“

“Who do I think I am?” he concluded. He pushed the gun further, choking a screech out. “Irrelevant. Listen to me, yes? You don’t say a word about this little trip. I don’t *care* who asks. I don’t care if Mori calls you up in his office and gets on his knees in front of you. You don’t tell him a word.”

“I — I don’t —“

“And *I’ll know* if you do,” he assured, petulant. He knocked his forehead against the plastic mask, plastering his eyes on the surface. “Don’t think I won’t,” He moved the gun from the man’s throat, laying it on his own temple. Under the man’s quiet, stunned gaze, he said: “You tell someone, and I rip your darling Eri’s womb off and feed her baby to the dogs.”

The body under him stiffened.

“How,” the man whispered. “How do you —“

“People tend to care about things. It’s what keeps them alive, you know?” He tapped the gun on his temple, pensively. “Your darling lives in the same apartment complex as the redhead you just saw. I couldn’t believe the coincidence. I do hope she won’t need to open the door today.”

A raw sound abandoned his throat; animalistic in its irrationality, as if dogs knew how to beg. “Don’t,” he begged. “Don’t, *don’t*, I won’t tell anyone —“

“I know you won’t,” he assured. “Because you know I’ll ask my companion to get rid of the surprise I left. If you *do* talk after that, though — I’m sure it won’t be much of a bother for him to go up a few stairs and blow your darling’s head off.”

“I won’t,” the guard promised, white as a sheet. “I really won’t. I promise. I’ll just — I’ll just say everything went as it should, in the report. I promise.”

“That’s good,” he sighed, tilting his head to press the gun even harder on his skin. “You know, this is hard for me, too. If I had just let things go as they should, you might have even killed me. I can see it so clearly. You look like a panic shot. You would have raised your rifle at me the moment 32 refused to answer.”

“You might have been able to do it,” he longed. The fingers brushing the trigger of the gun trembled. “It would have been so —“

“Dazai.”

He looked up.

Chuuya had lowered his body down the ladder again, quiet as a spider. He looked down at him with a carefully devoid expression — well aware that Eri didn’t live in his complex; well knew there was no surprise waiting for her.

Dazai ached. He remembered it so well — the garden behind Rimbaud’s *villa*. Remembered taking the gun and searching for — and doing *all* he could to feel, just for a moment, to *feel* the — see what it would be like, if that might be *enough* to *actually* —

“Dazai,” Chuuya repeated, merciless executioner of any and all illusions he might drown himself into. He wouldn’t want the corpse around. He wouldn’t know what to do with the blame. “Dazai, where the *fuck* is Q?”

## Chapter End Notes

list of stuff i typed into google as a research for this chapter:

- “yokohama map”
- “how well can a seven years old talk”
- “is it hard to get blood off concrete”
- “kouyou ozaki fanart”

thank you for reading if you made it this far. see you guys next chapter!

# YOU

## Chapter Summary

*They stole two umbrellas from a pair of suited men screaming into their phones, cursing out whatever was keeping them in the storm after midnight, and after scrubbing blood from their soles, they made their way into the station.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter iii.*

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*Case number: 18009567*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. were tasked with looking for [...]*

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*The Corruption thing was, objectively, a bit of an obsession.*

*It hadn't started as such — it certainly hadn't ended like that, not with Mori's amusement rattling the phone pressed onto his ear; praising his fore-planning for a Chuuya-decorated double suicide that made Dazai long for a pre-death of sorts. And yet there had been a middle: a crimson-soaked sky, a fractured Event Horizon, a never ending scream — the call of sunrise and death and an angry fifteen years old, among the few things capable of rattling him.*

*It could kill you, his bones had informed him. It did not care for him; it knew no mercy — no philosophy, no social conventions and no doctor's lessons. To at least one being, Dazai's blood was like anyone's else.*

*And Dazai had stepped closer.*

*He had been stepping closer for weeks, now. In his few hours of sleep, mostly — because Chuuya was pretending he knew how to grieve, and was climbing the stakes, and was nowhere to be found. Dreams of blood raining from the sky, slipping down fingers his bruises knew well — dreams of standing and breathing and watching the end approach and feeling something.*

*Corruption had dark eyes. Chuuya's hand was on his cheek. It was warm. Dazai knew it wasn't real.*

*Ask, it whispered. Ask him to break.*

*Dazai stepped closer.*

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Light appeared merciless and square-shaped, pulsing against his eyelids with no gain.

“Ah,” A man blinked down at them, holding the lids of the dustbin open with his chubby hands. Mere inches away from his bald skull was the sun; mere inches from Dazai's squinting

eyes was some unfinished coffee cup. “There was no need for you boys to wait for me all night. I could have retrieved this month’s payment on my own, you know?”

The neon of *The Alley’s* lights blinked at him, mostly turned off and not quite intact. With sudden sobriety, Dazai knew who he was.

A mixture of food-wrapping paper, abandoned drinks, and photocopies turned out wrong was his bed — his nape was tilted strangely against one side of the dustbin. Before he could fully attempt to sit up, his leg got stuck in between another pair.

“Uhh,” was the garble out of Chuuya’s mouth, blurred and miles away. He had trash stuck in his hair; his hat was submerged under an empty box of dog food. The moment his confused gaze settled on Dazai, sheer irritation sharpened his gaze. “The *fuck ar’ you doin’* in my bed?”

Unexplainably synchronized, their senses returned.

“You *son of a fucking bitch —!*” A combat boot hit him right across the cheekbone; Dazai could only throw his leg over the edge of the dustbin, much to their guest’s surprised yelp, groaning. “What the *fuck did you put* in the goddamned *chips — I’m killing you —* What the *fuck* is wrong with your *rotten* bandaged ass — “

“Nakahara,” the man managed to stutter, some minutes into their *attempts* at a fight. “Nakahara, is this about this month’s payment? I don’t remember asking for any treasure out of a trash can. I believe my tastes are, ah — *more refined.*”

Somehow, Chuuya managed to settle his gaze on the man’s hesitating frame. The fingers he had clenched around Dazai’s hair abandoned their prey; he made sure to kick him once more before jumping out of the bin, brushing remnants of those few hours of sleep off his good-quality clothing.

Dazai flopped back against that uncomfortable bed, moaning at the sky.

“...matter of the syndicate,” the boy was explaining, shoulders still stiffened with rage, doing his very best not to direct it to the small man in front of him. He couldn’t be older than sixty, but he sported a curiously candid mustache and some stress-deep wrinkles. “I apologize for the commotion. I didn’t realize you’d come by today.”

“Well, we can’t let that hole in your wall overflow, can we?” the man chuckled, a bit nervously. “The *Old World* won’t rebuild itself on its own, will it?”

Dazai landed on the ground — just in time to see the flash of *something* tighten Chuuya’s clenched jaw.

All at once, he felt utterly stupid.

*Oh.* The moment the new local god had been cleared from the Hospital, he had dragged Dazai out of Hirotsu’s desk and beaten him seventeen-to-sixteen at *Final Royal IX*. He had

refused to explain what the weird quests that made up his prize meant; hadn't answered a single taunt. *Of course.*

It turned out — he came to understand, studying Chuuya and who he called *The Owner's* chat, much to the former's displeasure — that while corpses were bound to stay so, buildings and bars could be brought back. So, he had found the owner of the *Old World* — a scarred, rich man who Verlaine had thoroughly terrified.

Except *The Owner* was a weird man, and all the money he had offered to him had apparently been worth next to nothing.

"About the reconstruction," Chuuya was attempting, breathing through his nose. His pupils were still blown from the chips-drug accident; Dazai wondered if his curiosity was worth more than a running advantage. "We — *I* was wondering, just how many more — *antiques* do you need to —"

"*Oh*, the list goes on and on!" The man brushed the matter away, enthusiastic. "My collection is only just getting started. Some pieces you found — I had been looking for them *forever*. And all of them up to my taste! Your work has been admirable —"

"If you're going to sell them all, why is it so important for you to like them?" Dazai questioned, just to watch the man grow red. His foot was almost stepped on; he pulled on his crooked hair in response.

*The Owner* stared. "Nakahara, who's this partner of yours?"

"*Not* my partner," the boy snapped — softening his tone at the man's curled eyebrow. "He's irrelevant. Been helping out with some of your — *antiques*."

"That elephant shaped hairbrush almost got me ran over by a local gang," Dazai said, waving. One of his feet was still asleep; when he started slipping, he posed as coolly as possible against a dog-eaten furniture box. "I must thank you for it."

"I see," *The Owner* said, clearly lost. He cleared his voice, offering Chuuya all his pleasant attention again. "As for selling — *Selling!* Preposterous. I wouldn't *sell* these beauties! These are *treasures*, young man, I wouldn't *think* of —"

"But," Chuuya frowned, "Wait, how are you supposed to get the money to rebuild the *Old World*, then?"

"I already have the money."

He paused. "What?"

"Of course I have the money," *The Owner* laughed. "It's not a matter of needing *payment*, son, or I would have simply accepted yours. You think I'm above taking dirty cash? I know what kind of people frequented my bar. I know what kind of people *died* in it."

A storm of colors passed by Chuuya's eyes — overflowing between already unmatching pupils. The leather of his gloves stretched against clenched knuckles. "Then why in hell —"

“It’s still an investment,” he insisted. “I want to get something out of it. And since you young boy seem so eager to have that old place put back together — Why settle for a free ride? That’s just how the world works, kid,” He winked, patting his very round stomach. “Live a few more years, and you will learn it too.”

There had been a dog, in Dazai’s first house.

It wasn’t theirs, mercifully — it was a neighborhood pet of sorts, some poor soul someone had abandoned and made the mistake not to kill. *Domesticated beings are bound to stay where they’re put*, they would explain to him, at times — as if he cared; as if he was supposed to *understand* something out of it.

But the dog liked to trespass and to bark at night and to bite at his ankles when he refused to slip food off his plate onto his own mouth — and Dazai hated it far too much to try to understand.

He hadn’t learned instincts with a gun to his head or a never ending sequence of shouts. He had learned when a hit was about to arrive by sound: the dog would always whine in pure, *unfiltered* delight when Dazai was about to be struck.

“You,” Chuuya said, endlessly quiet.

A hellish shriek broke through the first morning’s breeze; only *the Owner* was startled — enough to let out a small squeal, skipping in place to reach for a horribly modern cell phone from his pocket. Chuuya wasn’t taking his eyes off of him.

“Yes?” *the Owner* spoke, endlessly polite, holding the hand he has bumped against a pipe close to his mouth. “Oh — of course, sir! Yes — No, no, I wouldn’t dream of — Nothing important. No. *No*. Yes, of course, I’m coming right —“

Chuuya stepped forward. “Where do you think you’re —“

The man pressed the phone against his chest, hissing: “We might have to reschedule, Nakahara. Work calls!”

“You and I aren’t —“

“You’re not the only fool with big dreams locked behind my fingers, you know?” *the Owner* informed him, smiling. “And the *Old Bar* is nothing more than a site in a very, *very* good area — Perfect for all kinds of nice apartment complexes.”

A breath. Dazai offered his best attempt at the art of not being a vulture — traced every inch of his shifting traits, emptying themselves out with the ease of passing clouds. The bundle of scars on his left wrist — a spiral and a black dot; a tense vein. Quiet.

“Fine,” Chuuya spelled out, clipped. “I will be in contact for the next artifacts.”

*The Owner* grinned, making his way to the sidewalk with noticeable glee. “That’s what I want to hear. And goodbye to you as well, you — weird, bandaged sir.”

Dazai waved, amiably.

The moment the echo of the phone call could not be heard anymore, his spine dug a crater into *The Alley's* wall — mere inches from the leaking pipe.

“You,” Chuuya growled, close enough that the *unclarified-dustbin-stain* on the tip of his nose wet his own. “Better start coming up with an excuse to why you would *fucking drug us in the middle of an emergency* —“

“Drugs are illegal in the Port Mafia,” Dazai informed him. “That was just — A party trick. Very famous in the underground. Voices are the *Nine Rings* came up with the formula! You know, in small doses it’s actually —“

“Don’t piss me off right now.”

“Why? Your architectural endeavors are already disappointing you enough?”

His eyes thinned. “You weren’t supposed to find out.”

“That kind of hurts my feelings.”

“You still owe me help on the god fucking cursed treasure hunt,” he warned. “I don’t care what you think of my motivations. I don’t care for your jokes, and —“

For the second time since he had abandoned the dustbin bed, a distant shrill ricocheted against the stone walls. Perhaps Chuuya was just stunned enough anyone would call him — he kept his hands clenched around Dazai’s collar, but didn’t protest when he fished his phone out of his pocket.

“Oh,” Dazai exclaimed, blinking. “You may want to tell me all about your sob story later. Mori just declared open fire on the *Nine Rings*. ”

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### ***One day before.***

The underside of every noteworthy video game machine at the local Arcade was littered in dried gum — and, every other Friday and Wednesday, in dried blood as well.

“When are you going to tell me who you’ve been collecting knick knacks for in *The Alley*, anyway?” Dazai asked, rolling his thumb around the rusty joystick.

“When you stop hacking into my damn game system,” Chuuya hissed, *just* low enough that they might just not get scolded by tired retail workers again, crashing his fists on his own screen. “Do you want me to ram every last coin we have up your bandaged ass?”

“But what if you *need* the coins? To collect them for *The Alley*?”

The *Smash Smash!* machine let out a high noise, screen bright and colorful. *GAME OVER*, it read, over the head of Chuuya’s character — this time around, an uninteresting ten feet tall pirate, in what he could only assume was pixelated Italian leather.

He slammed his head down.

“I’m going to start guessing, then,” Dazai announced, eventually, spinning on his stool. Winter was a merciless companion to the imbrued roads of Yokohama; whenever a particularly intense thunder lit the roads up, the entire electricity system of the Arcade was rattled, momentarily turning every screen black. “You are clearly very sentimental over it — enough to ask me a favor, but not to tell me about it.”

“Do you want a red-thread board too?”

“Either it’s shame, or it’s guilt.”

“Or maybe I don’t fucking like you.”

“Sheep,” he offered. “Or Flags.”

Chuuya kept quiet.

It still rained, outside. Raindrops landed on the windows of the Arcade, twinkling in neon colors — chasing each other down like the racing machines in the opposite corner of the store. The cold of January had cramped up the half-broken heaters, sagging the room in a strange smell.

Yokohama was a haunted house. Malfunctions he wasn’t even causing were Dazai’s greatest gift. That place was momentarily holy.

“Alright, fuck you,” Chuuya said, at last, seemingly choosing to ignore the issue at hand. “We’re playing something else, fuck you. *Fuck you.*”

“You already owe me three dinners, two lunches, one of Hirotsu’s lucky lighters, a pet snake, and Ane-san’s hairpiece,” he noted. “What more have you got to bet?”

“I’ll throw you off the nearest bridge myself,” the boy offered, jaw clenched, “I’ll even put rocks in your shoes, how about that? That will get you off, won’t it?”

He widened his eyes. “What, like those videos I found in your laptop back in September?”

Chuuya's left eye ticked. "That was a *virus*. You caused it —"

"Sure thing."

"You popped one watching two people pretend to make out in Madame Tanaki's shitty soap opera. Their actual lips weren't even *touching* —"

"You got hard at a *Resources Meeting* —"

"That was literally a gun —"

" — Or were you just happy to see me?"

"That's not even how the joke goes —"

The base of true defeat was its indisputableness — as such, whenever the boy happened to win, Dazai wasted no time spreading around voices that he hadn't. Leashes were fun to pull. Watching Chuuya kick the coin machine as unsubtly as possible to get them more coins, he considered — that he sometimes forgot his hand was attached to said leashes, too.

"Sorry," he begged, at a blond woman mixing tickets at the counter. "Is that LED dog collar up for sale?"

She was mostly unimpressed, — both at his request and at Chuuya's hands cracking the counter — but she did slip them a pair of free coins.

They moved around. Air hockey tables and basketball stations allowed them to throw things at each other with mostly no complains from the employees; punching machines satisfied Chuuya's ego — claw machines, Dazai's desire to slip fake grenades inside them.

*[Truly, there were far too many things to settle. Who would take the blame with Mori regarding property damages, who would have to go look for Kouyou's lost cat, who would put a hole in Hirotsu's wheels, who would let Elise stick ribbons in their hair the next time they were unlucky enough to stumble on her.*

*Far too many things, and far too wide was their willingness to loudly debate over them where mafiosi had business to complete. Mori had begged for a more peaceful solution. Dazai had let him put his hand on his shoulder, as he did whenever he was just gleefully stupid enough to fall into his schemes.*

*Bubbles and domes were only different in texture — but one was less worthy of a death sentence; perhaps only of Dazai's causal drop of highly personal information, or Chuuya's well-aimed kick that got the coin machine to give more than they were owed.]*

"My favorite customers!"

Eventually, their target appeared — stained yellow t-shirt and eye bags over pimped cheeks — offering a clearly half-stoned glance to the chins they had laid on his counter.

“I was just updating our chart of the week! You know, I keep receiving loads of complains — The store wants *Supreme Lord Destroyer 3000* and *#1 Dog Owner* to stop ruling our top three,” Mr. Arcade wiggled his eyebrows. “Got any mercy left in those prepubescent bodies of yours?”

The College drop-out who worked night shifts probably had a name, but Dazai had never quite had a reason to learn it. The only relevant parts of his tall frame were his endless knowledge of pre- *Great War* -made video games — and his title of the most taletelling person in the entirety of Yokohama.

Mori had his spies. Dazai had his methods.

“Haven’t you heard, jackass?” Chuuya scoffed. “We’ve rebranded.”

The man’s eyes bulged out of his skull. “What, for real?” He typed away on his keyboard, “Ah, that’s — certainly more minimalistic. *Slug* and *Mackerel*? You two really have some low self esteem issues going on, don’t you? Is it bullies at school?”

“Not quite,” Dazai answered, genuinely.

“Three months ago I saved him from drowning and he spat out a whole mackerel,” Chuuya added.

“That’s so cool,” Mr. Arcade whistled. “Do let me know if bullies become a problem, though. I dealt with shit, back in High School. You want a quick solution? Eat lunch in the bathroom. *Oh, but that’s not hygienic* — That’s exactly what the sons of a bitch want you to believe. See, there’s this chick that comes here on Mondays —“

“Say,” he interrupted him. “Have you heard anything about a young Ability user wreaking havoc near the industrial area?”

The man’s eyes thinned.

He straightened. In a distinctively lower, more interested voice, he asked: “How young are we talking?”

“Couldn’t play that *Apocalypse IV* shit you refuse to fix the machines for,” Chuuya answered.

His eyebrow curled. “Under ten? Unusual.”

“Precisely why you would have heard about it.”

Strategy settled on his dandruff-covered hair, pulling his head down; feigning disinterest, he shrugged. “It depends.”

They exchanged a glance.

“On?” Dazai pressed.



“Information on Ability Users is not our usual chat,” the man noted, nodding towards the store. “Ain’t trying to risk my damn head here. Giving you tips on petty thieves, telling you which gangs have made protection offers — that’s useless stuff. That’s *anonymous* stuff. Ability Users rarely fail to keep track of who has their name on their mouth.”

“Rogue Ability Users don’t care about such details,” Dazai said. “They mostly focus on mass destruction — especially in places they know informants crowd around,” He stared at him, nonplussed. “You shouldn’t have made a name for yourself, if you weren’t ready to bear it.”

The man shrugged, again. “It’s the wonders of the job, kids. You get to make the rules.”

“And when you bump against others’ rules?”

His smile took a cat-like tinge; he munched on a chip with pointed loudness, pieces of it sticking to his clammy chin. “Then you don’t tell them what they want — and it gets the whole thing moving real fast.”

Imperceptibly — perceptibly, though, in some way, judging from the fingers Chuuya wrapped around his little finger, clenching until it pulsed — Dazai’s face fell.

“Listen,” Mr. Arcade continued, blind, his trustable grin painted neon pink and green, “I’m saying this to help you, you brats. Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. The voices I heard — something appeared yesterday night, and it has not been caught yet. There’s gangs interested in their whereabouts. Got it? Not kids. *Whole ass gangs.*”

“Such as?”

He downed some more chips. “Irrelevant. The *Nine Rings* will get them, for sure. I got most of my info from some of their drunk goons.”

They stiffened.

“Until then,” the man continued, petulant, making the mistake of adding a patronizing pat to both their heads, “Your valiant interest in rogue Ability Users should probably focus on something else, you feel me?”

Outside, it thundered.

“Man,” Chuuya spoke up, eventually. “You are truly underestimating how much we value your opinion.”

Mr. Arcade made an offended face. “Listen, how about you guys go play another round? My tab. Maybe try some *Visual War*? You know, the immersive 4D experience? That shit might wear those hormonal attitudes of yours down.”

“Why don’t you eat my entire ass instead —“

“That’s not going to happen,” Dazai said, calmly.

The silence that followed was funerary.

Chuuya attempted his best pointed look — whatever he found in his blank gaze pushed his shoulders back, flashing hunger in his eyes along with the next wave of lighting.

“Alright,” He licked his lips, not gracing Mr. Arcade with a single glance. “*Nacho Face*, you get one question.”

“*Nacho Face*?”

“You wouldn’t like the other names I’m thinking of.”

He scoffed. “You two are being particularly annoying today. Hey, just to know,” His smirk sunk in some particularly wet side of his brain. “Did you two brats fail that *badly* at babysitting?”

Chuuya looked right into his eyes.

The man’s spirited nonchalance wavered; it disappeared, slow and confused, as his body instinctually moved away from whatever he tasted in the air. Gravity *was* him more than it had ever *obeyed* to him — only just inhuman enough to survive near Dazai’s worst moods.

“Wrong question.”

Violently rattled trash cans and distant store music were equally muffled underneath the pouring rain; the man’s body crashed against the back of the alley, drowning through the ancient dustbins it broke on impact.

He tried to scream — the bullet Dazai fired into his thigh choked the sound out of him, helped by the gloved hand Chuuya clenched around his mouth.

“Use your words,” Dazai encouraged, not wasting effort into raising his voice above the incessant drums of the storm. *A man in danger would hear all that was needed*, Mori would say. “Where do we find the brat?”

Nothing but a pained shriek; he stuttered his way through some nonsensical syllables, prayers instead of answers. Chuuya moved his hand away from his mouth, grasping one of his flapping arms — he tightened his glowing-red glove around two of his fingers, and snapped them backwards.

His next howl left Dazai’s ears ringing; still, he laid the mouth of the gun into the wound left behind by the bullet, pressing, and he spelled out: “I asked you a question.”

“The —“ he choked, garbling vomit, tears and rain all at once, heaving, “The — Following *the* — The people who got them arrested, *t-they* said — they said — revenge, or —“

Their eyes met upon his convulsing body; Chuuya’s jaw settled, his gaze questioning.

He mouthed, *Possible*.

“And?” the redhead asked.

“Their — Their Ability —“

“We have no care for that,” Dazai interrupted. “Where were they seen?”

“I don’t know!” he swore, sobbing, “I don’t know, I don’t know, they didn’t tell me —“ His throat burned itself raw in another shout, as Chuuya tightened his grip around the shattered fingers. “I swear!” he shrieked.

“Fine,” he said, “Anything else?”

“No, no, I swear —“

“You sure?”

“Nothing!” he cried, “Nothing, nothing, let me go — No!” His voice rose, blurry eyes settled on the gun Dazai had raised once again, aiming for a quick death, “No, no, you — I can help, I can help you, don’t, don’t —“

“Not many sewer rats Boss doesn’t know about,” Chuuya noted, meeting his gaze again. “If we take him out, we’ll need to threaten someone into starting where he left off,” He paused. “Beg us for it, though.”

“Please,” he choked out, “Please, please, *please* —“

That request, more than any thunderstorm and month long absence, made him pause.

*[“He will grow,” Mori had said — had insisted, the one suggestion he refused to take from his unconventional right hand man, the one king he would not let him decapitate. The man had lessons to teach and a seat to fill, and Dazai was promising and suicidal, and Mori was going around saying things like equal and finally, finally, but not if it was him — “He’s not the sort of weapon that fails twice.”].*

“Not many that Boss doesn’t know about,” he agreed, lowering his gun. “Just few enough to need an example.”

He anchored his fingers in the man’s hair, and shattered his skull against the wet concrete.

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They stole two umbrellas from a pair of suited men screaming into their phones, cursing out whatever was keeping them in the storm after midnight, and after scrubbing blood from their soles, they made their way into the station.

Eyes-burning wind destroyed Dazai's own not even halfway there — as the Arcade was just close enough to the borders of Suribachi City that Chuuya's shoulders had grown tense. So

—

“Hey!”

— he spent the rest of his time reaching for the other boy's one, having his slightly bloodied hands swatted at. It took the snow mixing with the rain and soaking their shoes, for his fingers to hang off Chuuya's unwilling arm, sharing the umbrella between whines.

“We need to check Q's records,” Dazai said, between one jump in a puddle and another. “If they're looking for the people who sent them to us, their target must be someone from their old Institute.”

“Didn't you and Mori meet them?”

He shook his head. “We were contacted by one of our men playing policeman. Q was denounced by the headmaster; it must be written down somewhere at the HQs.”

Chuuya made a face. The station appeared in front of them, unblurred by the fading rain. “Hasn't Ace been demoted to official keeper of the archives?”

“And the *Torture Department* was handed off to Ane-san, yes.”

“Don't call it that.”

“It's what it is.”

“Ace won't let us snoop,” Consequences to the troubles the man had caused had spread like a wildfire, even if it had only been a little less than a day; whispers and dirty looks alike in their particular direction. “Not after Boss had his ass for it.”

“Well,” Dazai stated, jumping over the gates, as the boy inserted his ticket. “We'll just have to sneak in, then.”

Only a little less than a dozen people stood around the sidelines. The trains were never late — nonetheless, Chuuya didn't spare him a blink when he lowered himself in the empty tracks, waving off the very few concerned passersby. Dazai was merely surprised that someone had thought to worry.

He wandered, dragging his shoes through the snow, playing Hopscotch through the lines. He laid down, at some point, counting the rays of the upcoming sunset. He chased a moth, loudly praying for the train to come soon. At last, he climbed back to the real world — on the wrong side.

Chuuya had abandoned the soaked umbrella on a bench; wet hair stuck to his cheek. If he looked at him just uncaringly enough, he had black wings on his back. “You’re not being funny,” he let him know.

It screeched against his sternum — an old fear. He was sitting on the ground, tracing *kanjis* he couldn’t read; he was biting his tongue to make all his letters exist near to each other.

But Mori would have tutted for it, so it passed — like it all did.

Irrelevant, he considered, because spoken by lips that bled in ways he would never. Dazai crouched down, made a ball with the snow near his calf — and thought about asking, *where have you been?*, and threw it right into the boy’s jacket.

Chuuya’s jaw fell.

“You,” he attempted. Then he made a snowball, and hit Dazai right in the forehead.

They went back and forth until the train arrived, prey to the steadfast glances of the other passersby. One of Chuuya’s snowballs entered an open window of the upcoming train, arising a yelp from a some unfortunate old lady inside it.

Fingers blue and trembling, he had to jump to reach the wagon; he scratched his knees, and Chuuya made sure to kick him right where it would bruise.

They reached an empty carriage, and Dazai dared: “Bet you can’t hang off the straphangers,” because Q was gone, and it had been a month since he had bled in the sky. Hirotsu, unwilling companion he had been in most of Dazai’s solitary afternoons, would have told him to sit quietly, counting clouds. The boy squinted, and grasped the metal bars.

Neither of them laughed through it, hands stuck around cold metal — but it was quieter when they got off the train.

“Alright,” Chuuya concluded. An unmistakable stain from the bomb still remained on the street facing the *Headquarters*, surrounded by lazy police tape. “What’s the plan?”

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“Executive Ace’s office?” Madame Tanaki munched on her lip, wrenching tattooed hands in each other’s grasp. She was the only soul left in the Entrance Hall of *Building One*; a night

shift lover. “If you guys want to steal a gem so bad, I could give you this tacky necklace my dear bought me,” she sighed.

*I’ve been married four times*, she would giggle, when asked. *Do I look like I need sleep?*

The premature gray of her hair morphed into silver underneath the lights of the chandeliers, framing the X shaped scar that covered her face from the temples to the edges of her jaw. In her pink cardigan and pink scar tissues, her skin properly littered in tattoos and her glasses hanging from a black lace — she was a stubborn flare from the prior Boss’ reign, too smart not to bow at the change.

According to the voices, she had also given birth to her third daughter during a safari in Kenya, worked in a chocolate factory — and was responsible for the broken chandelier in *Building Three*, which she had shot in joy, after finding out she was pregnant again.

“Not that kind of emergency, Tanaki,” Chuuya assured her. “We’re not trying to mess around. Promise. We just have to deal with a — thing.”

“You know every corner of this building, don’t you?” Dazai batted his eyelashes at her. “Even better than I do. There must be a way to reach Ace’s office undisturbed. Won’t you do a favor to your child’s godfather?”

The redhead’s elbow sunk in the space between two of his ribs, full on crumpling him. “Go choke. She already said *I* get to be godfather —“

“Don’t make me laugh,” he choked out. “At best you could be a *dog* father, and he’ll be too squishy to play catch for years. *Ha*. That was funny.”

”It really wasn’t.”

”You have no useful skills to offer a newborn.”

“And you do? *You?* You’ll teach the hangman knot to a fetus?”

“Maybe I will! At least *I* won’t put a hat on him the moment he’s out of the placenta —“

“Boys,” Tanaki attempted, raising quieting hands, smiling softer than the snow on their coats. “There’s truly no need to fight. Neither one of you will be godfather.”

Their protests drowned each other out, the loudest thing in the night. It was most mafiosi’s work time; ever so often, suited men carrying body begs would pass by. If particularly brave, or particularly high ranked, or particularly stupid, they would throw a despising glance in Dazai’s way.

“Hanging around with people your age, Demon?” a passing man called, fingers clenched around a rifle. “Can’t believe my eyes!”

“Lay it off,” his companion chimed in, hitting his shoulder, eyes carefully pointed to the floor. “Do you want it to end up like last time?”

Tanaki glared daggers at them. They scurried away, blushing.

“How displeasing they can be,” she scoffed, the moment the duo disappeared in the glass elevator. “Truly have no better way to earn their pay than acting like the miscreants they are.”

“Ain’t that what we all do?” Chuuya replied. In a last resort, he laid a hand upon the woman’s own, on the counter-desk. “Tanaki, *come on*. ”

Hesitancy battled between the scars on her face. Eventually, staring at the ceiling, she sighed.

Old keeper of the *Headquarters* building as she was, the woman’s knowledge of its halls and shortcuts managed to beat even Dazai’s own. Some things, Dazai was never too happy to find out, could escape even the boring wanderings of a fourteen year old who was not allowed to any meeting, and expected to memorize their affairs in spite of it.

“We’re literally in that stupid game — *Monster In The Wall*, ” Chuuya pointed out, somewhere after the thirteenth spider web they encountered in their dark way. “How did Tanaki get a secret door behind her desk?”

“Mori says she had dirt on the old Boss,” he replied, blinking against the crimson glow of the boy’s body. His voice echoed off against the wooden tiles, devoured by termites and time — framing creaking stairs they had to climb sideways. “Maybe she built these passages herself.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Did you know one of her tattoos is a barcode that immediately saves a debt on the phone scanning it — *and* calls the police, in the meantime?”

The boy paused, removing a web from the chain of his hat. “She’s fucking insane.”

“Has to be, to work around here,” Dazai shrugged. “And so many years, too? I would have killed myself decades ago.

“That doesn’t mean much coming from you.”

*Chuuya should be just small enough to get through the grate, Tanaki had said. But you, Dazai — you’re thinner, so you go first. Just — try not to get stuck? I’m too pregnant to come save you.*

“Insane,” Chuuya repeated, after a while.

“Great tardive hearing abilities.”

“Die,” Eyebrows furrowed, he added: “Kouyou — when I chose her tutelage —“

“Chose?” he cut through, skeptical. “Mori didn’t assign you to her?”

“No,” The boy blinked. “He told me to pick between the Executives. The Colonel looks like his ass is constantly on fire, and Ace is a clear piece of shit. She was a bit uptight — but at

least no one fucked with her.”

A good enough description of the heads of the Port Mafia. “And did she think you were crazy? I did hear you bit her.”

“That’s *not* — “

“Very street rat of you.”

“It was an accident, *anyway*, and she got too — *Whatever*. She said all I would ever need to survive in this place was *some bloodthirst and silent feet*.”

Dazai hummed. “Sounds like her.”

“Pianoman, though,” he added — his voice unwavering underneath the weight of another name that did not even have a tombstone, “He said everything is a hierarchy, and the system was *corrupted but functional*, and I don’t know what other shit. Respect those you have to, and that will do it all. Asshole had a thing for nepotism, too.”

He wondered if he would need to lay in a grave to feel an inch of the heart-wrenching longing wrapped around his tongue like a whip of thorns. Chuuya recalled their words with some sort of reverence on his lips; lowered his voice, each time, undeserving of an honor the dead did not care about. Guilty.

A dog’s loyalty was too stubborn to need presence.

“Your point being?” he asked.

“I had expected people to respect you a bit more,” he sneered, hands in his pockets. “Scary nickname and all. Most of them treat you like a stray leaving his ass where he’s not supposed to.”

“They do.”

“They aren’t wrong.”

“They all signed up for the *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter, so I assume not,” He smiled, sweetly. He wondered just how *boring* the syndicate must have gotten for him, after the Flags’ death, for him to wonder after *Dazai*. Then, swatting his kick away: “Very few people have any idea of what I do. Occasionally, something in their puny brains is just developed enough to understand that it’s better to leave me alone. As you saw down there.”

“*That*. What happened *last time*?”

“Some men wasting their afternoons and I got in a bit of a misunderstanding.”

He curled an eyebrow. “Misunderstanding.”

“They got a bit offended when I called out their pathetic existence,” he admitted. “All that alcohol had them red like tomatoes! They beat the good day out of me, of course. Broke one



wrist!”

“And you let them?”

“I was experimenting with death by excess of physical damage,” he sighed. “It didn’t work. A shame. The day had been going so well.”

Something akin to disgust filled Chuuya’s eyes. “I really do despise you.”

“It’s mutual.”

“What’s a good day for you?”

Dazai thought about it. “Well, I like crab.”

“Crab.”

“I adore it. I had stopped by to eat some — and then I came here, and those men just had to ruin my afternoon. I let them,” He knocked on the wall, dirtying his nails, because Mori and his *Laws Of Hygiene* papers would hate it. “Then I put a bullet in their leader’s head, and Mori put me on cleaning duty.”

A huff. “Gets the point across.”

“Sure does. You know how Mori is,” He cleared his throat, “*This is a deeply formal setting, boys, please.*”

Chuuya stopped so suddenly, he almost bumped against him. All his astonishment bathing in his red glow, he questioned: “What was that?”

“You know,” he insisted. “When he gets all whiny. *I must thank you for joining this boring meeting.*”

“That doesn’t sound like him at *all.*”

Dazai made a face. “Yes, it *does.*”

“No, it *doesn’t.*”

“I have known him longer.”

“And I actually listen when he talks,” he hissed.

“My condolences,” A fraction of sunlight peeled through a slot in the tiles, blinding him before he could respond. He leaned closer; whistled. “Would you look at that.”

“— think I care?” Kouyou was saying, her shoe deep into a man’s torn apart ribcage, bones creaking underneath the pressure of her heel.

He was still breathing, somehow; pushing each other to get a more optimal view to Ace’s office, they watched his face grow paler and paler. “Boss removed you from your position

because you failed. Do not take your childish whining up to me. I'm here to obey his orders, as we all are."

From the other side of the room, Ace scoffed. He was clearly as annoyed by the sight of fresh blood on his carpets as he had always been, the few times Dazai had been brought along to his torture sessions. Such delicate cruelty had never quite fit him; whereas Kouyou's smile was untouched.

"As if you hadn't been waiting for an occasion to gain the lead to the torture experts for years," he jeered, dryly. "And in our current circumstances — all you're waiting for is to skin some *Nine Rings* alive with those hands of yours, am I wrong?"

Kouyou hummed.

Her kimono brushed against the ground, soaking blood and turning it into blooming petals. She wasn't even twenty yet, he knew — nineteen years of bitter poison had turned into something unhesitant, though, when the tip of her sword reached the space between the man's thighs.

"I have nothing to deny, nor to be ashamed of," she declared, softer than manicured nails down rotten flesh. "Miserable simpletons are bound to make mistakes. It is in their nature. The only difference — is that we are bound to retaliate. *That*, is what is in our nature. Is that not the *nature* of consequences? Aren't crimes supposed to be punished?"

"No one needs your philosophy," Ace spat out. "And no one needs you to justify your power. There is no fairness in crawling at a man's feet and obtaining the precious mud under his shoes."

"You believe Mori holds a grudge against you?" Her smile widened.

She sunk her sword. The man shrieked.

"You're wrong," Kouyou assured him, cleaning her blade with one of her sleeves, meeting his gaze. One of her eyes was always hidden under her hair; when he was younger, Dazai used to reproach her after every comment on his bandages. They didn't need mirrors to spit on. "Punishments are for those he wishes to keep around. If he held you in no value, you would be *the precious mud under his shoe*. And trust me — I am too busy to bring flowers to a traitor's grave."

Shoulder against shoulder as they were, Chuuya had no way to hide his flinch. He thought of a shaking silhouette at the Executives' table, red scarf and silky hands — how he would let Elise braid his hair, a distant veil on his eyes.

*Reminds me of someone I can't recall*, he had told him, with that accented voice of his they had never questioned. *Someone golden*.

"The *Nine Rings*," Kouyou said, "Are nothing, Ace."

The Executive did not say a word.

“Not anymore,” she continued, dragging the tip of her umbrella down the tears of the fallen man’s carcass, reading each cave and organ like a blind man would. “They think they can rise like an impudent phoenix, and kill my men — target the ones under my protection?” The umbrella dug. “No. Never again.”

“I slaughtered them once,” Was the sentence, “And I will slaughter them again. And she —“

Her voice died in her throat. Knuckles white around the handle, a spasm went through her whole body; she tilted her head to the side, as if listening. She laughed — a glacial, lined in jade, melody.

“Never again,” A wet squelch filled the air. “Never.”

Chastised, though not to blame, Ace hung his head low. “*Everything for the organization,*” he recited.

“*Until our blood runs black,*” Kouyou smiled.

How boring, Dazai thought, how foolish.

Behind the wall, her victim began to sob.

They leaned their backs on the tiles — knees pressed to their chests to muffle their breathing, still shoulder against shoulder — and they waited for him to die.

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“Oh,” Chuuya stated. “Oh, Boss is going to kill us.”

The *Blossom Institute*, a brick building near the center of Yokohama, had been described as *a column of high class and shady backgrounds*, in the file from Ace’s archives. Its glass linings, caged by a well-cured garden white with snow, were splattered from floor to ceiling in blood — with a grace that made it indisputably tasteful to the circumstances.

Places as marble-born as those — waterfalls from the highest seats in that city’s heart system — always tickled Dazai’s skin, the way an electrical shock might have.

“Kids, you need to stay behind the tape,” an Officer told them, cutting their line of vision from the massacre. The crowd pushing against their backs pounded against his head with the same vividness of the rows of ambulances approaching.

Their blue-and-red lights only showed off the damage they were trying to so hard to hide — the mess of dismembered corpses on the ground, their hands stuck around each other's throats, the everything-at-reach they had used as weapons still abandoned through the snowy grass, bloody and sticky. The headmaster's unrecognizable, severed head was half hidden under a sheet.

A sheet smaller than all the others covered one of the nearest bodies — a pale hand, scarred down the thumb, peeked from the edge.

*Caused a freak accident with a classmate*, the papers had said.

"God damn it," Chuuya snarled, through clenched teeth, removing his hat. "God fucking damn it."

"Kids," the man insisted, stern. "Step back."

"What happened here?" Dazai asked.

"You can check the news in the next few days —"

"They killed each other," He blinked. Q had been in the Mafia for months, now — they knew the rules. *Do not leave traces behind*. "They were also rather violent about it. Weren't they?"

The man's eyes hardened. "Where are your parents?"

"On the ground behind you."

He paled.

Before he could stutter something out, gloved fingers found Dazai's wrist, pulling him out of the ocean of whispering people — deaf to the Officer's calls and the horrified hiss of the wind. The crowd was quick to gain the newly emptied first row seats.

"Let's go," Chuuya said, not paying another glance to the funerary scene. "I know someone who might know where they went."

He dragged his feet through the snow, shoulders low — Mori's spies would need more than that not to find them, but the smell of decay might just distract them. "How?"

"His badge number," he replied. "I know someone from the 135th division. If he's not here, he must be where we're going. We could access his data and see if they have any registered sights of the brat."

"And where is this place?"

Chuuya glanced his way. Not quite amused — not with the echoing rage. "You'll like it tons. We need to catch a ride."

The so-called ride turned out to be a seemingly inconspicuous carriage truck, enclosed by rainproof sheets and overflowing in containers, rattling wildly with each sharp turn it took.

The end lacked doors, letting in a whipping wind and road-dust — the few other passengers they gathered through the journey to the outskirts mostly steered away from it.

“Fly away,” one of the men warned them, when they went to sit on the edge.

“Hope so,” Dazai nodded.

The passengers exchanged looks. They wore torn clothing, layer upon layer of colorless, warmth-searching shields — the tiredness in their limbs was only somewhat brighter than the one in their eyes.

Sitting right at the edge of the back truck, dangling their legs over the road, they kept quiet when a child not older than six — who had been hanging from her mother’s filthy skirts until a moment before — settled next to them.

She blinked. When their eyes met, Dazai mustered up the strangest face he could. A giggle escaped her mouth; she pressed against Chuuya’s side, instinctively.

When she turned to meet his gaze, her smile vanished.

“Odd eyes,” she said.

The boy huffed. “I’m not a cat.”

“Oh,” She fell quiet. “Curse?”

“You guessed it,” Dazai warned her, unprompted. “And I’m the one doing the cursing,” When she turned, he offered her his widest smile. “Should be careful, ah?”

A whine left her lips. Alerted by the sound, her mother called her to her side, sending them a mistrusting glance — under the hiss of whatever story the kid was telling her.

Chuuya’s face was unimpressed.

He shrugged. “One day you’ll tell me how someone who grew up surrounded by kids can be so awkward around them.”

“You got it already,” he replied, distractedly, sitting up straighter. “This is our stop.”

His body leaned so far over the edge of the truck, someone with less awareness of their own physicality would have fallen. Gloved fingers brushed the road, uncaring of speed — they glowed a gentle red against the night, sinking in the concrete as if it was little more than butter.

The vehicle jolted. The wheels were forced to a stop, pulled by that unnatural anchor — they jumped down. The little girl’s eyes followed them eagerly, until the truck vanished again.

“Fugitives?” Dazai guessed, as they made their way through the abandoned warehouses. The panorama was all grey and black; half destroyed buildings and blurred graffiti, losing

themselves between wildly tall trees. The smell of drugs was a distant echo; mixed to it, the roar of a crowd, and the rattling of metal fences.

“Access to the area is restricted,” Chuuya confirmed. “Only freight carriages can pass through. Lippman and I used to come here after missions.”

His eyebrows flew to his hairline. “You mean to tell me — *glory-lined actor* Lippman took part in illegal fighting rings?”

Metal fences had been pushed and tied together to create a small battling space; pressing and clapping against those walls was a crowd of clearly drunk people, exchanging beers and money, their leather clothes smeared in blood. Most gang tattoos were well hidden — a neutral spot, certainly. Banknotes were thrown in the air whenever one of the half-naked men inside the fences managed to slam a body to the ground.

“Not much,” Chuuya answered, removing his hat and abandoning it upon Dazai’s own head. “I did.”

“Look who showed up again!”

A shirtless man made his way to them, slicked-back hair losing their texture a bit more with every sweat drop on his forehead. He sported no gang tattoos or empty bottles — but he wore an expression so cheeky it was blinding.

“Been a while since you and that dandy friend of yours came around, Nakahara,” he laughed, clasping a hand around his shoulder. A good look at both of their expressions made him remove it. “Shit, did your kids’ cat die on the way here or something?”

“No,” Dazai said, “But the dandy friend did.”

The man’s face fell. “What?”

A thunderstorm had gathered on Chuuya’s face, and it clearly had no desire to leave Dazai’s own. It tore itself off, somehow; settled somewhere over their guest’s shoulder. “You must have seen the news, Okuda. Bastard got a three day service. Mourning of *Japan’s sweetheart*, or something.”

The bundle of old laundry underneath those ripping-bandaids quick words didn’t go unnoticed; the man cleared his throat. “My condolences. Thought it might have been a facade.”

“Yeah, cops always do,” he muttered.

Okuda cleared his throat — again. “*Ah* — And who is this, *ah*? Thought you were proud of being the youngest on the ring. Trying to prove all fifteen years old have mean punches?”

“Oh, no,” Dazai shook his head. “I’m not here to participate, my friend. Brutish displays of physical supremacy are hardly entertaining. If that was the idea, I’d go to a dog fight,” He tapped the chain of his newly acquired hat. “Then again, if Chuuya’s here, it’s basically the same thing.”

The man blinked. “Yeah, okay. Nakahara, want me to find you someone?”

“Actually, Officer,” Chuuya said, sending a pointed look to the work bag still hanging off his naked shoulder. “I was thinking I could beat your ass tonight. If you’re up for it?”

“Someone hasn’t lost his confidence,” He laughed, wholeheartedly. “What are you betting?”

They exchanged a glance.

“Three hundred,” Okuda concluded, once he decided they wouldn’t speak up. His wink came with the roar of the crowd, and the wet squelch of a bone being snapped. “Nothing less for our champion, right?”

“Fine,” Dazai said, before the boy could open his mouth to counter offer anything. “But if Chibi wins, we want the cash in coins. Deal?”

His stare waited for their own to lower. When it didn’t happen, he shrugged. “Teenagers,” he commented — as good as a yes.

The ring emptied out; new money was thrown on the ground, as Okuda’s sneers were slowly proven right — a shadow of matters and glances followed them eagerly, as Chuuya sat on an empty beer container, taking his shoes off.

His shirt came next. Dazai’s eyes fell on vaguely spiral-like, strangely vivid scars marring his torso — he placed himself where they would not be seen. “When did you have time to become an underground fighter? Between dog academy and Kouyou’s training, I mean.”

“The Flags thought I hadn’t — lived wildly enough in Suribachi, or some shit,” Chuuya said. He gathered his hair in gloved hands, tying them up much higher than usual. “*Grew up in that pit of deprivation and never fought in a makeshift ring?* I tried to explain that the Sheep kept me busy, but they didn’t care. Lippman loved this stuff.”

“Bet he did his own stunts in movies.”

“Nah,” A shrug. “He was too lazy.”

Lippman was, in his mind, what all the Flags were — an imposing silhouette in tailored clothing, always close enough to Chuuya to seem walls and windows and warmth. Hair tucked behind his ear, in Lippman’s particular case; a slightly too pleasant, slightly too *honest* laugh.

He and Kouyou had fought long and silent for the title of face of the organization. Dazai had tried to ask the *Lady of the Port* if his death had satisfied her; she had refused to answer.

“He would show up covered in bruises from the night before, and drag me along to make up pathetic excuses for him,” Chuuya snorted. “And then try to shove me in an audition room.”

Dazai was hit by the hellish vision of a gigantic billboard sporting Chuuya’s face, towering over the *Headquarters* — much to Ace’s displeasure. His short frame right next to that of his love interest — a film so horribly fascinating it would grant him all praises.

*I want to thank Lippman, he would say, awarded, as Dazai prepared the best Chuuya Is A Sore Loser newsletter up to date. For taking me out of the life of crime I almost dedicated myself to.*

“Oi,” Chuuya called, squinting. “The fuck are you giggling about?”

Okuda entered the ring, raising screams and cheers from the drunken crowd. The boy’s eyes focused, at once — he rolled his shoulders back, climbing to his feet. All but a chore; all but a game of uncertainty. The best martial artist in the Port Mafia didn’t fight fools he wouldn’t destroy.

*Not the best in our ranks yet, Kouyou had let Mori know, mere months ago, while Dazai slept his way under the man’s desk. But he will be. There is no other option.*

Well aware, Dazai leaned his chin on his hand, batting his eyelashes up at him. “Say, you won’t put us both in a very mortifying spot, will you?”

Chuuya’s grin was animalistic.

He wasn’t even sixteen — calling him muscular would have been too kind. He was scrawny and bony and pimpled, the way Dazai was, and one of Elise’s non-permanent tattoos — a cartoon-eyed bee — had yet to fade from his hip. He could benefit from braces, Mori had once said.

But he grinned, still.

Unhelpfully, his mind supplied: *ah*.

The fight was lost from the very first moment their bodies crashed against each other — nevermind the height difference or the cocky expression upon Okuda’s face. As most sunrises and dawns, Dazai got bored of it pretty soon. He wasted time, instead, humming against the screeches of the audience. He stole banknotes from Chuuya’s wallet, blinking at the half ripped picture inside it — Adam Frankenstein himself, pressing his cheek against Chuuya’s protesting own.

Sometime around the third spit of blood on the ground, he stood up.

He sneaked past the bulky wall of the drunken crowd, making his way to the appropriately distracted Officer’s work bag — stole a bottle of whiskey, while he was there, and ran his eyes down leftovers from lunch, reports, a pack of cigarettes stick to a badge, and, eventually — a two way radio, adorned with the Yokohama PD logo.

A chorus of groans lit up the night. Dazai turned just enough to watch Chuuya pull Okuda’s shoulder out of its socket, blowing hair off his forehead — and then made his way to the nearest warehouse, holding his newfound treasures.

*“I can’t even begin to imagine,”* he sang, as he skipped his way down the empty space — steps echoing off broken windows and rusty walls with haunted efficiency. Hirose Fumiko



was Mori's greatest plague, and the reason why his record player had been destroyed . *"And you won't hear me lie —"*

He found an abandoned desk near the end of the storage, right under an old neon cross as tall as he was, still covered in old permits and a #1 Mom cup; he sat under that fragile roof, and began browsing through channels on the radio.

It was hardly — much to Hirotsu's chagrin — the first time he played around with stolen police equipment; it took less than a minute for the confluence of voices to creak its way into life.

*"...near the Theater, the thief has not yet been —"*

*"Agent, any new info on the assault near the —"*

*"...Ability User — that's what the school said, but we can't be sure if it's actually —"*

He settled on that channel, pressing the button. "We got any info on the brat?" he asked, dropping his accent to an acceptable rendition of Okuda's town cadence.

The radio creaked some more. Eventually, a female voice intervened: *"Agent Okuda, hasn't your shift ended?"*

"You expect me to go home and relax while a psycho goes around forcing innocents to murder each other?" Dazai replied, as enraged as Tanaki got against the second male leads of her dramas. "Haven't even undressed yet. I'm near the highway — We got any updates? Witnesses saw them? I could get there real fast."

*"Not quite,"* she sighed. *"There's been sightings near Yamashita Park, then by the bridge — The little shit moves fast. No other victims apart from the ones at the Institute; clearly, they had a target. Agent Ino theorized they might be trying to get back home, at this point. But they know we're tailing them. They keep evading us, fuck knows how."*

No mafiosi worthy of their name would have failed at a task as elementary as outrunning the police. "You tried checking the cameras near Mori Corporations?"

The creaking lasted definitely longer.

*"We don't have clearance,"* she replied, clearly tickled. *"An order was sent out yesterday evening. We can't turn them on yet. The Commander won't risk angering them."*

Dazai nodded. Contacting their PD insider on his own had been a risky move, considering the woman was constantly in contact with Mori; but they couldn't risk Q being associated with the *Corporations* as of now — not with the bloodshed they were leaving in their wake.

"So?" he asked. "What's next?"

*"They're thinking of contacting the Special Division."*

He paused.

“That’s not a good idea.”

*“You think I want to involve the weirdos?” Her shrug was borderline audible. “We don’t have the tools to deal with Ability freaks. The Institute is already on our ass — we sent them our best guards for their honorable guests and whatnot, and the psycho still got in. We need to get them by the night, or we’re fucked.”*

If the *Special Division* got involved — the same people Mori had been trying to extort an *Ability Business Permit* from for the last year — he would never hear the end of it.

*At best*, he corrected himself. Mori didn’t much like punishments, though — only lessons.

“Fine,” he said. “Do let me know if we get any —“

A *meow* thundered across the warehouse.

One of the cats who had been diligently observing the fights had sneaked in — it sat, now, somewhat polite, right in front of his desk, paws brushing his shoes. It blinked at him, very slowly. *Meowed*.

Dazai turned the radio off.

Unhurried steps crossed the entrance to the warehouse.

“...think we’ll find someone?” a woman was saying. Her voice was softer than a caress; the skip in her step was clear through the pauses of her words — as if no message could be more important than her need to jump over rat feces. “Here, of all dumpsters? Recruitment a delicate deal.”

“Desperate people find desperate places,” A man replied. One he knew. “And this place reeks of desperation.”

“*Eh*. I only smell sweat and cheap weed.”

“Same thing, almost.”

“Better than what those Mafiosi smelled like, for sure.”

“*Tenshi*, ” the man insisted. “The money?”

“Do I have the money?” Her laughter was loud enough to startle even the cat, paws showing off their claws. “You’re damn lucky I don’t. I would have ran off by now.”

“What?” The steps paused. “But then —“

“In the car.”

“Why would you leave them in the — Fine, whatever. I can’t believe he still makes me work with an absolute — Just. Stay here. Do not go anywhere, or he’ll have my head, and then he’ll take yours.”

“It’s not like I can go anywhere,” A metallic rattle filled the air; handcuffs, as cheap as they went. “V, come on. Just go. Maybe I can finally take a piss somewhere, if you leave.”

“Not my fault if you’re a prude.”

“Not my fault men are *shit*. Go.”

The man ran off. The woman kicked some pebbles aside; with a tone that spoke of screaming to the ceiling. The broken neon cross seemed to flicker. Dazai set his chin on his hand — blinked up at it, feeling the pulse under his nails slow down.

Eventually, he pressed his body to the ground, spying through the thin space under the wooden desk front — just in time to watch a curly haired man with a rifle on his shoulder come back into the warehouse, dragging his companion out by the wrist.

The hems of the woman’s black skirt brushed the ground as she twirled and twirled, a cascade of blond hair bouncing with every step. Hanging from her neck was a silver crucifix — rusty with something too red to be rain.

Dazai looked back at the cat. Undeterred, the small beast jumped on the desk, meowing offensively loudly.

When the woman gasped, he stilled.

Before she could step forward and escape her companion, though, the cat made his way to her, each step a wide skip — fast enough to give the clear idea of a chase. Her delight was evident; she leaned down to pat its head when it brushed against her skirt, her glistening cross reflecting the light from around her pale neck.

When the cat made its way outside, she only hesitated for a breath before dragging the man outside with her, ignoring his curses.

The radio still clenched in his first creaked.

“*Agent Okuda?*” the woman called. “*Good news. I might just have a lead.*”

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Three hundred yen in coins were, as it turned out, a good enough reason for Agent Okuda to forgo all ring rules, and punch Chuuya square in the nose while he wasn’t looking.

“I can’t believe you let him hit you,” Dazai commented, slapping the nasal bandaid on his nose with little grace.

The *thump!* of the boy’s head against the medicine vending machine was only so louder than his muttered curses. Its bluish light was an eyesore for Dazai’s sleepless eyes — not as much tired as they were whiny about it.

“No Ability Users are allowed in the ring,” Chuuya repeated, hilariously nasal, for the tenth time in an hour, holding onto the handle of their latest stolen umbrella. When Dazai deemed his job done, he sat on the wet ground — just to spite his overgrown coat and the anti-homeless bench on the other end of the street — leaning his back against the glass until its vibrating hum warmed his muscles. “As I’ve fucking told you —“

“I don’t listen to little slugs.”

“My Ability activated instinctively, and I had to focus on turning it off — and anyway, the fucker went against the rules —“

“You beat Ane-san’s demon on the daily,” he insisted, amazed, “And you let a cop break your nose.”

“It’s not broken, fuck off.”

“It’s shattered.”

“It’s *fine*. ”

Dazai prayed to the pollution-stained constellations. “Like you need any help to look more like a garden gnome.”

Chuuya kicked his side. His shirt had been freed by his shirt; a slot of his ankle brushed his skin. Dazai breathed from his nose only. *At the very least*, he considered, they had gotten half of the three hundred coins. The Arcade would appreciate the effort.

A car passed by, wheeling at unnecessary speed — Chuuya tilted their umbrella, scherring them from the splash. A pack of *Crispy Chips* landed on his lap, thrown with all the petty violence of a grenade; the boy’s pack popped along to his own. Quietly, eyes on the empty road facing *The Alley*, they ate.

It would begin to grow brighter soon; they had less than two hours left before sunrise. Kouyou and Ace would be gone by the early morning; Mori would call by the afternoon to check on him, and he would ignore his calls until he wouldn’t — and in the evening, Hirotsu would bring him to the *Under Port* for Q’s weekly visits outside of their room.

He gulped down a chip, settled his eyes on the buckle of Chuuya’s choker, and asked: “Why do you want to be an Executive so badly, anyway?”

The boy frowned.

*(The Corruption thing, Dazai reminded himself — only concerned what destruction could do for him. Not the opposite. Not even Mori would have appreciated that shade of transactionality.*

*And it was only a little bit of an obsession).*

*Tainted* was holding his umbrella for him, freeing his hands to lock the pack he had not even half consumed tightly. The knot tickled some old memory — sleeping underneath a rusty bench in a park, holding his meal of the week where no shadow could see it.

“Says the guy who wants to die?” Chuuya replied.

Pulling answers out of his canine teeth was a walk in the mud. “You won’t gain anything from it,” he insisted. “It was all to get info on your past before I could, right? But now you know.”

“Not all of it.”

“No,” he agreed. “But you don’t give a damn about the rest, do you?”

He made a face. It was a very familiar face — he tended to wear it often, around him. Dazai knew he had seldom met mud-diggers as stubborn as himself.

“Maybe it’s none of your business.”

“Maybe I’m asking anyway. Keep up.”

His jaw set. “Knowing won’t change a thing,” Chuuya concluded, eventually. “Knowing what I know now hasn’t either. It’s a matter of principle, at this point.”

He clicked his tongue. “That’s a lie.”

“Fuck you.”

“The Flags wouldn’t have spent all that time looking for traces of your past if you didn’t care.”

“Then maybe people *change*, shitty Dazai,” he snapped, exasperated. “I have a right to snoop around my dirty laundry as much — or as *little* — as I want. It’s for sure better than whatever motivation you have.”

It was peculiar. Dazai sort of wanted to rattle his skull until it broke. To tear his chest open and fit himself next to his spine, maybe — cause him an itch he wouldn’t be able to pretend didn’t matter at all.

*If not you*, he didn’t ask. Death and such things; the view from the tallest building, and bloodied shooting stars racing for a ground Dazai knew better than most. Humanity seemed secondary in the face of such devastating realness. *If not you, who* —

“How are you so sure?”

A shrug. “‘S not hard. You don’t give a shit about power.”

Dazai grasped his tie; he made a knot out of it, studying raindrops land on his once polished shoes. “Do you?”

Chuuya fixed his choker. He moved his eyes away. “I don’t mind it.”

“I thought you did. *I’m not their king*, or whatever you went on saying.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“I didn’t,” He frowned; searched for a word, and landed on the most convenient one, “Deserve it.”

“*Deserve*,” Dazai echoed, gulping the last of the chips. He crumpled up the pack; stuck it in the little space between Chuuya’s fighting boot and his leg. He wondered if Shirase’s knife wound had scarred — knew it had, because that was how poison and children worked. Devotion and religion and all the *stigmas* of betrayal. “Searching for fairness in the best of the underground’s vipers?”

“Organizations ain’t shit,” he agreed. His voice was still squeaky at the edges — he was still bony and crooked, as young as he had been a month and less scars before. Dazai wasn’t sure of why he couldn’t stop noticing. “Mori is, though.”

His lips quivered.

“Hey,” Chuuya insisted, an eternity later, as the blue-and-red lights of a passing ambulance shattered his face in second-hand colors. ““You think the cursed brat’s okay?”

At that, even he had to blink. “Do you care?”

“Murder tendencies aside, they are a child,” Chuuya replied, clearly not willing to deal with the weight of saying — *not really*. “I paid them a visit before leaving, you know? The Under Port is not the most cheerful kid crib around.”

“I’m sure they’re delighted by all the corpses and the smell,” Dazai commented. “Can’t say if more or less than they must be after that massacre.”

“What’s their deal, anyway?”

He leaned his chin on his knees. “I could get philosophical or ethical with it, but I have no wish to give them that much credit. Their mother thought they were a freak. They believed it. Mommy dearest was also a religious freak herself, and she clearly passed some of it onto the worst person possible to believe themselves a sinner. As for the bloodthirst,” He shrugged. “Who knows how much of it is genuine.”

“And what’s the rest? Boredom?”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “Childhood, perhaps.”

Their file had been an entertaining enough read. No amount of paperwork could put into words what was wrong with them — not in a way that wasn’t stampable and bracketed. No one had taught them to control an Ability their mother was so sure only prayers might rub away.

*They brought me here to make me better*, they had told Dazai — the first words out of their mouth, behind bars they could have passed through, thin and malnourished as they were. He had never understood why they hadn’t. *I can’t. They don’t get it. I can’t.*

Mori had taken one look at them and said, tutting like a doctor — *No, you can’t.*

Chuuya kicked the running water under his feet. “That doll should be locked up.”

“Do you want them to go insane, then?”

“They’re too dangerous to keep around.”

He snorted.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Dazai shook his head. “That’s what the Colonel said about you, back when you joined.”

His expression was unimpressed — the one common factor amongst any Executive that lacked flower-lined kimonos and a lipstick-red smile. “Isn’t that funny.”

“What is?”

“It’s what Ane-san told me about you, too.”

As most winds did, it laid in the space between one breath and the other, and it did not ask much more than to exist. He untied the laces of Chuuya’s shoes; the boy stamped the mud underneath his sole on his tailored pants.

“We need to tell them,” Chuuya huffed, once a nearby owl decided to quieten his song down. “Boss is already going to have our heads for the Institute. If he only sics the Lizards on them, they will —“

Dazai registered it in blurred shots.

Wheels screeching hellishly, somewhere where the underside of road began — the lights of the old neon sign upon *The Alley* flickering. The sight of a silhouette stumbling in that silent corner, shirt off and bruises Chuuya had left up his dislocated shoulder shining indigo under the neons.

Chuuya, letting his umbrella fall, startled — stomping towards him. “Officer?” he called, hesitant steps accelerating when the man blinked at him — and fell to his knees. “What the

hell are you —“

“*Repent,*” the man informed him, in a strangely deep voice. His eyes had never met the humorous glint he had sported near the ring. Over his left shoulder, lines of ink Dazai could have sworn hadn’t been there mixed with dried blood. “*It will come back ten times stronger.*”

“What?” the boy snapped. He rattled the man’s shoulders, eyes widening at the blood that stuck to the velvet of his gloves. “I didn’t do that much — Okuda, did they slip shit in your beer?”

Light flashed in the corner of his gaze, bright and blinding like a miracle. Dazai was on his feet — he didn’t remember standing up. Officer Okuda was as still as a puppet — he didn’t respond to Chuuya’s hand around his skull, or the scowl of questions on his lips. A silver chain dangled from his neck.

Dazai only had time to count the four limbs of a cross, tightening with a precision that could not be born out of motion — his head exploded.

It was so unnatural it seemed to glitch in front of his own eyes. Chuuya jumped back with a, “*Shit!*”, unable to protect his front from the mixture of blood and viscera landing on it at vertiginous velocity. “What the fuck —“

Okuda’s decapitated corpse fell. His necklace landed somewhere amongst brains and spilled beer; Dazai stared at the two dots of light approaching the tunnel, and he called, helpfully: “Chuuya.”

Later, in the report Mori would force him to write down, he would explain — the truck had clearly been running with targets in mind. Its horn flared; the wheels skirted and screeched in almost donuts under the bridge, speeding towards Chuuya’s sole silhouette in the middle of the street with purpose.

It hit him with drunkenly efficient precision.

And crumbled like a tin can on impact.

It was an even less understandable sight than Officer Okuda’s implosion; Dazai’s brain registered the shrieks of metal bending and sparkling and breaking under the never ending — Ability-modified — weight of Chuuya’s still frame, one foot *pressed* onto the hood.

It came to a stop with a hiss. Slumped against what was left of the steering wheel, the driver sported pieces of the shattered windshield over his skull.

Okuda’s cross rolled down the concrete with a crystalline sound. It was quiet.

“*Ah,*” Dazai spoke up, eventually, watching one of the truck wheels roll away. “Did you seriously piss off some post service while you weren’t around? Barked and bit at them like a good dog?”

Chuuya lowered his leg. His chest rose and fell too quickly. His eyes were still stuck on Okuda’s corpse; his hands in his pockets. Seemingly unconcerned, he asked: “You’re saying



you didn't hire someone to take me out?"

Dazai *tsk-ed* at his own lack of foresight. "You mean you don't recognize it? We were up there only hours ago."

He didn't answer.

They watched the truck fall onto its side with imperscrutable eyes; even as the ground shook, and a small waterfall of gasoline rained from the vehicle's destroyed underside, they didn't move.

He was on his way to the abandoned necklace when the back doors of the truck fell open, creaking louder than the ticking rain. Chuuya's stiffening shoulders came first — the familiar, *small* arm dropping into a puddle, rolling down the truck, second.

More followed — dozens of bodies covered in dried blood, each smaller than the one before, quiet and lifeless and staring right back at them. He couldn't have counted — nonetheless, a number flashed in front of his eyes, framed by Ace's snickers.

— *bring thirty three of our men back from death?*

"Kids," Chuuya breathed out, right as Dazai's fingers closed around the chain. Outside that bubble of silence, the rain came to a slow end. "They're all kids."

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## **Present Day.**

The way home was, most of all, putrid.

A cobblestoned road led to mountains and valleys of trash, the only real entrance to that abandoned island no one had thought to claim. Mechanical remnants and pieces of every material known to man climbed their way up to the sky, unmoving and fixed like modern art statues — the kind Dazai had never pretended to understand, but Mori liked so much.

Walking to the center of the maze was harder at night, but he had learned his way around by trial and error — had learned when the road would disappear and he would need to scramble his way up and down an abandoned car or two; what bundle of trash wasn't stable enough to lay his weight on; what pieces were so rusty they'd tear his clothes apart if he brushed them by mistake.

Most of all, he had learned to ignore the smell and the eerie silence, wrapped up in the cold embrace of solitude.

Not *loneliness*, he mused. But empty all the same.

*Illegal dumping site* was a set of words that called that description like a moth to a flame. Last Dazai had checked, the area didn't appear on any maps. It explained, at the very least, why it smelled so badly all the time.

If someone were to ask — *do you have a favorite piece of the abandoned?* — because someone *might* ask — the answer would be quick on his tongue and unrecognizable to his spine, like all he had long planned: the abandoned traffic lights.

They towered on the edge of the crater leading to the center of the site, and sometimes they turned on, powered by something Dazai had never investigated. *He liked* — he would tell them — *to make a game out of it*; liked the imperceptible jump his heart did right before the answer came; liked the unwilling reaction of a body that was undoubtedly human.

Flesh and mind were different things. Dazai felt colors and riddles and bets in his ribcage, not in his clockwork brain.

( *He liked the thrill of not knowing, because he always did. The crowds of ants he called his peers stared in wonder and confusion at every piece of this world, asking and asking and waiting for answers they knew he would give.*

*He liked the thrill of not knowing, as if a man could turn evolution back to the start and stare quietly at the starry sky, without knowing what fire even was).*

“Hey there!” He greeted a passing raccoon. Laughed, delighted, when it seemed to greet back.

Making his way down the crater was the hardest part. It was half slipping down, half grabbing the nearest piece of trash; he had broken his foot, once, during a first attempt. *These days he was an expert*, he had informed Mori, with all the pride of the child he wasn't. He skipped his way down, grabbing the pills in the pocket of his coat and throwing two of them in his mouth.

The abandoned shipping container was hollowed out in the cold earth. Old graffitis and even older shipment instructions were painted on the smudged blue of the metal, signs of a time Dazai had not been there to witness.

Following familiar motions, he settled his phone between his cheek and shoulder, raising the metal bar keeping the container shut; he pushed the door to the side. With a creak, his feet landed on the floor.

That metal box would fall apart, sooner than later. It was exactly why Dazai had chosen it.

“I'm here,” he announced to the phone. He leaned down and untied his shoes, skipping around in the darkness to get them off his feet. His shoulders hit one of the walls; his hands

reached up, looking for the row to turn the light on.

Mori's voice spoke right in his ear, sinking all the way to his rotten guts: "*Two steps to the left.*"

He huffed, but followed the instructions. His fingers finally closed around the plastic end of the thread; he pulled. With a buzz, the container was bathed in the dim light of the cracked, naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

As it usually went, Dazai hit his forehead against it.

Massaging the area, he muttered: "Damn thing. I should just live in the dark."

*"Three steps forward."*

"Not even a little concern?" Dazai asked, making big eyes at one specific corner of the container. It wasn't exactly a camera, or else he would have seen it; but he knew there was *something*. "I might get a concussion, one of these days. Get electrocuted, maybe. *Oh*, wouldn't that be an interesting way to go?"

*"Three steps forward."*

Sighing, he did as told. Then he bowed, mockingly. "Do you believe me, now?"

Mori hummed. "*Do a twirl for me, would you?*"

He barked out a laugh. "I'll kill you."

"*Most probably,*" the man agreed, like he was proud. *Mori*, Dazai sometimes mused, when the taste of blood was stuck in the gums of his mouth, *only ever spoke to him like the mirror had a crack right in the middle*. Like the crack would send him to the asylum, once he grew haunted enough to look at it. "*Not yet, though. We will talk when I'm back from Tokyo. I have heard some interesting things about your recent pastimes.*"

"Have you?" he offered. "No concern offered to the thirty three children of mafiosi we found in the *Happy Truck*?"

*"You believe it might lower my rating?"* he asked, like he truly cared.

"This place is tasteless lair of plastic snakes," he agreed. "But you know how much I like kids."

*"You detest them."*

"Yeah," Dazai fell down on the bed. It squeaked under his weight, a warning as old as the days he'd spent sleeping there. He studied the circle of light on the opposite end of the container; idly, he raised a hand and painted shadows inside the white screen. A little bunny, a dove. A middle finger, settling his eyes on the invisible camera again. "That's the point."

Mori's smile was right there, through the waves of the distorted sounds of his phone. The signal was tremendous in that area. His smiles were a terrible omen, when genuine.

*"When you find them," the man said, all words that always meant, and said, and, what's the point of an empty wound? "Q's doll will be given to your custody."*

He had expected it. "Yes, Mori."

*"You know," the man added, "If you and Chuuya had told me about the Old World, perhaps I could have intervened."*

"I'm sure you cannot wait to seize the occasion."

A huff of laughter. *"The men might need a new bar under our protection, anyway."*

"And you might need just one more thing to make the local dog grateful," Dazai yawned. "Bet he won't even whine about whatever punishment you will give him."

*"Both of you," Mori specified. "Thirty three children's deaths will not inspire any loyalty in — How curious."*

"What is?"

*"There is no parental equivalent to an orphan," His breath creaked though the intercom, very distantly curious — the way it got when Dazai had to take tools off his sleeping fingers and settle a pillow under his cheeks. Useful, Mori would say. "The Institute will demand an explanation, also. I can't just send you two to the corner and call it a day."*

"Of course, Mori."

*"I believe Kouyou might put Chuuya on corpse duty. I hear he might have received some of the old style whipping — you know, that ancient punishment baston the syndicate has owned for generations? The one she uses during training? Yes, that. That is, if the prospect of cleaning duties didn't tire him out already."*

"Of course, Mori."

*"Shall we find something you might despise just as much?"*

*Impossible,* he didn't say.

Chuuya's hatred for the cleaning duties was born out of something too pure to survive near his fingers; something as human as the desire not to let his eyes linger on the dead faces of men he had known. He would make corpses with a grin and sit next to them with a knot in his throat; it made for a repulsive show, moreso because he refused to admit it.

Dazai had never quite felt anything so —

So.

“I trust you’ll find something,” he concluded. It was what he had been doing since he was fourteen. It may not come for months; years even. But he would find it. Mori tended to keep his promises.

His hum was all the confirmation he would ever need. *“Goodnight, Dazai.”*

“I hope I’ll die in my sleep,” he replied.

*“Did you take your pills?”*

“Unfortunately.”

*“Then,”* the man assured, with all the cruelty the world had to offer — like he had nightmares about being wrong; like he had nightmares about being right. *“It won’t happen.”*

*Beep beep beep*, he thought. *Bye-bye.*

There wasn’t much in his makeshift home that could steal his attention. There were only so many times he could study the rusty stool in the corner — the metal desk filled with work papers and bullets boxes. He had no pillow and no sheets in his bed, either; Mori had taken them away after watching him do his best to choke and hang himself with them. It got boring pretty soon.

Throwing his discarded shoes to the other side of the container, he stood up, welcoming the goosebumps arisen by the contact of naked feet against the ground. His coat slipped down his shoulders; he abandoned it on the stool, watching it spin quietly.

The desk creaked when he laid his hands on it, but Dazai didn’t flinch: he was too used all the spectral noises that house was capable of conjuring. It hadn’t taken long to learn that specific melody, and fourteen years old Dazai was nothing but obsessive. Almost two years later, he hadn’t changed.

Almost two years later, still alive. Still in the shipping container.

The papers on the desk mostly consisted of reports — stuff Mori wouldn’t accept if not written down. He didn’t need them — thought the whole ordeal unnecessary, even — but he supposed not everyone could have his memory. And not everyone was the subject of Mori’s ivy taunts.

“Let’s see,” he mused.

The red file he extracted from under his dress shirt was startlingly bright against that old paperwork. Dazai had no qualms about pushing every useless document off the table; he opened the dossier and studied the thick stack of black and white photographs, eyes skirting along the squares of papers filled with personal information stapled in their corners.

Sneaking into the Boss’ office would have been impossible, hadn’t the man wanted it.

He raised one of the pictures, hiding the lightbulb behind its square. The glow highlighted the outlines of the woman staring back at him, her expression eerily vacant. In a corner, in one of

Mori's archivists' red handwriting, was scribbled: *Not Found*.

*Desperate souls*, he recalled, *find desperate places*.

The dossier was filled to the brim. Much more than thirty three, *relevant* people.

That file was stuffed with *busybodies*. Men whose only purpose was proving how much more of a shock value crowds of armed men were, compared to a single one. They didn't even have to be that good with a gun; most people just assumed a nicely dressed man holding a weapon would know how to use it. Most people wanted to live.

The theories scribbled in the stapled papers were lazy, at best. Most assumed those boring men and women had caused their own demise; drank themselves to death or picked a fight with the wrong person. No one wanted to know how the lower rats spent their time.

Useless people. And yet, no one grouped useless people together without a reason.

His phone buzzed, loud enough to shake the bed it had been discarded onto.

*Fucking chips aside, I know you saw it too*, it read. The lack of any insults was the one proof he needed of the genuine ire he still felt. *The tattoo on Okuda's shoulder*.

Dazai hummed. *You're too slow*, he could have sent back. *I thought I told you to delete this number*. He could have texted, *Stop making yourself a reasonable part of my plans*.

Instead, he snapped the phone shut and threw it on the bed again, watching it miss the mark and land on the floor. The photographs stared right back at him — strangers who were dead set on stretching his life out.

His phone buzzed, again. Fate was a thing, he reminded himself. But the invisible thread choking him was nothing but sea wind — sea wind and Mori's chessboard.

He sighed.

"Whatever," he conceded, staring right into the invisible camera. Knowing Mori, he had already stopped watching. Knowing Mori, it wouldn't matter. "But I won't be happy about it."

There was honor in walking to your scaffold with your head tall. Dazai had no time to waste with such things; he dragged his feet along the metal ground, and grabbed his abandoned phone.

things i googled while writing this chapter:

- do arcades look different in different countries
- are fighting rings age restricted
- bandages
- acceptable fight moves
- what does the police sound like realistically

# WILL

## Chapter Summary

*The first rumble of thunder came with the third nail they ripped off.*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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*chapter iv.*

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*Case number: 11190067*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, under the orders of M. O., came the last of a sequence of missions at the hands of Dazai O. and Nakahara C., as per [...]*

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Miyoshi Takayuki's office smelled of blood.



Not the *concrete* kind — not the dried sand under his soles, under too long nails Mori would reprimand. It dripped down the walls with the cadence of a proud, retired soprano — never landing in puddles just dull enough to stick to the sidewalk.

No one who sat high enough in Yokohama to see the moon face to face could ever be called bloodless. Dazai simply wished it didn't convince CEOs they had any right to ruin his mornings.

"Mr. Miyoshi, for the last time," He rolled on his guest chair, distracted. "The deal was: if you helped any other shipment but our own, we would kill your hostages. I truly don't understand your outrage."

The entourage of suited men behind the CEO's shoulders caged the skyline through the glass walls of his office. Everything was pristine; it still felt a bit cheap. Blood refusing to show itself as the riches it was. Miyoshi was all thin eyes and thinner lips, with his hands tight around the hostages' corpses' pictures Dazai had personally taken.

There were cameras everywhere — it mattered little, though; the Port Mafia had enough anonymous tips to waste on that Corporation to drag them sixty feet underground.

It made getting caught somewhat boring.

"You don't *understand*," the man hissed, in the name of professional repetitiveness. *Important things are to be said once*, Mori would have sighed. "The Nine Rings, they — *threatened us*, they stood right where you are —"

"*We* threatened you, too," he pointed out, blinking. "Were they scarier?" His head dangled back. "That won't do. I pride myself in my methods. Don't I?"

Behind him, the line of *Secret Force Unit* men gave a monotonous, coordinated nod. A brain or two behind their sunglasses might have saved them on the edge of a cliff — puppets wouldn't see the point in it, though. The bitten curb Mori had encouraged once opposition to the local fifteen years old leading them had arisen had turned them quiet.

*If not allies, then examples.*

The Boss' suggestions were usually bloodier than they were wrong.

"They," Miyoshi gulped. "They — They threatened my family. Found my daughter's school, and —"

His nape flopped against the top of his seat. "Of course they did."

"She's barely *nine*, she —"

"Obviously."

"My, my employees — Their lives matter much, enough to keep our deal afloat. But my own *blood*, my flesh, my *child* — Sir, you, if you'll forgive me the — Sir, you are *young*. You cannot understand the love of a parent —"

“The love of a parent who abandoned his pregnant wife for his much younger intern, and who his daughter has seen *six times* since she was born?” he completed, tossing his phone in the air and catching it as it fell. It lit up, awakened.

“Mr. Miyoshi, what is it that your company does, again?” he questioned.

It took him an endless time to answer. Wrecked by hesitance, eventually, he said: “We — We deal with electronics. Trades with Europe, sir.”

“Economic procedure, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which *means*, ” he concluded, “That you *know* the value of competition. Different brands and a multifarious offer are what make our society so *interesting*, right? Let a man pick, and you will know what you need to do better. Most importantly — You know how annoying it is to *have* any competition, when you have no care for the betterment of society.”

Dazai settled his eyes on him, just for a blink. “As — I’m sure you understand — *my Boss* has no interest in,” He lowered his gaze to the pictures, “His leasures lay... *elsewhere*. ”

As one, Miyoshi and his men flinched.

Voices and sayings had spread like wildfires during the prior Boss’ reign. Then, they had become ghost stories — Mori *mostly* saw no use in dead men with no price tags. But he liked stories. He especially liked Dazai’s *demonization of the Mafia’s methods* — as he called it — keeping the stories alive.

He should have been less *prodigious*, Dazai knew — had had it confirmed throughout that whole week of war against the *Nine Rings*. It was always to blame.

“Alright,” Dazai stretched, extracting a bundle of papers from underneath his chocolate-stained dress shirt. This is a confession. The Yokohama PD will mysteriously get their hands on it mere hours after finding your men’s corpses, and you will be brought to jail — where the *Nine Rings* will not be able to threaten you any longer.”

“Someone from our ranks will be placed in your stead, as to recover the shipments we have lost after you offered their access to the Nine Rings,” he added. “And everything will be where it is meant to. I should hope you appreciate my solution. I spent a lot of time thinking about it. Just sign it, would you?”

Miyoshi’s pale skin bloomed scarlet.

Through his hysterical stutters, Dazai typed a message.

Mori, he knew, had declared open fire on the Nine Rings out of bored offense. *Retaliation is such a boring concept*, he had once mused, munching on a chess piece. *People should simply quit trying to move against us*.

The still *reasonable* number of citizens involved in the various massacres would send an unmistakable warning to the underground. The world existed for it: soiled ground to sink the spear of conflict into.

Under Miyoshi's rage, Dazai pressed *send* on a failed picture he had taken of the fallen hostages. *Stop texting me*, he wrote, underneath. *I'm busy*.

The answer came pathetically fast — as distinctively too-carefully typed as ever. *I have not texted you once all day*.

*Send another picture and see where that phone of yours ends up*, came a second after, blindingly aggravating underneath the *Slug* contact-info.

*Suribachi*, he texted.

Silence stretched out, cautiously unanswered.

*Damn you*.

*Also*, he added. A picture appeared, as brutal as he had expected it to be: bloody, sharp remnants of a shop window, and the barely recognizable body of a suited man plastered on the shattered glass. Kouyou had truly put him on *cleaning duty*, then.

If he had been interested in the answer, he might have asked him if he had grown desensitized to his colleagues' carcasses.

An unmistakable, gloved middle finger broke the picture in two. *Go choke, bastard*.

*Hey*, he texted, again. *Window or desk?*

Bubbles appeared. Then, *Fuck do I know?*

Then: *Window*.

*Thx*.

"Alright," Dazai climbed to his feet, much to the man's endless speech's startlement. "You don't need to write. Luckily, there are many recognizable signatures."

Many things could be said about the *Secret Force Unit*. One thing, though, Dazai couldn't fault them: aim.

A flutter of fingers got them to raise their guns, and open fire. The rain of yellow and black awakened dust and screams; Miyoshi's guards went down with wet gasps and muffled shouts — as a *hellish* shriek left the CEO's mouth, his eyes set on the blood wakes his men's corpse left on the glass.

Dazai appeared next to him, one hand tight around his nape. As emergency alarms began to flare through the whole floor, he slammed his head forward, waiting for the sick *crunch!* of his nose cracking the glass of his desk.

“See,” he said. He *pressed* his head down, until the webs spread — until his whole face *creaked*. “When competition arises, one has to become resourceful.”

The office doors were slammed open. When a tranquilizer gun appeared in the corner of his gaze, he allowed it to shoot — politely succumbing to the bitter sting on his neck.

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The first rumble of thunder came with the third nail they ripped off.

A basement of sorts occupied the depth underground of Miyoshi’s skyscraper-kingdom; Dazai had awoken sometimes around the first knot of his wrists around a metal seat. The distinguished men in suits with distinctively unfriendly faces dealing with him were rather standard; Hirose Fumiko’s oldest single playing from an old stereo, somewhat less.

“*Moonlit Lover* is certainly a classic,” he had admitted, as they buttoned their sleeves up their elbows. “But my favorite of hers is *A Night To Die*. What do you misters think of her rock years?”

After that, it was mostly a crimson, vaguely *wet* blur.

Torture was an old friend, in the way of trash lined up on his house garden. Some days, it was the only occasion he had to touch flesh. Dazai had never enjoyed pain; at least, he would have preferred it at the hands of a capable man. *Think Mori*, he offered, either silently or not, because torturers always seemed to enjoy conversation. *Think Mori. Doctor until the very end of his days. Doctors wear gloves, at least.*

It was unprofessionalism at its finest — their knuckles crashed against his cheekbones again and again, looking for nothing but the entertainment of flesh; when his head lolled back, all the blood drooled into his mouth.

“Our deal on the rhinestones traficant,” one of the torturers asked, at some point. “Tell us how to gain his help without the Port Mafia’s intermission.”

“*Uwaa*,” Dazai whined, wiggling his fingers — missing nails and cracked bones and all. “That’s not any of *my* business. Not anymore. I got promoted, you see,” He choked; spit out blood — it landed on the scarlet mess of his shirt. Mori did always say to wear a jacket. “These days, it’s the pipsqueak who deals with it,” A blink. “Oh. No. Wait. He doesn’t anymore. *Nine Rings*’ business.”

“*Pipsqueak?*” the man grasped his hair, raising his chin up from his chest. “No code names. Tell us where to find him.”

“*Gladly.* Will you kill him?”

“That depends on you.”

“*Please* do,” Dazai groaned. “If he finds out I glued his back-up gloves to the ceiling he’s gonna *lose it.*”

Deaf and distant, the reinforced heel of the man’s shoe landed on his toes, smashing at least one of them right on impact. He bit his tongue.

“Tell us,” he spelled out, slowly, mere inches from his face, “Who he *is.*”

He opened his mouth. “A bother, is what he is.”

A clenched jaw. “Is he a wild card?”

“You could say. Stupidly short body. I have to squint to even *attempt* to find him. Elise keeps saying he looks bad in skirts, so she has to put *me* in them,” He sniffed the blood from his nose up, “Hey, do you guys know if your back door still has an alarm?”

“What?”

The earth shook.

Far enough a less *adjusted* ear wouldn’t have caught it, combat boots landed on metal tiles.

The storm appeared strangely unfocused — the destructive cracks of the ground, like the bells of a collapsing Church, webs spreading up and down the endlessly tall walls. His taunters attempted to *ask* — the next sound was a cacophony of horrified screams.

Red flared, vibrant like lighting, running up and down the room in the shape of solidified wind. Wet squelches; shrieks and a revolting *crunch!*. Blood reached his dirty shows — ribcages spread apart; raining viscera on the floor.

Then, silence.

From the old stereo, Hirose belted out an *ah*.

“Pathetic,” was Chuuya’s final judgement. He slammed a bored heel on his metal restraints, pinching his under-chin. “All this shit to learn Miyoshi’s secret treasure room’s hideout?”

“What, you think I go around granting myself pain for fun?” Dazai whined, ripping a piece of brain off his tie. A tooth came out when he spat blood. “You need to learn punctuality. Elise is going to wrap me up in sparkly band aids.”

A fate as deranged as that demanded no comment; they jumped over the corpses and left, as Chuuya cracked every security camera on their path. Dazai made sure to wave at every

horrified face he met.

Outside, it rained viciously enough to wash the blood off his face. The half-broken bones of his toe made his limping look even more suspicious than the bruises; Chuuya offered a stolen ice pack from an ice cream vendor and a kick to the back of his knees.

“To forget the aches,” he clarified.

The moment the rain subdued, Dazai *pointedly* stomped into the first lake-wide puddle they encountered, soaking him all the way to his chin.

From there, it was a chase — all the way to the *Yokohama General Cemetery*.

Chuuya seemed to know exactly how to move around that valley of blooming green hidden by snow and candid stones carved by time, under the lingering smell of incense from the New Year visits. He stopped by a simple tombstone, hardly different from all the others in those maniacally precise rows — and plopped down onto the snowy ground.

“If you smelled just a *bit* more,” he muttered, without sparing him a glance, “You would have to dump me in one of these.”

“How very hopeful of you to think you will leave a body to bury,” Dazai replied.

“Seriously, when’s the last time you showered?”

“Mafiosi under direct orders of the Boss are *busy* people,” He brushed the matter away, unwilling to vocalize the unexplainable. Chuuya was many things; someone whose unmatching eyes he wanted to meet, as he attempted to put *waking up is an order and falling asleep is a duty and brushing my hair an excuse not to have Mori’s hands in it* into words — not quite. “Say, why the sudden anguish for a stranger?”

Seemingly unwilling to talk again, the boy pulled at the frayed edges of his leather jacket, *huffing*.

“Last I checked, your mourning was reserved for Rimbaud’s traitorous grave,” Dazai insisted. The ice made his face numb; it felt like a smile. “Say, the Flags don’t have graves — so *why*, exactly, do you have the Cemetery’s planimetry memorized?”

Chuuya was suspiciously silent.

“You have any other traitors to mourn? *Those* get graves,” he asked. “Any pseudo-relatives I don’t know about? Murderous older brothers excluded.”

“You have the personality of a haunted doll crawling up Ace’s ass.”

“And you have the undefeatable intellect of Kouyou’s hairpins,” He sat down in the snow, sinking into that cold embrace all the way to his waist. His knee brushed Chuuya’s. “Who’s Nishimura?”

“The old fuck who got blown up last week,” Chuuya answered, uninterested. “The taxi driver.”

Surprise, he thought, was to be reserved for moments that might deserve a stutter from a prodigy — from a butterfly on a wall. For the *uncharacteristic*.

“I’m assuming you paid for his funeral.”

Kouyou’s pride and joy, as far as she could try. “Anonymous donations aren’t gifts.”

*You will be the death of you*, Dazai recalled thinking, the first time he had stumbled into an alley and saw *Corruption* break through his ribs.

“You’re using strangers’ graves,” It wasn’t a question. “Aren’t you?”

Chuuya’s fingers curled into the snow. He left holes, staining his gloves; filled them up, diligent like only a focused child could be. Every line of him was antagonistic; every scar peeking from his clothes seemed fresh.

He poked a bit deeper: “Isn’t a whole treasure hunt for a bar enough?”

“Any news on Q?” Chuuya asked, like a coward.

Dazai shrugged. “The Mafia is now *officially* looking for them. I’m assuming they will call me if they hear a whisper.”

“Boss won’t just let an asset go like that.”

“No,” he confirmed. Q was a cheeky ghost in the hallways of a building not made for kids — nonetheless, they were too good of an investment. *You’ll find them, won’t you?* “He’ll find them, of course. Hey, which one was the worse one?”

“Of what?”

“The ones you killed,” He snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Let’s say this week.”

Clouded blue and that burned shade of amber studied every inch of his swelled up face — strangely deep for the most *unenigmatic* creature in existence. “The hell you care?”

He shrugged.

The searching gaze he offered him was more than familiar — Chuuya wasn’t smart at all, but he was certainly clever. He knew Dazai didn’t waste air — not when he despised it *so*.

“Kouyou’s number one suspect for the first wave of homicides,” he said, finally. His tone dripped in carelessness; it wasn’t the *blood* itself to disturb him. He got a kick out of weaving corpses into existence — if it saved his people. “A big shot of sorts. We entered his apartment and slashed his throat. His pregnant wife woke up, so we killed her too.”

Because that lifetime was shared and known, he guessed: “Tore her belly open?”

He ripped a thread off his jacket and wrapped it around his little finger. “Yep.”

“You really have a thing for children.”

“It’s not about the kid.”

“Then?”

“What’s with the interrogation?” he sneered. “Your best shot at grasping human emotion? I’m no lab rat.”

Dazai conceded: “Not anymore.”

He didn’t flinch; it was a near thing.

Fascinated, he stared at the slow regeneration of his fractured gaze — his poisonous grimace, always *tense*, like every part of him. Whenever his hands had managed to brush against a square of him, every muscle in his body had always been *ready*.

He spat out: “You’ll have no luck, asshole. It was just gross. Fluids and smell and screams. Weapons are messy.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah,” He kicked the tombstone. “What the fuck was *your* punishment, anyway?”

“I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Your punishment is *not dying*?”

“Maybe my punishment is a painful demise,” he replied, obnoxiously. Punishment was a shred of chemtrails in the soft sky; like most tragedies, it did not exist as long as he did not care. *Here’s a wound*, Mori would say. *Make something out of it*. “Maybe, right now, I have poison in my veins — slow and efficient, but terribly burdensome. Have you considered it?”

Chuuya kept quiet, seething. *Spoilt*, he could read on his face, *unfair*. *Boss’ little bitch*, he had heard many dead men walking mutter. Dazai fed on their ignorance like a last meal; ate up all they vomited, too.

“Hey,” he added. “Tell me one more thing.”

“Your voice is pissing me off.”

“You know in *Time Apocalypse III*, when the player has the chance to choose whether he wants to kill a man or watch somebody else do it? And if you happen to choose neither, you lose enough points you go back at the start?”



The chain of his hat dangled, gentle and unassuming, crowning his silence with understanding.

“Why am I being included in your misplaced guilt?” Dazai nodded forward — the white road and the grey sky; the corpses drowning in the earth. “I didn’t do a thing to that man, and neither did you. A bit egocentric of you, to claim this pain for yourself. Don’t you think so?”

“I think,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard a word, “That you are a brat.”

Dazai grinned, and it *hurt*, pulled every bruise of his face. Pushed their shoulders together, like it was meant to appear *friendly*, like it was meant not to break bones. “And *I* think you wouldn’t be allowed on any of the rides of the Summer Festival.”

“You don’t lack morality,” he continued, undeterred. “Just the desire to understand where to direct it. So you don’t stop until someone tells you to,” His scoff warmed the air. “The Mafia’s little prodigy, struggling with basic concepts.”

“Basic,” he repeated.

“Sons of a bitch have souls, somewhere. But you get so damn confused looking for it.”

“And so what,” Dazai wondered, jiggling his legs in the snow and widening his eyes. *Look at me and regret it.* “You think you can direct me to the light?”

“No,” Chuuya stood up, brushing dust and snow off his pants. “I don’t know where that is.”

“Fascinating. Hey, do you intend to visit every victim of yours? Q’s Institute certainly opened up the gates. And dear Officer Okuda!”

A pimple right at the corner of his mouth tilted with his lips. “Don’t take me for a good person.”

Mafiosi were black and red; it stained their eyes and it changed their souls and it kept their hearts beating. Goodness was a thing of this world — he knew, because the poets *insisted*. Just not one he had ever witnessed.

None of them were good. The general consensus was — Chuuya was somewhat *better*.

It made for a pathetic sight. Black wings and fingers spasming for a touch he wouldn’t search; corpses dangling from the hands in his pockets and knees on the floor of Mori’s office — on the snowy ground of a stranger’s grave. Inane and blind. Living, *laughable* emulsion of blood-thirst and integrity. Better than Dazai would ever be.

*[Envy, Mori would have said, is a deplorable defect. Raise your shoulders, would you?]*

Dazai sighed, tilting his head back until his nape began to pulse, staring into the winter sun. “How *irritating* this is bound to be.”

“Tell me about it,” the other muttered. “Well? What’s the plan?”

“I’m going to need —” He dragged out; then he smiled, toothy: “A *big* wall.”

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Chuuya’s apartment was empty.

Better, more intricate words would have failed at an accurate portrait; *meticulously-kept*, perhaps — though it made one wonder how the person whose phone was cracked on all sides and barely alive enough to turn on could manage it.

*Haunted*, perhaps — if a certain, *tentative* sort of warmth hadn’t appeared the moment the front door closed behind them. Welcoming them to the void.

“Hey,” the boy snapped, as Dazai made his unworried way through all the rooms, “Hey, what do you think you’re — *Take off your shoes*, you —“

Calling the nonexistent *tidy* felt cheap, so he didn’t bother, as he roamed through what had to be a bedroom — or a futon on the floor and a wardrobe. Messiness was not Dazai’s taste — he folded his clothes like someone would check, and he picked up bullets from the ground like the corpses might breathe.

Mori had had the obsession for the pristine of a true surgeon; he had banned him from his clinic by the third mess. Dazai had wandered. Had slept under a good number of roofs. The smartest one had been his desk, but Mori had found out too soon. Another location he wasn’t allowed — partly because it was a quick way out of punishment, partly because he had been stupid enough to get caught. And Mori wanted his craftiness more than anything.

These days, he was tidy.

“*Hey*,” Chuuya snarled, stomping in his bedroom. He dragged him out by the tie, before he could check out what the shoebox labeled as *Shit* under his bed was hiding, “Who the fuck gave you *permission* —“

“You truly interpreted the meaning of *essentialism*,” Dazai observed, hypocrite until his very last day, content enough with having verified the absence of bugs around the apartment. Given his container, one couldn’t be too sure. Mori liked his kids all in one place. “Are those French textbooks?”

“Give me that,” The boy stole the book from his hands, settling it next to a bottle of milk near the stove. He snorted, kicking his shoes off towards the only furniture in the counter-divided

living room — a beanbag. “Have you got no manners of sorts, you freak?”

“You grew up in the streets,” he replied. Over the edge of the hallway door, a pile of what looked like bare mattresses blinked at him, precariously held by the wall. Perhaps he had misunderstood the futon prices; perhaps the Flags had standards he didn’t mirror. “Why are you learning French?”

“Can’t I learn a language?” Chuuya stole the book from his hands. “You know a shit ton.”

Dazai jumped on the counter. “Maybe you should focus on learning Japanese first?”

A knife brushed his cheek; he grabbed it with lithe fingers, curling it in the air once, twice — before hiding it in his shoe. “Stop being so mad all the time. Ane-san’s reports tell me you’re basically a native!”

“I *am* one.”

“And Hirotsu is working on your diction, isn’t he?” Dazai would know — unwilling subject to the man’s absolutely *non-ability-related* talent to *understand*. “Although, stupid as you are, you probably didn’t even realize he’s doing it. It’s alright, though. It took me three whole seconds, too.”

“Have you ever considered stuffing your mouth with shit? Familiar seeks familiar?”

He stole the nearest bottle, gulping down mouthfuls. “*Le français semble un choix étrange pour un punk de la rue.*”

“*Je ne suis plus un punk de la rue,*” came immediately, as he removed his jacket. His accent was good; even slightly *too* good. “*Maquereau.*”

“Learning pet names just for me? I’m moved,” Dazai leaned forward. “You do know you won’t get to speak it with Verlaine or Rimbaud, though, don’t you?”

His teeth gritted louder than the traffic. He unbuttoned his shirt; Dazai’s gaze fell on the square of freckled skin between his clavicles — and the black ink of the Port Mafia symbol. Two stems of white heather crossed at the base, thin and delicate, shaded blood-red at the edges. Dazai had been told what it meant, once. He could never recall.

*Does it rot you too?*, he didn’t ask. Bloom was unmistakable; old roots always knew where to look.

“Thank you for the concern,” Chuuya said, eventually. “Unrequested, as usual. Are you going to tell me why you had me running around collecting documents all week?”

“Sure,” he said, throwing his own hidden dossier on the floor. “But first, I’m going to need — some thread. And the biggest marker at your disposal.”

A beat. “You’re about to absolutely desecrate my walls, aren’t you?”

“Precisely.”

He shrugged. “‘Suppose.’”

“Cool. You *do* have a computer somewhere in this dog house, don’t you? Bring that too. Oh, and some snacks!”

“Fucker, do I *look* like someone who has snacks laying around?”

Dazai sighed, petulant. “Fair. We’ll just get take-out. I’m feeling Chinese, what about you? Don’t say anything. We’ll just order Chinese.”

His abandoned bottle flew right over his head, barely avoided, as he strolled to the living room. “I’m not your *assistant!*”

There was no furniture to set aside, so his plan to get Chuuya to do all the work came to immediate motion. Mug shots and information files were picked up from the floor and smeared onto the roof with glue, connected by neon green thread. Walking his merry way upside down, Chuuya scribbled facts, skipping away from Dazai’s bored fingers on his forehead.

“That’s not how you write that *kanji*,” he informed, at every opportunity.

“Die,” Chuuya replied, without fail, before writing it again and again — until it *stuck*.

His hat chain got stuck in the thread. It arose a strange debate on the superior Chips snack. It had turned into a *Hold Your Breath* competition that had all the blood turn the boy’s face red — when the intercom beeped.

“Good, I need a break,” the redhead muttered, walking his upside-down way to the door, still. “Do *not* snoop around while I’m gone.”

“Yes, Chuuya.”

His long-suffering grace traced his innocent frame. “Don’t you, *Yes, Chuuya* me, you liar.”

The moment the door was shut, Dazai was on his feet.

He dragged a marker up every wall he walked next to, abandoning a wobbly line behind — scribbling his height near the kitchen door, and adding an exaggeratedly shorter one at its side.

As foretold by their owner, the cabinets were mostly empty. Leftovers in plastic containers took up most of the space — headache meds, too; some variation of Oxy. Chronic pain medications — enough to make him raise his eyebrows. He shook some pills in his palm, gulping them down dry, before adding the ones in his pockets to the mix.

There was *method* in it, he knew — there was method in everything Mori had ever done for him.

The gist of the reports abandoned in the sink was mostly the same: *bloodied ground and vicious enemies*, and then *bloodier ground and defeated enemies*. Chuuya’s arrival on the

scene always, *always* the breakthrough.

It was hardly new — the first boy his age and all his hyperbolic *self*; that blue bracelet under Arcade lights. Nothing had ever looked more like a leash — apart from those friends of his; unfaithful believers in ripped jeans and a lacking pillar.

Merciless encouragement for him to sink his hands in the blood for their pointless sake. He had done it once; he had done it twice. If he had done it a million times, Dazai *understood* —

Herbivores lacked complexity.

As he got busy ripping the French textbooks spines in half, a square of paper — a photograph — fell from the pages. Before he could turn it around and study it, the door opened.

“Got lost on the way?” he taunted, throwing himself on the floor again. He wouldn’t know how to explain why the picture ended up in his deepest pocket. “Pipsqueaks must have it *so* hard up the stairs. Is the elevator going to be fixed soon?”

“Ikeda wanted you to know they’ve exchanged turns,” Chuuya replied — going out of his way to drag fish-patterned socked feet up every inch of his ribcage, before settling on the ground with the bag of food.

“Ikeda?”

A skeptical look. “One of your men.”

“Oh,” The boy’s outright distaste would have made someone else squirm. “Why do you know my men’s names?”

“Maybe because they *introduced* themselves?” he scoffed. “Why the hell did you station them here, anyway?”

Dazai grabbed the nearest bowl. Piously, he swore: “I’m somewhat hoping they might reveal themselves to be the *Chosen Ones* and assassinate you.”

A snort. “Your men can’t take me.”

“My men can take *anyone*,” he tutted. “They’re boring like that. That’s why Mori gave them to me.”

“Boss found the only men in the syndicate who would resist the urge to shoot you in the head if you begged for it.”

He conceded.

They ate. He dropped every last inch of his sauce on the ground; Chuuya wiped every corner of his hands on his dress shirt. With his container still more than half full, and burping long enough for it to be genuinely impressive, he starfished on the floor and started: “What do all the fuckers in this pictures have in common, then? Same hairdresser?”

He slurped the last of his meal, and made his own star. “A few weeks before Verlaine came around, the Intelligence began to notice an unusual amount of disappearances from our ranks.”

“Pianoman said something about it,” Untouched as the wind itself; he *almost* believed it. “People vanish all the time though, don’t they? Their corpses always end up turning up. They’ll have Kingstain’s balls in a jar up Ace’s desk by the end of the week.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” He connected the pictures on the ceiling with a lazy raised arm. “All these lovely men and women have two things in common: number one, their disappearance wasn’t reported by anyone.”

“Then how do we know?”

“*Free tattoo and a lifelong oath of observation!*” Dazai parroted. “That’s what I proposed Mori wrote on the recruiting fliers. I was rudely denied, but the point still stands: you can’t just *join* the Port Mafia. Most importantly, you can’t just *leave* it.”

“Is that story true?” Chuuya asked, on the verge of a mocking tone — but not quite. “It was everywhere in the underground. *The Port Mafia has never had a deserter it didn’t catch.*”

“Probably not,” He shrugged. “Exaggeration is the mother of fame. But we came close enough to the idea. Thing is — These people weren’t reported, because they were hardly important enough for the ranks to *miss*. Grunts, messengers, lowly guards—“

“The scum under Boss’ shoes.”

“Basically. Their second shared feature is — If we’re right, they’re under the influence of a microchip of sorts that keeps them alive in impossible conditions, and that might just regulate their pain tolerance.”

“And what,” The boy frowned, following the vacant eyes of the subjects. A sauce stain on his cheek looked like a mole. “Should we expect these vanished people to reappear?”

He snorted. “Of course not.”

His glance could have stricken lightning itself.

“Uss that dog brain for a *moment*,” Dazai insisted, knocking the side of his head against his, making him curse out. “Those thirty three people — Ane-san called them *fundamental assets*, didn’t she? What do they have in common with these faceless laborers? If we believe the Nine Rings want us weakened on our economic incomes — why bother with the capture of people who bring nothing but numbers?”

“*Desperate people look for desperate place,*” Chuuya said. “That’s what you heard that V guy say, right?”

His finger landed on one of the pictures. “*Hokama Shigeo*. His late father owed an immeasurable debt to one of Ace’s casinos — his favorite recruiting technique. He couldn’t repay us if he won three lotteries in a day.”

Another picture. “Tamashiro Miki. She offered her body to the organization, but she was kicked out of the *Pomegranate* after the underage sons of some clients accused her of rape. Before she was abducted, she lived in a *stop apartment* at the entrance of the city. One of her hands was cut off after an escaping attempt. Ishida Ken —“

“Got it,” Chuuya interrupted him. “I was up there writing this stuff the whole afternoon. Miserable people, possibly heartless. Same for Kingstain. But that’s our only lead? *It wasn’t the Nine Rings because the Nine Rings don’t go for miserable people?*”

Dazai blinked. “Don’t misunderstand. It *was* the Nine Rings.”

The boy leaned on his elbow, staring down at him. “Excuse me?”

“What, you think the tattoos are lying?”

“But *you* said —“

“Mori isn’t *wrong* about the Nine Rings’ involvement,” he explained, dipping his hands in some *Kung Pao Chicken*, “They *are* involved. But the microchips alone prove that they are *not* the mastermind. Whoever is at the top of the chain probably wants them to take the fall. It was a challenge — One that Mori accepted.”

Understanding spread through mismatched eyes. “And if the head of it all can control people with those crosses —people so low ranked no one noticed their existence —“

“It means he could sneak eyes in,” He nodded towards the roof, again. “*Naito Ayame*, a cleaner who only disappeared a mere week before Tenshi was freed, worked *specifically* in the dungeons. I hacked the cameras of the stairs, and —“

“If you get Boss on my doorstep for suspicious activity on my laptop, I will *end you* —“

“And I saw her right where she was supposed to be, when our prisoner escaped,” he continued, pointedly not mentioning the state of alert their Intelligence must be in for those kinds of research. “No one even noticed she had been gone for a week.”

Chuuya’s nod was heavy. “Like the fucking elf in *Royal Battle IX*.”

He sighed, disconsolate. “Like in *Royal Battle IX*.”

Silence fell, through the hisses of some nearby apartment’s air conditioning. It was an older building than Dazai had expected either him or *mighty Executive candidate* Albatross to live in.

Dazai’s dumping site was as quiet as cemeteries came; sometimes, if he tried hard enough, he could hear the distant waves.

Floating lithely to the ground, one of the pictures was ripped off the ceiling, landing right on his face.

Frustration made its way through Chuuya's throat. "It's not enough. Why would distractions have the microchips? Are the crosses Abilities or —"

He filled his cheeks, blowing the piece of paper out of his face. "That's what we're going to find out, obviously."

A distinctively *repulsed* tremor went through his body. "*We.*"

"They *did* attempt to blow you up, so I'm hoping you will make for a fine bait," With a final shudder, he jumped to his feet. "Step one of *my* master plan to catch the bad guys."

"*Master plan,*" he echoed, with a tone that made it clear *that* wasn't the part of that last sentence that made him the most skeptical. "Like the Secret Executive's spies in training,"

While misunderstood, he hoped his grin conveyed enough. "I think we should call this — *Mission Blue Flower.*"

Gloved hands rubbed at Chuuya's temples. "You need to get over that stupid game loss — Do you know how hard it is to convince someone that gun of yours is fake?"

"Like you have a better name in mind —"

"Maybe I do, *yeah* —"

"I haven't heard you offer *any* suggestions since that one *ridiculous* list of revenge methods of yours — That my poor insides are still recovering from, by the way — So —"

A hint of genuine rage flashed through his eyes. "Don't you fucking *dare* act like you didn't deserve it." He barely escaped his kick. "*What* are we doing?"

Dazai gathered the empty food boxes, juggling them precariously. "For starters — You and I are going to infiltrate the *Nine Rings*. And have a chat with their Boss, while we're at it."

Through his most vicious efforts to tear his makeshift juggling balls out of his grip, Chuuya paused, staring him down.

"Fine," he said, eventually, barely hiding excitement. Little caged dog, hearing the creak of the door leading to the nearest park. "And where do we find this *Boss*, since mackerels gained omniscience while I wasn't looking?"

"Why, of course," The boxes landed on the floor, spreading remnants of food all over the vacant ground. "Our Tenshi works at the Arcade, doesn't she?"



The lights of the Arcade were turned off.

“*Stop ignoring me!*” Chuuya hissed, floating up and down flickering street lights and rusty benches. “How long have you *known* —“

“How is it my fault if you have the observational skills of a dead moth?” Dazai interrupted, plastering his face on the metal shutter. Turned off game machines and his own reflection was all he saw — he kicked the lock on the ground, half-heartedly.

“We were here mere days ago, weren’t we? Didn’t you notice the woman giving out coins near the air-hockey table?”

“*No*, I didn’t *notice*,” the boy snapped, “Clearly. You could barely see her face through the bruises *your* ass gave her, the one time I saw her. And you didn’t think about speaking up about the escaped prisoner standing *right in front of us?*”

“It’s precisely because she was there that I *didn’t*,” He offered him a pitying glance. “Living with that much free space up there must be maddening. No doubt, I’d kill myself.”

“You’d kill yourself for shits and giggles.”

“Unrelated. Make yourself useful and get us in, yes?”

Even as he fixed himself in place, heel upon the lock, Chuuya’s mutters filled the moonlight-lined street with *vengeance*. “Oh, *now* he needs me to *know* information —“

The padlock came loose with a well-calculated kick, just silent enough not to startle the familiar symphony of Yokohama — muffled vigilantes and rumbling waves; old engines and police radioes; the *never-not-absent* chink of crimson drops dripping in a pool of blood.

“Come on,” Chuuya pulled the shutter up without a blink.

“What is it that we’re looking for?” he asked, as they wandered down the square-tiled space. The lack of lights and repetitive jingles gave that familiar room a spectral sort of tinge — with the eerie hums and the occasional mechanical sigh from a recharging game. “You think the Nine Rings would use an old Arcade as a base?”

“No, but one person would,” Dazai replied, sliding across the counter. “As Mr. Arcade never failed to mention, this place is *right* at the edge of most gangs’ territories — It’s why Mori hasn’t stopped us from frequenting it.”

A snort. He extracted one of the plastic rifles from the *War God III* stands, cocking it a bit *too* convincingly. “The same Boss who ordered us to *lay off some steam with those electric marbles of yours* the last time?”

He jumped on the usually-bright squares of the *Dance Dance* machine. “I’m banished from all malls in the city, so —“

“That’s because you keep locking yourself in their bathrooms when you’re whining,” Chuuya clarified, stealing a basketball, this time. “Remember that time Elise and Q wanted to play hide and seek and no one found you for a week?”

“You need to stop being so attached to the past.”

“They sent me to look for you in *Beijing*. Because you left cryptic messages in the local dialect.”

“You’re welcome for the adventure.”

Dazai had barely enough time to lower before the glowing ball could tear his head off his neck.

In a fit of inspiration, he dropped to the ground.

“*Dude*, what the —“

“She kept tapping her foot,” he murmured. He dragged his nails along the lines of the tiles, tracing the deeper lines of cement. “And *Mr. Arcade* — He kept glancing here, while we talked.”

A bit more gracefully, Chuuya crunched next to him. “You think she has an underground base?”

“Could be,” Something glinted, right next to the leg of the table. He reached forward. “Either that, or *she* saw *us* too, that day.”

Before they could analyze the silver cross — a perfect match to the one still resting inside Dazai’s pocket — any deeper, an unmistakable *snarl* shattered the silence.

It zapped their bodies like electricity, kicking their legs out in an attempt to drag them to their feet. His knees bumped against the air hockey table, tearing a yelp out of him — the glass divisor between fields was rattled, rolling down — landing right onto his skull.

Chuuya’s flinching head met the edge of the closest gaming machine, and the sudden pain awakened his glowing-red punch.

Vision half-blurred from the impact, Dazai saw the *Apocalypse VI* metal box set-up fall in unlikely slow motion, creaking a hellish *shriek*, and tearing its cables off the wall — ready to *crash* their confused bones. Chuuya’s *son of a fucking bitch!* was a pointless dot; his shoulder blades dug holes in some space under Dazai’s ribs — as the boy threw himself upon him, blocking the machine with his shins, a mere foot from their faces.

Like a death sentence, the cables snapped.

“*Shit*, ” Chuuya’s eyes widened, under the game machine hovering upon them; Dazai realized what was going to happen in a blink, eyes stuck on the *WARNING: SECURITY* sign , “Oh, *shit* —“

Lighting up the whole Arcade in emergency scarlet, the shop alarm began to blare, loud enough to revive the earth.

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*Tadeo*, as it turned out the devil that had startled them into action was called — the police dog who had been roaming the area along with his more human colleagues — clearly bet its all on its name.

Once they were forcibly settled to huff about their *underserved* handcuffs, it didn’t move an inch from his guarding position, offering them his unfriendliest, slobbering all over the glass shards on the ground.

“This is a *residential area*, anyway,” Dazai pointed out, as one of the officers cuffed his wrists. “You guys can’t have your stupid dogs howl all they like. It’s *way* past any reasonable child’s bedtime.”

“Aren’t they supposed to be used for more relevant shit , anyway?” Chuuya intervened, between curses to his newly bruised shins. He had yet to go on a spiel about how *none of this would have happened if Dazai’s stupid slimy skin hadn’t been touching him*, but he knew it would come. “Explosives? Drugs? Rescuing people from under a building? Since when are Arcades *guarded* at night?”

“Since when is *anything* guarded at night?”

“Arcades aren’t even guarded during *the day*. ”

The woman was clearly unimpressed. She left to go talk to her colleague — on the ground, unswayed by the half-heart-eyes Chuuya was *evidently* sending his way, Tadeo growled.

“How come you know so much about police dogs, anyway?” Dazai asked, shaking his bandaged wrists to hear the cuffs click. “Is the legal part of your double life more truthful to your nature?”

The glance the boy directed him could have frozen Hell all over. “This isn’t the *time*, you —“ Genuine dismay drooled down his cheeks. “*Oh*, come *on* —“

“Truly, Chuuya,” A masculine, slightly exasperated voice spoke up. “At your old age, with an actual job — still robbing Arcades?”

Detective Matsuda, as the officer was introduced by Chuuya’s nearly hysterical spit, was a middle-aged man with no hair and thick glasses, who somehow knew better than to put his hands on either of their shoulders as he led them to the police car. He had also, apparently, been Detective Murase’s field partner. At least — before Verlaine had ripped him off his brother’s hands, like a child’s last whim.

“A pair made in heaven, the two of them,” Chuuya scoffed, as the man whistled on the wheel. “Had nothing better to do than roam through Suribachi City *every day*, like they were looking for living quarters.”

Dazai could imagine it, if he squinted — an even *shorter* redhead, skipping around the fragile box houses of that hellhole, hiding the younger kids behind his frame when two *too-good-willed* men in uniforms got too close.

Good men, as *per* tradition, tended to sink their claws too deep.

“The crater has a certain beauty to it, if you know where to look,” Matsuda intervened, offering them a curled eyebrow from the rear view mirror. Dazai had barely wasted time in grasping his roots; a good-hearted, stubborn man, who had only done one thing for the entirety of his life — who intended to keep that way. One of the *absent ones*, Mori called them. “Given how many times you would escape to break into that Arcade, though, I believe you might not share that notion.”

*The ones who truly want us dead in the name of justice, and not revenge*, he would add.

“Let’s get this over with. We have stuff to do.”

“That’s not nice, Chuuya,” Dazai said, dragging the sharper edge of the silver cross up and down his window. His head was still pounding; an irrelevant trickle of blood pooled under the bandaged side of his face — and the other boy kept sending brusque glances to it, as if he somehow *knew*. “This gentleman is being nice enough to give us a lift home. Learn some manners.”

“Actually, I’m taking you to the station,” Detective Matsuda replied, stupidly. A golden thread with a crucifix dangled from his neck; the irony did not escape *him*. “You’re currently charged with breaking and entering. Plus, undefined damage to work tools, attempted escape from the police force, and assault on one of my officers.”

“Is your *dog* charged with assault?” he asked, sticking his head between the front seats. “Because he should be. He tried to eat my shoe. That can’t be legal. Have some sense.”

The man glanced at Chuuya, very pointedly. “Found yourself a partner in crime?”

“Don’t make me throw up on your fine stail leather.”

“Didn’t you use to constantly bitch about your friends’ lack of interest in your video games?”

“He *did*?” Dazai gaped, delighted.

“Oh, absolutely. Barely ten years old and more bitter than a widow from the Great War. There was this one time, when it took him a whole *three hours* to escape, that he —“

“Unfortunately, I don’t have criminal acquaintances,” Chuuya interrupted them, eyes stubbornly stuck to his window.

“You *are* a criminal.”

He laughed. “On what basis?”

“Chuuya.”

“No, show them to me,” he encouraged, pulling Dazai back by his coat, to take his place. The expression he offered the policeman was the pinnacle of gloating innocence — and then *something*, something distinctively more enraged. “We’re going to the station, right? Show me the papers. *Ah?* Got nothing? Knew it,” He dropped back onto his seat, pulling at his cuffs, only once. *If I wanted* — “Give me a few years, and I’ll press charges against you guys for prejudiced tenancy in accusations.”

He wouldn’t. He didn’t know if Matsuda knew, though. Imperscrutable, framed by the echo of the red lights upon their heads, the detective allowed the silence to stretch out.

“I hope,” he said, eventually — somewhat casually, somewhat *genuinely*, in a way that got Chuuya’s gloved nails to scratch his palms. “That you still have those Mafia lawyers of yours on speed dial.”

“The Mafia has *lawyers*?” they echoed, just the right tad *too* vacant.

A sigh. “As expected.”

No matter the late hour, the Police Station was bustling with energy — a tremor slightly different from the HQ’s busiest days, but still similar enough to make his eyes roll.

They were dragged through desks overflowing in papers and snacks, as uniformed men and women made it a duty to bump against their frames as they ran around — answering endlessly ringing phones, tearing the doors open to escape, and pulling cuffed wrists into the tight hallway of cells.

Two tedious, *infinite* hours followed — as they were immediately separated and stuck in two interrogation rooms. Matsuda followed the redhead like a nostalgic, overexcited relative; the blank-faced woman who had handcuffed him sat in the seat in front of him, and wasted no time to monotonously rattle off questions from a standard-procedure binder.

It was a distinctively unsuccessful conversation.

The final proof of it came after too many *I wouldn't know, officer* and *I'm not answering that, officer*, and *What's your take on a double suicide, officer?* — until, at some point after the first half hour, Dazai laid his chin on his arms and refused to open his mouth again.

The detective — a smart one — simply got up and *left*.

“...refuses,” he heard the woman snap, from the ajar door, gesturing in front of Detective Matsuda's exasperated eyes. “— lawyer — No, he isn't — Hasn't said a *word* in almost two hours, what am I supposed — Nakahara's playing the silent game too? Since *when* is — *Port Mafia*? We only have the Arcade, we can't —“

With an unmistakable, well-practiced kick, the door of his interrogation room was nearly torn off its hinges. Deaf to the calls coming from the hallway, Chuuya marched in — still handcuffed and still unbothered by the notion — before plopping down on the empty seat next to his own.

“Hey — *Hey*,” the detective protested, barely holding the door before it could ricochet back into her face, “Kid, for God's sake, *you can't be here* —“

“You're drilling us for the same shit,” the boy replied, clearly uninterested. “We share a lawyer, anyway.”

“Or we would,” Dazai continued, raising his hand, “You know. If you would let us *call him*. ”

A vein in her forehead throbbed. She took a *single* step forward, some frustrating ounce of *adult intention* running through her veins — *pointedly*, Dazai hooked one ankle to the leg of Chuuya's chair, pulling him closer.

— *Tried* to. Nothing came out of it. Gloved fingers grasped his armrest with a sigh, plastering them together under the deafening *screech* of the old seat against the floor.

The woman's vein nearly bulged out of her skin.

“Just leave it to me, Matsumoto,” Detective Matsuda intervened, rubbing his temples, before she could truly attempt to wring their necks. “I'll take care of this.”

There was an old radio upon the metal table between them, steadily muttering about rising fires around the city through white-noise statics. A camera in the left corner, staring right into their faces; a vague smell of mansweat, left on every surface like a faded footstep.

As he dragged his eyes up and down their files, the golden cross hanging from the man's neck glistened.

“Then,” Matsuda threw the file on the desk. Dazai didn't grant it a gaze. Some summary of their latest mess was of little interest to anyone in the room — he knew the *true* ammo rested in the evidence board in the main room, where old, blurry photographs of the lowest ranks of the syndicate framed impasse-ended investigations.

“I assume better introductions are in need,” he started, at last, offering his hand. “You're Dazai Osamu.”

“That’s not a question,” he noted, arms in place.

The detective lowered his own. “*Mori Ougai’s* Dazai, I assume. Hard not to recognize you. Are you surprised?”

A file about him had to be hidden somewhere too, he assumed — and at least one of the suited silhouettes in the red thread-connected pictures *had* to sport bandages. Dazai had never dabbled in laying low; no one in the Port Mafia had truly had any need to do so.

*We could empty out our blessed Bay*, the old Boss used to say, *and fill it up with dirt*.

He shrugged. “Perks of Mori Corporation’s tutelage.”

“And are they quite a few?” Matsuda asked. “These perks, I mean.”

“As many as a weapon manufacturer can give, I assume. Legal defense is amongst them.”

“Listen,” he insisted. The radio creaked; a female voice requested vehicle support. “We all know how this is going to go. You will get your call, and some *distinguished* gentlemen will bail you out and clear your name ‘till it’s shining, leaving us with nothing but pictures of slightly rebellious teenagers we *unjustly* stuck in a cell.”

“That certainly sounds entertaining,” Dazai noted.

“Maybe we should get on with that,” Chuuya agreed.

“I’m kinda getting hungry, too.”

“Are you guys aware your toilets are all broken?”

“Apart from the one *I* broke,” he specified. “Before you get the idea of blaming me for all of them.”

The man cut in: “Doesn’t it frustrate you, that some people in this world can do whatever they want — and face no consequences?”

“Not particularly,” Dazai answered. “But, well — I’m not *people*. I haven’t done a thing.”

“We all have.”

“I’m sure it frustrates *you*, then.”

His necklace dangled, back and forth. He had seen eyes like his somewhat rarely; had felt like every adult his once body used to bump against wore similar ones.

The adults were *always* well-intentioned. That was the rule; that was what they had all agreed on, during some private meeting Dazai was not allowed to whine at the door of. They wore wrinkles at the sides of their skulls like a hard-earned jewel; they let words fall from their lips like the world wouldn’t overflow in pretense, at some point.

“If we all know how it goes,” the latest of the bunch concluded, “Do a few questions really change anything for you, then?”

Dazai blinked. “Would hearing the entire evolutionary history of crickets bother *you*? Because I could do it.”

“Give it up,” Chuuya replied, the pinnacle of a sharp kind of boredom — far too drenched in diesel not to turn into rage. “You’ve dragged me here one too many times. I know my rights. We don’t have to tell you a single thing.”

Detective Matsuda curled an eyebrow. “What, does Mafia recruitment come with a crash course in law?”

The led lights on the ceiling buzzed intermittently. In the corner of the room, the red dot of the only visible camera blinked.

This time around, the policeman only tolerated the silence for a few minutes. Eventually, he sighed: “You kids said you’re hungry?”

Regardless of the Chinese takeaway boxes still resting on Chuuya’s apartment floor, they perched up.

“Let’s discuss the matter at hand, then,” Matsuda attempted again, a little less than half an hour later, watching them promptly exchange the boxes left in front of them and munch their way through well-spiced noodles. “Why did you break into the Arcade?”

“*Chuuya* thinks lucky-winning *one* round of *Smash Smash!* means he will ever be able to do it again,” Dazai offered, drawing a circle near the boy’s face with his dirty chopsticks. It was good enough food; if it was meant to be a bribe, though, he would have enjoyed some more salt. “I could hardly wait for opening hours to rip him out of his delusion.”

A kick to the leg of his chair rattled his skeleton. “ And *Dazai* thinks hacking the game machine so that all my players will attempt to commit suicide *ten minutes* into the game — *Somehow* translates into him not being *shit* at every single —“

“*Ergo*, ” Matsuda said, “It has nothing to do with the rising rate of gang violence — the worst in almost *one year*; by the way — we’ve experienced in the last week and a half?”

“I’m touched by your faith,” Dazai assured. There were two other boxes on the table; but he was already growing nauseous from the mechanical eating motions, and Chuuya had fallen into his *leave half* habit again. “But we tend to bet lower stakes on our Arcade nights. Haven’t gambled on the fate of the Yokohama underground yet.”

“Maybe it’s time to,” Chuuya proposed. His grin was a half formed thing, stubborn at the very edges. “Get me a list of crime scenes visited in a week and whoever gets closer to the number wins.”

“That’s grim, Slug.”

“I didn’t say the *corpses*, I said the *crime scene*. ”



“That’s basically the same thing,” he insisted, stealing a vegetable from his box.

“*How*,” His chopsticks pinched his nose, hard enough to bruise. “You can have crime scenes with more than one body. It changes the whole damn point system.”

“Because, you hooligan —“

“Who in hell are you calling *hooligan*, you wretched *whore* —“

Matsuda’s sigh came in tandem with a shrill from the radio, — something about a robbery near Yamashita Park.

“I know this is a pointless conversation,” he promised. His eyes kept falling on that mess of a late dinner table; Dazai got the feeling they could have told him they hadn’t been fed in weeks, and he would have cried about it. “Your loyalty will stitch your mouths closed. I understand. You weren’t given anywhere else to direct it to.”

Hidden meanings crawled underneath those words, a tad too cold for the temperature of that rusted room. *Pity*, he had once told Mori, *tasted like antiseptic medicines*.

Chuuya’s shoulders curled in, caging his curved rib cage into something even tighter. Strangled by that too large coat of his, Dazai felt the instinct to do the same.

“The disappearances we’re dealing with,” the man continued. “Most of the precinct agrees they are not Mafia style. There’s no usual identification wounds, for starters — no bite to the curb. Plus, your syndicate has never concerned itself with Ability Users. Not to *kill* them, at least.”

“No point in killing useful cards,” Chuuya shrugged. “If you want to insist we’re two grunts for the Mafia, then you can answer this: why ask us about the disappearances, if you don’t think the Port Mafia is to blame?”

“Because you’ve been around for decades,” Matsuda replied, easily. “And Yokohama is still standing. I’m assuming, consequently, that the city itself is not a target.”

Dazai turned his head; he was unsurprised to find two unmatching eyes already there, answering his well concealed curiosity with a curled eyebrow.

“Oh, yes,” he explained, leaning towards his ear in a stage-whisper, staring right at the detective’s face. “Old man Matsuda is a *smart* one, you see. Has always been. Was the only fucker around to raise his hand at cops’ meeting and advance the hypothesis that *maybe* — Mafiosi are not completely broken in the head.”

He whistled. “That’s certainly a feat.”

“Admirable. It gave Detective Murase an aneurysm.”

“And you being *Mafia* didn’t?” the Detective scoffed. “The Sheep — I *understood* the Sheep, Chuuya.”

His eyes hardened. “Watch your mouth.”

“They were *children*,” he insisted. “You *all* were. Petty crimes, and — and stolen alcohol, and breaking into Arcades — You were doing your best. I could see that. *Murase* could see that. You didn’t trust adults, and you wouldn’t allow us to help —“

“Help,” Chuuya echoed.

*Lighting in the summer*, he thought. Something more natural, even — something utterly *made* for ire, the way that face of his, stolen or copied it was, had always seemed. Dazai wondered if it felt warm, behind that endless frame of his — where the anger wouldn’t reach, but only cradle.

He couldn’t recall if anyone had ever wasted an inch of that kaleidoscopic fire for him.

“— You had *reasons* not to. But the *Mafia*, Chuuya, you —“ Matsuda’s gaze fell on Dazai; it scurried down the bruises from that afternoon’s beating, the bandages around his arms. *Pity*, Chuuya had once told him, *always tasted fucking cheap*. He had bought them food to be sure they would starve, without it. “You two don’t know what you got yourself into.”

Dazai felt his mouth smile. “Of course.”

“That’s it,” Chuuya dropped his chopsticks. “We want our lawyer. Bring him here or we’ll start screaming our throats raw. Want a child detention case on your hands?”

“It’s not a *life* just because it’s keeping you alive, for now,” It could have been laughter, the thing out of his throat; he saw the desperation lining it — an old thing, never victorious. “I know that’s what it seems like. We have watched countless people like you get lost in it. Chuuya, do you really think Murase would have died for a lost cause?”

“I thought law-abiding citizens were meant to have some more respect for the dead,” the boy snapped.

“You went to his funeral,” he insisted and, *oh*, that was news. “Because you felt *guilty*. Because you knew it was wrong — that a man would die for *nothing*.”

*For me*, Chuuya didn’t say, and Dazai heard it so loud his ears rang; saw it carved on five graves that weren’t his to mourn, because he never ran out of grieving space. *For me, for nothing*.

“We’ve got files on files on people who ended up just like him. Entire archives. The conflict that’s starting — It might not have begun on the Port Mafia’s terms, but we both know the Port Mafia *will* end it.”

“Great, then,” Dazai clasped his hands. “Glory to the mafiosi. You’ll be able to refuse night shifts soon enough.”

“*Civilians* disappearing isn’t a Port Mafia matter.”

“Someone has to do shit around here,” Chuuya said.

*“Listen to me,”* he begged. “You’re betting your lives on something that does *not* care about your existence.”

Dazai tilted his head. “Isn’t that how faith works?”

An aborted, thoughtless motion raised Detective Matsuda’s fingers to his cross necklace.

It wasn’t like there were no children in the Mafia, he considered. Joining the outskirts of a gang, doing delivery commissions right under the nose of the police, having a tattoo stain young flesh for the sake of *numbers* — they were the quickest ways to gain some money on the streets.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t believe the sob stories soaking the man’s tone in desperation; as if Chuuya hadn’t muttered about Murase’s death. But the two of them — the infamous Port Mafia’s youngsters; the kids hovering behind the shut doors of meeting rooms, bothering Madame Tanaki for information, breaking furniture in petty fights about bones and viscera —

*Don’t take me,* he thought, and maybe it had been a prayer of its own, *for a good person* .

“So,” Even that silence-shattering sound tasted bitter. The noodles should have really been saltier. “Our lawyer?”

Detective Matsuda’s eyes were stuck to the remnants of their food, pooling down the edge of the metal table. They didn’t even exchange a glance.

As one, seamlessly drowning any leftover dejection, they began to scream.

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The pair of women in the cell next to their own would be dead by sunrise.

“You’re not holding it *right*, ” Chuuya reprimanded, fixing the half-empty bottle in his grasp. His feet were planted on the dirt-lined floor of their own cubicle — a square barely wide enough to fit a bench and their abandoned coats, and for his rotating kick not to tear the bars open. “I’m more than fine with ripping your head off with the cap, but Boss will kill me.”

“You’re severely overestimating his gratitude,” Dazai replied — still curious enough about that bet to hold the bottle higher. “Now hurry, or this week’s reports are *all-on-you*.”

His nostrils flared.

The old TV hanging from the hallway wall framed a bloodied, yellow-tape-covered street, somewhere nearby the train station; gesturing lazily, the journalist vacantly confirmed the latest episode of local gang violence. Cursing-out officers slammed the doors behind them to run into the night.

Momentarily distracted, Chuuya leaned his elbow on the cellbars, studying the filmed crime scene. He scratched at his chest, where Dazai knew the tattoo rested.

Not one of *their* massacres, then.

From the cell on their right, the first woman said: “I don’t care if it kills us in the process. *No pain*, can you imagine a life like that?”

“Heaven,” the other one agreed, a bit quieter. She had been sitting since the beginning; if not betrayed the motions of her chest, she could have easily been a corpse. “*Heaven* — If he’s even real.”

Quicker than a breath, their eyes met.

Chuuya stood a bit straighter. He talked; Dazai only half registered his words, bickering in all the right moments. It remained dubious if the pair had any idea they were being listened to; nonetheless, it was better not to risk it.

“An interesting name doesn’t make a legend true,” the first woman agreed, munching on her lip. Her clothes were frayed. She had the carved face of someone who knew what it meant to starve — and the shaking frame of the homeless sleepers the police could never leave alone. “I know. I understand your fear. But the underground never allowed lies to survive as long as this one has.”

“*The Poet*,” the other echoed. “And his dreamlike life. And the only price is — Faith?”

“His price is regret,” she replied. “Facing our sins, or whatever powerful men are all about. And faith, I suppose. Takes a whole lot of it to go against the Port Mafia.”

The bored detective climbing up and down their hallway rattled his knuckles on the women’s bars, startling them into silence. Chuuya raised his leg.

Not a word was uttered until the man had reached the other end of the hallway again; instead, the somewhat drowsy *staccato* of old printers and hushed orders filled their ears — clanging along to the cuffs they had finally pick-locked their way through.

Eventually, the first woman hissed: “I don’t care if their new Boss changed the business. I ain’t forgetting what they did to us. Those fucking *Crimson Rains* killed my child.”

Bony fists clenching around the base of the bench, the other woman’s eyes kept staring at the floor.

“*The Year of the Crimson Rains*, ” Chuuya murmured, low. “Haven’t heard that name in a while.”

“Mori tells me you couldn’t take a step around at the city without hearing someone mutter it,” Thirteen and stained by ghosts that did not play doctor yet, Dazai had only heard the echoes of the underground bleeding through the fingers of the prior Boss — a peak of years of slow decay, but a climb that had never been as vicious as it had in that fateful year.

“You couldn’t take a step around without getting killed,” the other boy corrected. “I don’t even remember when they started giving it a name. People were too busy being called traitors to worry about semantics.”

Resentment was a hard fire to put out. Almost two years had passed since Mori had taken over — a succession they had made sure to publicize, lest they lost the occasion to pin all their faults on a dead man in a stained-glass room — but while most agreed that the Mafia was growing irrevocably *stronger* each day, they hardly believed it to be a positive thing.

“If *they* are offering themselves as the road to revenge against the PM,” Dazai considered, studying the framed pieces of newspaper in the hallway, “Then they are assured the support of almost every smaller gang. The *Nine Rings* used to be a *chimera* of its own right. If someone could be believed wild enough to go against us...”

The woman on the bench let out a sigh. Her fingers intertwined; she began to pray. Deep in his pockets, the matching crosses seemed to burn through the fabric.

“Let them try,” Chuuya concluded, raising his chin in a peerless way that *reeked* of the *Lady of the Port*. “We’ll kill them.”

Then he shifted his weight to his other leg, kicking the flying one heart-droppingly close to his face — allowing the tip of his fighting boot to strike the bottle cap away. Like clockwork, it flew between the bars, and bumped a newly arrived Hirotsu right in the forehead.

“These yours?” Detective Matsuda questioned, as he *slowly* opened their cell. The permanent frown digging his forehead spoke of mistrust: to the unpunished guilty he was letting go, and the old man in cashmere and certain hidden revolver.

Irrelevant. “Unfortunately, yes,” the Commander said, picture perfect gentleman in every move — *the Mafia respects hopeful fools, Dazai; they have nothing but* — and *almost* enraged in the eyes he kept on their scurrying out silhouettes. “All paperwork should have already been fixed. I deeply apologize for the disturbance. I assure you,” He curled an eyebrow, “It will not happen again.”

Unimpressed, they stared back at him.

A faraway siren startled most protesting, drunken voices in the hallway into silence — from the television, the panicked journalist squeaked out a warning, as the familiar rhythm of an arising shootout appeared around the car he had taken refuge behind.

It wasn't true quietness; nonetheless, Dazai thought he could have heard a pin drop — slipping through the *blaming* eyes that were the only thing Matsuda could settle on Hirotsu's devastatingly impassive face.

He offered him a hand. "Thank you for your service."

The Officer clenched his jaw. His gaze slipped down to Chuuya, unanswered.

Surprisingly enough, it fell on Dazai, too.

He shook his hand, resigned. "Keep an eye on them."

Hirotsu's Camaro sported a years-expired parking ticket on the windshield. He ushered them in the backseats, somewhat unnecessarily; neither one of them had ever made the active choice to sit next to him. Silent as the roads were, they roamed through mostly undisturbed, soaked in a silence that was probably meant to signify *something*.

When he got bored with kicking the back of the driver seat, Dazai leaned forward, switching radio stations.

"Oh, *fuck* you," Chuuya groaned, as the spoken intro to Hirose Fumiko's *Schoolgirl* filled the vehicle. "You skipped *The Day I Was Born*, but you like her pop stuff?"

His head snapped to him. "You know Hirose Fumiko?"

"And *you* listen to any kind of music?"

"She's the greatest vocalist alive, I'm not going to —" Horror spread all the way to his fingers; any kind of resemblance to the local dog felt like sin he should rub off on him in the most painful of ways. "How do you think I spend my days, honestly?"

Uncomfortably, the boy sunk deeper into his seat. "Torturing fuckers in the dungeons? Planning your own demise? How can you not like her rock singles, that was her *peak* —"

*[If someone were to ask — he had planned, some sleepless night of some sleepless eons ago — he would say: "Her rock years were disappointing and outliving her purpose as an artist," and he would not stutter once, would look them right in the eyes, as people did. "She should have stuck to classical, clearly." And then they'd ask, "Are those your favorite?" And he would nod, as people did, and say, "How could they not?"]*

"Then," Hirotsu spoke up, traditionally toneless, "Any reason to cause trouble in the middle of a conflict?"

"Technically, Gramps, we're not in a conflict," he pointed out, dropping back in his own seat, legs crossed. Every window was fogged up; he traced stick-figures with his finger, because it would stain. "It's — How did Boss call it? *A time of repercussions*."

"It's a time of police cars pretending their daily routes ask them to circle our Headquarters twelve times in a day," the man insisted, sending an unmistakable glance through the rearview mirror. Something about *watching his mouth* and *not mocking the Boss* and *feet off*

*my leather*. “No officer is ever going to arrest us for murder, boys. It’s *foolish*, seemingly irrelevant mistakes like these that land people like us behind bars.”

“That’s what we have an army of lawyers for,” Chuuya groaned, pulling at his shoelaces. “We *know*. You make that speech once a week. And anyway — None of this would have happened if *this idiot* hadn’t gotten scared of a dog and startled me —“

“*Excuse me?*”

“You jumped ten fucking feet in the air!”

“You almost crashed *Apocalypse VI* on our skulls,” he whined, “How am I supposed to win the *Miso Soup* bet, now?”

“The *Miso Soup* bet was lost from the beginning —“

“Boys,” Hirotsu called, his seat nauseatingly rattled by their vicious motions.

“And, *and* — You’re the one who has babysitter cops in every corner of this damn city —“

“*Babysitter cops?*”

“If the guy hadn’t been so *desperate* to drag your short self into the nearest *Good Lad Academy*, they wouldn’t have had all that time to match up our files with the little they know —“

“Boys.”

“*You* kept asking Detective Mastumoto to kill herself with your deranged ass!”

“You ate *my* chicken, and it was the *wing*, too —“

The Camaro swerved so suddenly the wheels *screeched* against the road, drawing a full circle in the empty square; Dazai flew forward, *painfully* bumping his head against some sharp corner of Chuuya’s cursing out body. “*Gramps!*”

Hirotsu raised the volume of the radio, undeterred.

Glistening gently on the floor of the car was one of the silver crosses, having slipped free from his pockets. Dazai leaned down to recover it. When he fixed himself back into his seat, the other boy was staring out of his window — *meaningfully* meeting his eyes on the reflection.

Eerily familiar against his ruined fingertips, the refilled syringe he casually extracted from Chuuya’s pocket went easily unnoticed under Hirotsu’s eyes — too focused on deciding which roads wouldn’t put them in the direct impact of the police cars hurrying towards the center of the city. Quietly, they laid back against the seats, counting breaths.

The car stopped at a turn; the traffic lights blinked, matching the old man’s finger against his steering wheel. Yellow left its place to blue, abrupt and soundless, and Dazai struck the

syringe in the side of his neck.

— *Tried to.*

Thin as it was, the needle shattered on impact, as it came into contact with the revolver Hirotsu had angled between the front seats. He didn't even bother to shift his eyes from the road before firing, — in a crystal *thump!*, two bullets put a hole in the rear windshield, webbing the glass all the way to its frames.

*[Sneaking out of their cell had been all but a hard feat. The need to take turns had been a mere precaution; as intensely warned the guard roaming up and down their hallway had been about the two of them in particular — blood-bound mafiosi in a night cell with children locks — Chuuya had already lowered the gravity around his body, making him light-headed enough to trip on his steps.]*

*The makeshift Infirmary had been the second stop, purely out of caution — But the archives had been the true target of their swift wandering, on tip-toes and hissed insults.*

*“No reason to risk catching Mori's attention,” he had shrugged, “When we can steal from the bugs buzzing in his ears.”]*

Plastered each against their own car door, Dazai and Chuuya exchanged a speechless glance. A hiss of wind entered from the cracked glass, whipping their faces.

“If you could refrain,” Hirotsu said, eventually, with the nonchalance of a true driver, “My fingers are still spasming from yesterday's anesthesia. I was stuck in the Hospital after a shootout near the port,” He blinked at them in the rear view mirror. “You know how *repercussions times* are.”

The shocked silence only lasted for a few more alleys. Chuuya ended up exploding in a: “You could have put a hole in our *goddamn heads!*”

“Your Ability would have stopped it.”

“Shitty Dazai doesn't *have* an Ability!”

“Were you *worried* about me?” he cooed.

“Hardly the first time Dazai receives a bullet wound,” Hirotsu brushed the matter off. “You two have caused enough troubles for one night. The Intelligence will have to spend a good *day* deleting any traces of you from the database. I'm taking you to the HQs, and Kouyou will deal with you.”

The boy scoffed. “Ane-san is in *Tokyo.*”

“The Executives have already returned, actually. Boss is currently on his way back.”

Dread crept down his neck. “Old man — Old man, be merciful. Where's your heart, truly? She'll make us work on our calligraphy until our fingers fall off —“



Realization struck the redhead's face. "She'll lock us up for the entire whole day —"

"Ah," the Commander nodded, reasonably, "You were certainly ready to lock yourself up — *and* play until your fingers *fell* — at the Arcade, *during a conflict*, so I do not see what kind of —"

Chuuya's fist tore a hole in the headrest of the man's seat, fingers hooking onto his nape — *slamming* his face onto his steering wheel roughly enough to make the car *shake*.

"Oh, dear —" Dazai attempted, through the pained curse leaving Hirotsu's mouth and Hirose Fumiko's highest note yet. Gloved fingers cut the circulation of his own. "Plan B," Chuuya announced, before kicking his car door open and dragging the two of them outside.

For good measure, before stumbling down the mostly empty road, swerving through a few horning cars, he stole one of Chuuya's best hidden knives, stabbing a particular square near the filler neck of the car.

By the time the low-range grenade painted a column of fire against the twilight sky, they were already five alleys away.

Not slowing down a moment as he jumped up and down walls, Chuuya called: "When in *hell* did you put that thing in there?"

"I'm not revealing my tricks," he replied, barely avoiding face-planting against a streetlight, "Putting bombs in cars is my seventh preferred communication technique!"

"The fuck were you trying to *communicate*?"

"Ah," Dazai spun, running backwards, just to offer his best wink. "*Don't follow.*"

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She appeared out of nowhere, the moment the sky turned dust — having quietly followed them from the moment the police had dragged them out of the Arcade.

A *Bodeo Model 1889*, safety already switched, was loosely hanging from her pale fingers. A strange match with her unusual clothing: a calf-length gown the color of rust, and a white silk shirt, curling on her nape like a hood of sorts, hiding her golden hair under that makeshift veil. Dazai had studied frescoes less delicate than her frame; had yawned in the face of *Madonnas* with crueler eyes.

She didn't quite resemble the bruise-littered woman on the floor of their dungeons, nor the armed woman who had bickered with *V* as he hid under a desk — not until she laid the mouth of her gun on the side of Dazai's skull .

"Hello," she said, smiling. "I'm truly sorry to interrupt. May I ask what you were doing in our territory?"

"Tenshi!" he exclaimed, obnoxiously. "All that work to find you, and we just had to wait for you to show up? Arcades are a no man land, by the way. Everybody knows that."

With clear intent, Chuuya took a single step forward, cracking the ground open all the way to the woman's feet. The hems of her skirt shone a pale crimson; stone-hard eyes on, he asked: "Are you going to let him go, or are you going to learn how to crawl with concrete shards in your bones?"

Her smile stuttered.

"Not to butt in," Dazai said. "But I would *very* much enjoy being shot in the head, if you wanted to join, Tenshi."

Chuuya's eyes darted to him. "Are you fucking stupid?"

"If she wants her revenge, I'm not going to —"

"You've got *jam* where your brain should be —"

"*Revenge* ," the woman interjected. She had a wristwatch over her left hand; the crystal was cracked, blindingly reflecting light into his eye. " *Tenshi* . You boys are speaking strange words."

He paused, daring to sneak a glance her way. The picture of gentleness had been painted on her face, honest to the last bone in her grip around his coat. She *was* beautiful; still as ageless as she had seemed that day, as he spied from the bridge. "I'm assuming you're here for vindication."

"Vindication?"

"*Only fair*; my Boss would say. I can still hear your pretty bones cracking at night," Dazai reminded her, softly. "I'm not a good enough person for them to haunt me."

The hesitation stretching out in Chuuya's gaze told him all his position didn't allow him to see in the woman's gaze — her touch was growing cautious.

"Cut the shit out," the redhead grunted, sinking his heel a bit deeper. "You welcomed us with a gun in hand. You know who we are."

"Port Mafia," she confirmed. Her tone lacked the arrogant confidence it had dropped with at the fighting ring; it was nothing like the lulling voice she had used at the Port, though. "You reek of sea salt and blood. You were looking for my hideout."

“We found something of yours, also,” He extracted the silver cross from his pocket, huffing at the viciousness she pushed the gun into his skull with. “*Not* a gun. I was just trying to be courteous, so you know. I’m assuming you might be missing the extraordinary wonders of mind control.”

Not a word was hissed. Outside the alley she had pushed them in, the first traces of traffic began to appear. In the distance, as it always was — police cars and ambulances.

“The *Nine Rings* have been waiting for a meeting for more than a week now,” she said, eventually. “An occasion to discuss the... *circumstances*. I was expecting all but kids. Something more formal. The decapitated head of a friend, and a piece of paper with a location.”

“We haven’t used cut off heads in a decade,” Chuuya replied.

“You’re here to negotiate, aren’t you?”

“I’m here to talk with the woman I tortured,” Dazai corrected. “I know it’s you.”

A shock of sorts went through her body; over the wall of her makeshift veil, in the corner of his gaze, he saw genuine confusion. Something more than approaching the enemy with a gun and receiving no fear; something deeper. *You boys speak strange words.*

“I know,” he added. “I don’t know if *you* do, though.”

Carefully, she lowered her revolver.

A back-door rested on the side of the Arcade where they had dumped Mr. Arcade’s body, half hidden behind old fliers and washed-away by the graffiti. It wasn’t a strange sight; the endless mixture of keys and *pulls* their guide used to open the door, though, denounced either paranoia or secrets a less curious Boss wouldn’t have offered so easily.

Her name, apparently, was Beatrice, and she swore to have never seen them before that day. The led lights of her secret hideout led them down rusty stairs, as she muttered under her breath and switched the safety on and off her gun — all her attention on the silver cross he had offered her.

Walking just far enough in that tight space that their skin wouldn’t come into contact — an ancient, familiar habit they had mastered when the situation required a closeness their Abilities would fall to — Chuuya hissed: “How many personalities does this chick have, anyway?”

“That could be terribly rude, hypothetically.”

“She’s not *ill*. She’s under the effect of an Ability.”

“Must be hard to understand the whole spectrum of emotions,” Dazai nodded, pitiful, pretending not to get what he meant. Very aware of that fact, the boy seethed. “When you only have one. A very angry one at that.”

Behind another metal door at the end of the stairs, rested a space unlike its upper neighbor. It was a deliberate Western style; deep purple walls, interrupted by heavy curtains that would have fit better on royal windows. Crimson carpets, somewhat sharp under their soaked fits, filled the floor in undetectable order.

Every piece of furniture was the darkest shade of wood, plainly antique and well used. The chandelier dangling from the ceiling painted snowy squares on the walls. Beatrice — studying their observing gazes with something like confusion — led them through a maze of velvet couches, coffee tables covered in tea sets, and tall bookshelves filled to the brim in dusty papers.

A heavy desk, its legs sculpted to resemble growing vines, allowed the woman's body to drop, as she seated on the fairly unfit shop stool behind it. She motioned them to the throne-like seats on the other side.

She studied them some more, silent.

“Did she send you?” Beatrice began, eventually.

They exchanged a glance. “What?” Dazai asked.

“Considering your friend's Ability to snap my neck the moment I allowed you in here, it truly doesn't look like you two came here to threaten me. Or to talk peace,” the woman explained. “So here's my educated guess: you're not here on your Boss' orders. Are you here on *hers*?”

“Who's *her*?” Chuuya insisted.

“That's a *no*, then,” she concluded. She leaned under her desk, stiffening the boy's shoulders — and settled a bottle of wine and three glasses between their faces. “But you haven't talked about the Port Mafia yet, so my theory remains. Wine?”

“We're minors,” the redhead muttered.

Beatrice blinked. “You're —“

“He's a bit broken in the head,” Dazai intervened. “I beg you to forgive him. Hard childhood and all.”

His shoe slammed against the sculpted leg of his seat hard enough to push it back. “Wine tastes like shit, anyway.”

“Oh, not if you learn how it *works*,” Her smile turned as bright as it had been in the alley, “You see this? This is a *Petrus*. Calling this darling *expensive* would be an unforgivable show of impoliteness. If bottles of wine were queens, he would have been beheaded by the revolutionaries.”

“Beautiful metaphor,” he nodded, “As long as you don't drug it like you did with that inhaling dust on your doorframe.”

Eerily slow, her face turned to stone.

Chuuya's head snapped in his direction. "*What?*"

"I told you about it, keep up," Dazai huffed. "In *The Alley*? Remember? That drug the *Nine Rings* are rumored to have come up with? A marvel of black out. Instantaneous reaction and a few hours of guaranteed inactivity from the heaviest goon around. It doesn't need to be regulated on weight, so the costs are much more convenient."

He tilted his head to the side. "Only con, though — You can't use it more than one time in a bunch of days on someone who already took great, *great* quantities of it. The body grows too used to it."

Understanding colored Chuuya's face the most scarlet of reds — anger, if the smack on his nape meant something; and then begrudging acceptance. "And you couldn't *let me know*?"

"It was funnier like this. Anyway! I'll forgive your attempt. We don't have time. Say — have you been in Yokohama these last few months?"

Most of her amiability had vanished. She handed them their glasses, more cautious. "I spent the last three weeks in Nagoya, asking an old colleague for help. Becoming head of an organization is not terribly hard; leading it, though, is..."

"Yes," Chuuya muttered.

"It's all been very hectic, since —"

"Since you found the Nine Rings seal?" he guessed. "How does that work, anyway?"

Her eyes flashed. "We have our secrets."

"Isn't it somewhat unfair, though? Having your leader become *de facto* with a treasure hunt?"

Beatrice shrugged. "There has never been any kind of bloodless power. At the very least, men kill each other with a goal in mind," She lowered her hood, allowing long golden strands to frame her face. "I'm not stupid enough to believe a symbol means divine blessing. That's not what God is about."

"You're religious?" Dazai asked, and the unrelenting desire to jump to his feet and say, *you won't guess what my companion here is!*, was somehow perceived — Chuuya hit his chair.

"Somewhat," Her eyes fell on the silver cross. She had an accent of sorts; not quite foreign as much as *old* — the way the prior Boss had talked, in his crimson-stained bed. "Not really. Hard to, in this line of work. Once. But if a powerful syndicate wants to call me their leader because I won this treasure hunt, why should I refuse?"

"I like your attitude," he encouraged, "You sure didn't show it back in our dungeons."

Beatrice squinted, tapping her nails on her glass. "Aren't you two a bit young to threaten a Boss?"

“Old enough to be Port Mafia,” Chuuya replied. He downed a good sip of his own wine, blinking when the taste hit his tongue. “This shit is *actually* good.”

“We’re not threatening you. Nor do we need any sort of information on your syndicate,” Dazai took over. “We were perfectly able to inflict considerable damage without knowing a thing. What would we even need?”

Her smile tightened. “Arrogance is rarely a wise choice in war.”

“Are we? In war?”

“You brutally murdered my second in command and his wife just two days ago,” she said. In the corner of his gaze, Dazai saw Chuuya stiffen. “Even if I sit here and pretend no one else died — Don’t you kids think it sounds an awful lot like a declaration of war?”

He dangled his legs from the seat. “And you, ripping thirty three of our men’s chests apart — tattooing your own symbol on them? What does that sound like?”

The woman frowned. “We never touched your men.”

“Ah, see,” Dazai smiled. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’m not even counting all the disappearances the entire city has been dealing with. Maybe your supposed visit to Nagoya threw you out of the loop, but the underground is ready to watch *us* clash.”

“We didn’t touch your men,” Beatrice spelled out. “If you have no reason to trust me, I at least hope you will find a lack of guilt in my words: I am *not* a fool. Certainly not enough to threaten the widest conglomeration of Ability Users in the city. It would gain me the death of my subordinates.”

“And their respect,” he pointed out.

“And their death,” Chuuya said, a bit too quiet, a bit too pensive. He raised his eyes to her face. “You’re saying you didn’t do it. You just — woke up, one day, and the Port Mafia had declared war on you?”

Helplessly, she nodded.

Dazai’s gaze fell to the silver cross.

*Was it as simple as removal?* Did taking out the cross release the mental hold? It hardly explained how to nullify the Ability they were sagged with.

“Tenshi — Beatrice,” he asked, “Do you know a man named V?”

A pause.

For a moment, it seemed like the glass slipping from her fingers would not break at all. It did, though — crimson vines spreading through the old wood of her desk, dripping from the edges into their shoes.

Her face was stone. Quicker than a blink, she reached for the abandoned revolver on the floor — but Chuuya was faster, kicking it to the other end of the room.

In a voice thinner than light, she stuttered: “Where did you hear that name?”

“You were with him,” Dazai said, calmly. “The general consensus is that he’s the one who freed you from our dungeons.”

“ *Us* being the general consensus,” Chuuya added.

“I returned to Yokohama *yesterday*,” she insisted, lost, “ *Where* did you hear that name?”

“You —“

“It’s impossible,” Her voice cracked; something just hysterical enough to be laughter. “You don’t *get it*. It can’t be him, and I wasn’t in your *damn dungeons* —“

“You were, actually,” he corrected. “And I saw *him*, so we can rule that lie out as well ,” He tilted his head to the side. “But that doesn’t make sense, does it? Because you killed him yourself.”

Dazai knew what regret looked like.

How easily it stained tailored clothes; how well it hid in the cracks of a building just rebuilt and on the brink of falling apart. Most mafiosi hid it well; just not too well *enough*.

All of it was a language — the imperceptible spasm that made them pull the trigger too soon; the way their eyes skirted along Dazai’s bandages and then flew away. All of it was a language, and the thing on the woman’s face wasn’t *regret*. It was something deeper — *soul* - crushing.

“He’s dead,” Beatrice said, quiet. Was it *human*, he wondered — was something so filthy truly the key to a beating heart that wouldn’t feel like a job? “I know that.”

“You’re wrong,” He shrugged. “Either that or someone is impersonating him. I don’t know. I don’t really care. But we’re still going to need your help for a matter or two.”

Chuuya nodded to the cross. His shoulders were still stiff, in that careless way of his — prepared to maul, but boldly unworried by the prospective. “You see that little thing? You threw it up in our dungeons.”

“I *wasn’t*,” she breathed out, stuck between rage and impatience, “In your damn *dungeons* —“

“You threw it up,” he continued, undeterred, “And then you escaped with the help of someone under the effects of another one of these things. It’s a communication device — powered by an Ability. We assume it can grant some sort of control over its victims’ minds.”

“You told us your name was Tenshi,” Dazai added. “And you went around with this *V* person, recruiting people to bring to whoever these microchips respond to. Someone you were scared

of. You made that very clear.”

Beatrice stared. “You kids think I’m being *hypnotized* or something?”

He scratched the bandages on his nape. “I suppose that’s one way to see it. Hey, listen — How did you get those bruises?”

Her hands flew to her wrists; a flash of skin peeled behind her sleeves, covering her all the way to her chin. She had been careful about hiding her condition — Dazai, though, knew how someone littered in bruises breathed.

“I got into a fight in Nagoya,” she said, twitching. “I — I can’t remember all the details. I was concussed, so —“

“*Dang!*” Dazai pointed one finger gun towards her and *shot* , enhancing a flinch. “I gave you those. All of them. One of our organization’s medical Users took care of the worst of it; we tend to keep prey alive longer. You see, I have this theory — Whoever is on the other side of the crosses views you as *his* to hurt. Got any ideas? Any past sin to atone?”

“You’re no priest.”

“I’m a sinner,” he replied. “We all are. Isn’t it enough to ask for forgiveness?”

“Call whoever you were supposed to be with,” Chuuya proposed. “In Nagoya. Ask them if you were truly there.” She hesitated. “The name *Tenshi* confuses you, doesn’t it? The only thing you seem to have in common with this other *you* is this V.”

“He’s dead,” she insisted, “It can’t be him.”

“We’re dealing with mind control. Who says we’re not be dealing with resurrection, too?”

She kept quiet.

“We have time,” Dazai added. “And wine. And a resistance to poison! It would be the perfect occasion to tell us a story. Or — we can simply leave, if you’re not interested. You can sit here, haunted by your ghostly memories, and wait for the Port Mafia to obliterate your organization.”

He leaned forward . “And make no mistake, Tenshi — You and your people *will* be destroyed, if our Boss doesn’t get a better explanation for our losses.”

Abandoned on the lake of wine, she clenched her fist.

“*But,*” Chuuya concluded, slowly, “If the Mafia found out you’re as clueless we are...”

The thought didn’t warrant a culmination. It was there, in the too-complex webs in Beatrice’s eyes — a cunning shade of carefulness.

*Ane-san is going to murder us both for this*, he considered. Chuuya made a face, as if he had heard.



The woman sat up. “In the name of a truce.”

He smiled. “In the name of a truce,” He dropped back into his seat, clanking his glass with Chuuya’s abandoned — *empty* — one. “Do make different voices for the various characters! That’s my favorite part.”

Fighting the little hesitation left — the other boy went straight for the bottle, this time, closing his lips around the mouth of it.

“A story it is,” he huffed. “But I want Arcade coins. As soon as this is over, I’m *wrecking* this asshole at *Motor War*.”

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The one, single unlikelier event than finding the *Entrance Hall* of the HQs abandoned and empty, was the downfall of a Port Mafia Boss.

“Highly improbable,” Madame Tanaki would say, each time. “But somewhat less rare when you’re around, right?”

Dazai liked few places less than the *Five Towers*; he knew few places with the same heart-wrenching familiarity. It was all onyx-stained glass and golden-lined couches; the never ending march of brand shoes with blood dried on the soles; the rush of the wall fountains every mafioso would turn their eyes away if they saw him jump inside again.

When it was empty, though — when it was *empty* it was just a building.

At times, he tasted the idea of being the last to leave. The illusion of that place — just a building, at last — slowly, but inevitably, being abandoned.

He spread his arms on the numbingly-cold floor, blinded by the half hidden chandeliers, and breathed into the secretary desk phone.

“*Port Pizza*,” he recited, in his highest voice, trying to drown out Tanaki’s soap opera from the closest TV screen. “*Where sauce and blood are one and the same*. How may I help you?”

“*Dazai!*”

The *clink-clank* of her heels on the floor was enough of a telltale — by the time manicured fingers had ripped the phone from his grasp and pulled him from under the desk, Dazai was prepared to the sight of Madame Tanaki's panting — *very* pregnant — body.

"There's a scumbag on the phone," he informed her, still laying on his back.

"Really, Dazai?" she hissed. Then, speaking into the phone, "No, sir, I — *No*, yes, certainly — Do say, just let me grab a pen —"

She played a futile game of trying to stick her heels in the meat of his legs, as he changed the TV subtitles' language from the remote. The monotonous lull of her voice turned his eyelids into concrete. If he could have slept, he would have curled under his coat, studied her endless tattoos, and —

Probably not slept, still.

Some eternity later, a warm weight settled next to him, drawing snow angels on tiles. Careful not to touch — as most were smart enough to be. When he studied her face, the silver *X* of her face was a human, normal thing.

"Honestly, Dazai," she echoed, eyes hungrily following the characters on screen. It was an old episode — she wouldn't have dared continuing *Spider Eyes* without Dazai and Chuuya both, carefully separated by her frame.

"I'm just trying to widen our horizons," he insisted. "All we have to offer are dusty weapons and old threats. People are bound to get bored, you know?"

Her eyes ran up and down his face. Voices spread too quickly in the Mafia. If he breathed in slowly enough, he could taste the blood from his bitten tongue.

The men were never quite fast enough to drag him away from a gun pointed at his head.

*Why today?*, she didn't ask. He wouldn't have told her. She was strange; too odd to survive anywhere else, too *scarred* — and a bit too warm for that place.

"As expected," she said. "Considering our — *Policy*."

"No wet umbrellas in the Hall?"

"Dazai."

He huffed. "You're no fun."

They watched the soap opera, commenting on old clues they really should have caught on sooner. Tanaki let him put a hand on her belly — though the baby didn't quite *kick* yet, and it was weird and a bit disgusting, in a somewhat cool way .

She reprimanded his jokes on double suicide, reminding him that no girl would ever fall for his charms with such a sharp blade underneath them. When he proposed *she* should be that woman, she didn't seem convinced.

“I’m too old for you, anyway,” she tutted.

“You’re as radiant as each of Ace’s jewels,” he replied. “I’ll have to resort to the one thing girls cannot resist to: puppies.”

Tanaki gasped. “You adopted a *dog*?”

“Haven’t you met him already? Chuuya said he brought you breakfast this morning.”

She reached, as if to slap his arm — with a finery that would have gathered praise, she let her hand fall like it had never happened. “Leave him *alone*, you — Yes, he *did*, and maybe you should learn from him —“

It truly didn’t matter — she was warm even from a distance. “He’s just trying to fatten you up.”

“*Stop* that,” Her lips trembled. “He has done *nothing* to you.”

“He’s *ruined* my *life*. ”

“How?”

He rolled on the floor, miserable. “His existence brings agony upon my fragile, stained mind. If he were a physical consequence to a meteorological phenomenon, I’m prepared to gamble he would be a *sun rash*. ”

Tanaki curled one eyebrow. “Ever so poetic.”

“This *sunrise*, ” he insisted, “I even had to drag his minuscule body all the way to his apartment, because the idiot got *drunk* after his first glass of wine.”

*[Few things, he suspected, could have ever been as predictable as Chuuya’s tolerance being that of a child — and yet, for some reason, Dazai hadn’t seen it coming.]*

*He had watched with genuinely perplexed eyes as the redhead began to spit senseless odes in the middle of Beatrice’s office, floating to the ceiling with mirth and directing pointed insults at his innocent frame.*

“*First time drinking?*” the woman had asked.

“*Hopefully the last, too,*” he had sighed.

*Dragging him out of the Arcade had been a quest — and he would have left him there, if he had been in any hurry to face Kouyou’s rage. He seemed unable to decide whether he wanted to be carried or not; he would spend ten minutes upon Dazai’s shoulders — singing all of Hirose Fumiko’s worst singles right in his ear, and making sure to bite when Dazai would remove his shoes to distract him — and then jump down, rolling in the leftover snow with the glee of a true dog.*

*At some point — between the third and the seventh street light he smashed, seemingly for no reason at all — Dazai had decided to give up, and drag him by the calves instead.*

*Chuuya has been fascinated by it all. He had sat in front of an empty Cinema, clawing Dazai's calf to keep him where he was — leaving marks even through his bandages. He had walked up the walls of the building and sat on the neon sign; before Dazai could consider leaving him there, he had begun to loudly announce highly confidential info on every double suicide request Dazai had ever been denied.*

*He had half expected him to reveal Mafia's plans, along to those whims of his, or some well-kept secret of theirs. The perfect chance to make Mori understand his mistake, and gain a front row seat to his execution. But dogs would be dogs until the very end, and his inebriated mind was as loyal as Dazai had never felt the need to be.*

*Loyal to the organization, yes. Not to the only other boy his age unlucky enough to be tied to it].*

Madame Tanaki was endlessly engrossed in her most beloved soap opera. It was, from the little he had understood in those last seven months, a story of crime, or arranged marriage, or maybe both.

He wasn't particularly interested. If he had been, he would have told her — "Yogi needs to wake up and understand that staying with that living corpse of a man won't do her no good," and then, "How can she *afford* to follow that self-centered crime lord like a dog, when her mother can barely make ends meet and her father is on the brink of a heart attack?" And also, "Doesn't she understand priorities? *Doesn't* she?"

"People can have different priorities," Tanaki replied, because he *had* been mumbling, apparently. "Is love such a low one? Freedom, *revenge* — They're all feelings. We all die for something. We are *all* moved by something."

*I know, he thought, but what do we live for?*

"What are *you* moved from?"

Her fingers drummed on her belly. "A better future."

"How optimistic."

"It's not optimism, if I bleed for it," She nudged his shoulder. "One day, I will be deemed too rusty to sit at this desk. I will move to Europe, and spend the rest of my life atoning for my efforts to reach that peace."

Dazai curled an eyebrow. "What, you want to join a monastery?"

"I'm too old for religion," Tanaki scoffed. "No — There are more useful ways to apologize to the world."

"Guilt is pointless."

“So is bleeding,” she replied. “Will you come to my funeral, once I’ve lived a fulfilling life?”

“I’ll sit on first row just for you.”

“Maybe I’ll — I’ll buy a house on some coast,” Tanaki mused, sweet and longing, eyes on some blurred spot on the ceiling. “Clean trash off the beaches.”

“Dear god,” he sighed, “An environmentalist!”

She nudged him again. “And you?”

“I’m unmoved.”

She gave him *that* gaze. “No one is.”

He hummed. Like he didn’t know the answer, he wondered: “Do you think Chuuya is moved by grief, or the absence of it?”

It was mean. Her gaze told him so; but it wasn’t out of place, in those haunted halls and glimmering stained glass — and her distant eyes told him so, too.

“Leave Chuuya alone, Dazai,” Tanaki said.

An old sentence, and an even older judgement. *Leave Chuuya alone. Leave Chuuya alone. Have Chuuya help you; help Chuuya in all ways; stand next to him — but do leave him alone.*

Mori’s voice or his own. Irrelevant.

Irrelevant and *there*.

“That would be an unseen predicament,” His smile was *tactile*. “I trust your ability to convince him, Tanaki, how about that?”

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*[He returned after lunch, surrounded by black cars and old guards, as entertained with the air itself as he always was.]*

*There was no flesh in his expression; no wrinkles to give credibility to his affectionate grin, as he studied Dazai's frame. And yet — he knew there was something. It clung to his spine like ivy, drew shadows on the walls of his skull and container. It might have been carefulness. It might have been terror. Sometimes, it was even the absence of loneliness.*

*"Boss," Dazai said, obviously, unneeded, "You're back."*

*"Fortunately, yes," Mori confirmed. Same as he had always been. No dirt under his nails; a surgeon until the last day. "I must say, Tokyo was truly starting to bore me."*

*"The hotels weren't to your tastes?"*

*He tilted his head. "Elise didn't like the bathroom much. Not enough space for her dolls to bathe with her."*

*"That won't do."*

*"No," he agreed. "It won't."*

*Perhaps, he was just happy to see him.*

*He dragged him to his office, to check his vitals and throw his pills — throat ache, this time; and muscle relaxants — in the trash. He didn't ask how long it had been since he had last washed, or remembered to eat; he ruffled his hair and dragged him to the thermal baths, whining about complications Dazai would resolve.*

*Empty and quiet; the marble floors interrupting the pools were the same gray of the snowy sky that refused to leave Yokohama. Behind the floor-to-ceiling windows, the city was nothing but towers of dust, and one spinning wheel.*

*He yawned, bored. "Baths make me sleepy."*

*The curve of Mori's lips was gentle, — familiar; tombstone and cradle, clinic and altar. "Nothing makes you sleepy, Dazai."*

*He stumbled to the furthest pool of the room, waiting — to talk about Q, to talk about the Nine Rings, to talk about police officers and you know you ought to be smarter. Mori's steps weren't late; he had nothing to hide, and Dazai wasn't allowed to hide anything.*

*Undressing himself was always a lengthy affair. There was the coat, there was the suit, there was the tie, there were the bandages, there was the soul wrenching disgust devouring the hole in his chest, until the edges spread further and further, ingesting the universe itself — the revulsion painting invisible dotted lines all over his skull, cursing his accidental meetings with his reflection, cursing the blue veins he could count, running down his skin and imagining the blood running inside them. Alive, alive, alive.*

*This is my nose, he thought, staring right into the waveless water, as he removed his underwear. Nose, hand, eye, mouth. She had sung him a song about it, once. Dazai didn't even have the vocal chords to scream.*

*He removed his bandages last, laying them in careless knots next to the clothes Mori would come and fold tidily soon enough. His hair felt filthy — he pulled the bandages down his face, felt their texture against every inch of his face. The pulsing attacked his skull almost immediately as he blinked, trying to adjust to a world that was as tilted and off balance as usual — just more naked.*

*It will ruin your depth perception, Kouyou had told him, once. You'll end up with Hirotsu's monocle, demon child.*

*It had been a surprisingly non antagonistic remark. He remembered asking himself what the need to speak of the obvious was.*

*I have no need for two eyes, Ane-san, he'd told her, one is enough of a bother.*

*He dropped into the water with the broadest splash he was able to conjure, and he closed his eyes. He hoped it dirtied the floors. He hoped he could not see his reflection on them anymore.*

*"You need to take better care of yourself," Mori told him when he remerged, busy folding his tie.*

*He considered: "Do you habitually clean the house you mean to sell?"*

*His gaze didn't touch him. Nose, lips, hand. The blue under his eyes matched the Yokohama skyline. Modesty was a see through costume; an umbrella he'd long since left on the sidewalk. Eyes were eyes and flesh was flesh; he was more annoyed by Mori's insistent, leftover doctors instincts, the ones that made him carve X-Ray lines down his chest.*

*You won't find anything, he promised.*

*Like he had read it somewhere, but had never wasted sweat on it, the man concluded: "It's a matter of politeness. We offer respect to others, so that we have a right to demand it for ourselves."*

*"That settles it, then," Blowing off his wet hair didn't work, so he pushed them back with his fingers, making sure their trembling outlines wouldn't be noticed. The end was close and Mori was closer. "I owe nothing to the rats that will devour me."*

*Mori hummed. He ran pale hands down Dazai's dress shirt. He had old hands, too old for his age, though he loathed to be told: the veins on his palms flexed at the barest movement; the grooves on the fingers that had held a scalpel and the city for too long were deep.*

*"I wouldn't leave your body to the beasts," the ex-doctor reassured him. "That is a traitor's fate."*

*"How do you know I'm not a traitor?"*

*"People like us have no time for it."*

*Dazai hummed.*

*“You would have a wonderful funeral,” Mori insisted. “Port Mafia style.”*

*“Flesh to the ashes and heart to the sea?”*

*“Maybe,” he said. Smiled. “Or maybe Elise will ask for your body as a doll.”*

*“Maybe you’ll be long dead, by then.”*

*“Dazai,” he promised. No blood spilled to seal the pact, but there was no need, with the honesty dripping from his lips like drool. Mori Ougai was no benefactor. “I am not leaving your body to the rats.”*

*“It’s my body,” Dazai lied. He remembered reading: my debris belongs to the wind. “You can’t have it.”*

*The next time he went underwater, he sank his nails in his wrists and refused to swim up.*

*He started thinking. Thinking was necessary, he thought. Especially with Mori. He liked thinking with Mori. He wasn’t a match, but he listened. He wasn’t a match, but he never stopped to ask how much blood his ideas would involve.*

*He couldn’t see the city, but he could feel it, each dot on the glass like a stain on his bones — his vision blurred, just paint on a canvas, blue and yellow and black, Mafia black — Alright.*

*Hands grasped the underskin of his arms, pulling him up. He fought against them — fought until he could see red serpents curl in the blue after leaving the cage of that organism that had claimed him; — harder than reality had around Chuuya’s fractured hands and shattered mind, Corruption and —*

*The liquified roof broke without a sound.*

*Mori’s arms were tight around him as he swam to the land, his hands grasping at his neck, his side, his chest. His traitorous lungs sang a psalm to the divine air. It was a familiar thing, he thought, and yet so tiring, when his carcass didn’t accept his prayers. Would you listen, he thought, would you listen if I didn’t hate you?*

*“Not yet,” Mori said. Dazai could hear his heartbeat against his back. It was slower than the waves, and he hated it, hated it, hated it. “Not yet, Dazai,” he insisted, Dazai, and never anything else, never anything at all. Whose grave did you steal it from?*

*“Oh, I know,” He laughed his heart out, watching it echo against the oil-painted city on the windows. Every fit ripped the flesh inside his throat apart, old, old wallpaper making room to humidity stains. “I know, I know, I know.” ]*



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Their first stop was a local Church.

“How come you didn’t bring Sama along?” Dazai wondered, waiting for Mori to climb up the stone stairs to the doors. “She’s not one to let you wonder at night by yourself.”

“You know, you have a tendency to speak of the head of my guards as if she’s some sort of nanny,” the man replied, easily untouched. “She’s a devoted mafioso. She understands the precarious position I’m in.”

“Doesn’t that make her sort of a nanny?”

“She’s a very capable woman.”

“Remember that time she put me in a headlock because I tried to offer you tea she hadn’t checked?”

Mori’s hum was amused. It hadn’t been, back then — not so outwardly; lest he let his people believe Dazai could be touched. “Now, don’t be mean. She did take you to that rope shop you like afterwards.”

“Hangman’s knots,” Dazai sighed. “Still. It’s so aggravating.”

“What is?”

He pulled the heavy doors open, listening to the screech of metal with glee. “Whenever you happen to like people.”

Senator Masaaki was waiting for them amongst the pews, lips puckered in prayer. In a tone that was *meant* to sound dismissive, Mori told him to *go play* — so Dazai did, lighting electric candles with no wishes in mind and falling on the keys of the organ, startling the Senator out of his shoes.

Mori rarely met up with the pusillanimous — he rarely met up with outsiders, in general. Most of the underworld assumed the Boss wouldn’t have been as dauntless as to name their cover up after himself; thus, most outsiders and low-ranked insiders agreed he was the least probable option for head of the syndicate.

*Hiding in plain sight*, he had explained, pulling Dazai’s ear, the way he did when he could *feel* he was about to lie to him. *How is it my fault if they think me so modest?*

He settled on the altar, legs crossed, knocking some silver cup off. They landed on the marble floor with resounding importance, drawing hesitation in the Senator’s tone.

He wondered what he thought of Mori. Of his smile, his gloved hands, the creepy kid he dragged around by the nape — the eerie child cursed to eternal eavesdropping to whispers

that kept Yokohama on its feet, who had stolen a doctor's wallet.

Sharp lines cut the stained glass wall in front of him, offering biblical stories to the illiterate — *how courteous*, she would have said, in that gently *mean* way of hers, *how courteous*, *they're trying to help you out*. The Senator had been elected only a few weeks ago; had boasted about justice to wide-eyed fools carrying their wrinkled hands through the motions.

A snowdrop landed on a *Madonna's* cheek; it slipped down, slow and unassuming. Blinking curious eyes at him was a cat, its fur littered in the shards of color from the windows behind him.

It meowed, low. Dazai meowed back.

“—low profile,” the Senator was insisting. “A quarter of the opposition is conducting investigations — You must be aware our support — however *faithful* — is an open secret.”

“And that is an issue,” Mori drawled, likable until his last smile, “For us, or for you?”

“It's — Half a government cannot be swayed so —“

“Your predecessor managed it flawlessly. I trust in your abilities. Leaving *my* people's fate in a simple man's hands — You surely understand the effort such a show of trust demands, do you not?”

“Sir, I *do* — My gratefulness is — Being chosen is —“

“It would do your *half of a government* good,” Mori did not let him finish, “To *remember* who allowed them to gain any sort of grip over Abilities. That is how your predecessor put it, at the very least. A Permit truly isn't much of a bother. Your *Special Division* would be just another underground group, had the *Maihime Project* not —“

The Senator choked.

Sitting in the alcove of a statue, head on the stone leg of Judas, Dazai sorted his way through his stolen wallet. Kouyou was never seen handling money, and her secret funds were a mythical tale — Mori had kept all his money in a jar, near the butterflies.

He pocketed the bills — but only the ones whose faces did not look at him *weird* ; he downed the sugar packet from one of the pockets, mixing it with leftover Paracetamol.

“That's *Kiko-chan*, ” Elise explained, out of nowhere. She elbowed and whined, never reprimanded by the hand that had made her — until she settled comfortably on his lap, her marble cheek against his own. “She was the first.”

“First,” he repeated.

“Of his,” she confirmed. The back of her shoes made a sharp sound whenever they hit the base of the alcove. “I think that dumb Rintarou misses her a lot.”

Short hair, challenging gaze. An apron of sorts, dried blood staining it all the way to the collar. “Don’t be silly. Mori doesn’t *miss* people. If he let her go, he didn’t want her.”

“It was quieter, when she was around,” Fake as the very air they breathed, Elise had not quite mastered the art of being nostalgic. Mori would have seen no need for it. She did not particularly like him, either; because Mori had found the concept hilarious. “I was quieter. He talked to me less.”

“You must have been jealous.”

She knocked her head against his; settled one of her markless hands on his open palm, strangely unreal to the touch — the touch of insides, when they tumbled out of a body.

There was a time, he recalled, when she would settle next to him on his bed, waiting for him to fall asleep. *You look weird*, she would only say. Mori had found it entertaining. Dazai had *shoo* -ed her away by the morning.

“Of myself?” she asked. “Only if he disliked it.”

“Dazai?” Mori called.

Wordlessly polite, he skipped his way to the pale face of the senator, offering him a photograph from his coat pocket.

Half an hour later they were in a car, Elise diligently conquering every inch of his tortured hands with colorful bandaids. Her tales never ended: Kouyou refused to buy her a matching umbrella; Chuuya had taken her shopping, carrying her bags with his *funny Ability*, and, *when are you going to take me shopping?*

“When I feel like holding your hand,” he told her, and she scoffed. “You only hold it for the pictures,” she lamented.

Mori smiled, ruffling her hair. “We will take another picture soon, then,” he promised her, offering an exasperated wink to Dazai.

*You made her like this*, he considered saying, but his tongue was too lazy in his mouth. *You made her like this. You don’t have the right to look away.*

The car driver was silent; they always were. Darkened window and pricey wheels. In the Church, he bet the Senator was still praying, holding the bloodied picture of his family in a fist. Dazai was seldom bored enough to be mean. He settled his temple against the car window; let Elise cover him in bandaids and wished he could snap her throat.

“Come on,” Mori’s hand landed somewhere between his shoulder blades. “Remember to be polite.”

“Military bases are the epitome of corruption,” he replied, as the gates screeched open, just to move his mouth.

“Ah,” His chin nodded to this or that guard, always fitting in all places he haunted. Dazai only knew whispers from his days in the *Great War*. “The military has been nice enough to promise they will allow Q to stay with them, once we get them back.”

*Oh*, Dazai thought.

Elise hid under the back of his coat, giggling. He let her play, taking weird turns and speeding up when she least expected it. When their guide abandoned them in front of a metal door, she showed her tongue to his retreating back.

“Now, Elise,” Mori studied the locks put in place. The door was at the end of a corridor; the only one in the entire aisle. Dazai wondered if Q would cry, when they dragged them. “No need to be mean.”

Still chuckling, she hid. Dazai asked: “This is your idea of safe reclusion, then?”

“Do you like it?”

The walls had to be thicker than even his skull. Mori was an expert on military bases. “It *is* what you proposed from the start.”

The man hummed. From the bars-closed windows on the higher line of the walls, the Church cat blinked. He made sure to nod his greetings. “If I remember correctly, *your* idea had been to throw them into the nearest basement and blow it up.”

“Certainly,” Dazai shrugged. “Some pawns aren’t worth the hustle. This whole disappearing mess only proved it further.”

“I thought you liked them,” He faked surprise; it made Elise giggle harder. “*An adorable little wild beast.*”

“That’s why I was so adamant.”

“You will have many occasions to visit them,” *With torture tools*, Dazai imagined. “But I will limitate contact. It’s clear companionship isn’t what they’re searching for.”

*Did you ever want them to search for it?* , he thought about saying. Or, *would you let them have it?* Irrelevancy wasn’t worthy of the former doctor’s attention, though. “I still think you should just let me kill them.”

“They like you a lot, you know?” Mori mused. “I *think* it might be those bandages they insisted on adorning their doll with.”

“Q doesn’t have much of a style sense,” Elise agreed. “And they aren’t very smart. They could hide some toys under the bandages.”

“First time my fashion choices have landed me such popularity,” Dazai sighed, last in line. “Do you care about the massacre they committed? The ones to come?”

He blinked. “I’m looking for them, am I not?”

“You sure played the distraught part at the Institute’s funeral.”

“And you didn’t show up,” Mori curled an eyebrow. “I expect some more respect from an Executive candidate.”

“And I expect a more stubborn sense of justice from a Boss.”

“If you’re truly trying to push me to punish them, you should know I would stop before killing them.”

*Same with you.*

His shoulders relaxed into something pettier. “And you wonder why Q likes me better than you.”

It was a complicated thing, he knew — giving rules to a boy who had never broken a single one. No rules, then; just consequences.

Mori just liked the dramatics of it all. Of his invisible crown and his blood red scarf and of a fifteen years old right hand man who he refused to let die. Of Elise being all he most detested in a little girl — and of leaving his wallet in his hands when he didn’t want to reminisce to his face.

“Mori,” Dazai wondered, “Do you even *like* Yokohama?”

His grin was as honest as it went. “I adore it.”

He thought about the girl in the photograph, the eyes they shared and the blood they had bled on a doctor’s coat — and he *hated* her, viciously, for a single moment, an uncharacteristic inhale, for not being the fourth in their heartbeat line — the focus of Mori’s gaze and plans and endless lifetimes, and all the things Dazai was too bored to refuse.

“Is that why you forbid this city from falling?”

“You already know the answer.”

“I do,” he confirmed. “Chuuya understands, too — But he’s been acting all *weird* since he lost those little friends of his.”

A severe glance was thrown his way. Elise had disappeared; only the shadow of her cold skin remained against his pants, like wet patches of new blood. Like he had heard it was good etiquette from warmer bodies — like he *knew* it got men’s eyes shiny and men’s hands tighter around the rifles he had put there — he reprimanded: “Mourning should be respected, Dazai.”

“Yes, Mori.”

“And?”

He kicked the door. Most things he touched would rot, at some point — maybe the opposite. “If you don’t want that balance to be disrupted, why do you collect monsters?”

Mori twinned his fingers. How did they all look in his mind? A nice little museum, every piece embalmed behind its rightful glass cage, cursed with containment and never ending scrutinization. A rusty hospital morgue, every temporary grave holding their frozen bodies. “The balance can’t last forever.”

“Why not?”

“Because it *can’t*,” he insisted. “Peace is an interlude, not a play. I’m satisfied with making it last as long as possible, but the inevitable is, *per* definition — unavoidable. Even the conflict that will come is a form of *balance*. My teacher knew it as well, when he laid the city in mine and Fukuzawa’s hands.”

“Because he’s good and you’re bad?” he mocked.

“We both know oversimplification is rarely correct.”

“Recently,” Dazai replied, twirling until his back landed on the shut door, “I have been considering simpler thoughts. We *could* sit here, draw circle after circle and talk philosophy all night, but — what’s the point? Existence is factual. It lies on the mouths of the people. You, Mori Ougai,” he lied, “Are a *bad* guy.”

The doctor hummed. “Probably.”

“You sent the organization to destroy the *Nine Rings*, even if you know they aren’t responsible. How is that balance?”

“What’s your theory, then?”

“My theory?”

“What am I doing?” he explained. Familiar: the two of them on two opposite sides of the room, offering problems and solutions. “You believe this whole situation is more complicated than it looks, and that I am purposefully ignoring that fact. Why?”

Lazily, he raised one hand and showed some fingers. “Four reasons. I’m not going to tell them to you, of course.”

“And what do you think about them?”

“Boring,” he sighed. “But I *will* play your game, if it somehow feeds into your ego. I am but your dutiful servant. Executive position is to be earned, correct? And now I have competition. Plus, I *have* to pass the time, somehow, until —“

Something in Mori’s tone grew sharper. “Until you find the right way to die?”

*[He had been fourteen, he thought, and the doctor always insisted on leaving his bed to him. A matter of hospitality, if their rat cage could he called a home. His old bones could*

*withstand the floor; he had been militarily trained to. Dazai was too delicate. The bed put him face to face with every jar on his desk — every syringe and every corner, every promise and order.*

*That was why he slept on his back: the restraints wouldn't let him move.]*

“Don’t make me out to be picky,” Dazai said. “It’s my fifty second problematic trait. Not by far the most urgent.”

“You’ve never been impulsive.”

“You’d never let me.”

“No,” he admitted. “But I did make you a promise.”

“And I’m holding you accountable for it. I can’t say I’m sure of how much blood is worth my weight in gold, but I *will* get there, someday,” He knocked his head back against the door.

“And then, I will be just useless enough to be disposed of.”

“This show of faith is interesting.”

“Faith,” He thought of the dirty stained glass of the Church. Q, running around the city. “It’s not faith. Despicable as it is, you are a smart man.”

“You flatter me.”

“It’s either my death or yours,” he replied. The moon filtering through blinded him, when opened his eyes. With heavy limbs, he raised a finger gun to Mori’s face. “And only one of us will bleed for it.”

“You’re not afraid of death,” Mori agreed, like the weather would change soon. “But you’re afraid of pain, aren’t you? No other reason to kneel at the feet of an anesthetist.”

Dazai waited. Waited for a remark that came as a muffled warning. *Stand straighter. We’re in public. Youth is intolerable, and growing is a sin.*

“Promises are promises,” the man concluded, at last. He turned around; made his way down the corridor expecting to be followed, and he did. “I will give you a prediction.”

He skipped lines, jumping on every fourth square of tile. “Lay it on me.”

“Something will kill you, one day,” Certainty stained the little of him he could see through the darkness. *There’s snow outside. There are people in the room. You will not survive the winter, once I find where it’s hiding.* “And that day, you will be the one fighting nails and teeth.”

“That sounds good,” Dazai wondered if it was too late to ask any Senators to pray for him, as well — if the girl caged in his wallet, cursed to never be forgotten by the doctor’s fingertips, would do it, too. “*That* is a show of faith.”

“Faith?”

“Yes,” Mori’s hand landed somewhere between his shoulder blades. In the corner of his gaze, some guard in uniform bowed. “For the frightened.”

## Chapter End Notes

dazai: damn bitch you live like this

chuuya: bitch you live the same way

and here we introduce matsuda! he’s a very interesting character (to me) that we will be seeing more of in the future. actually, that whole scene of dazai and chuuya being caught by him was one of the first scenes i’ve ever come up with for this fic!

i have stuff to say about this chapter, but at the time im posting this, actual hell is going on at my university, which means it will have to wait for next chapter. until then, i hope you stay warm and take care, and take you so much for reading!!



# LOOK

## Chapter Summary

*Chuuya's apartment was empty.*

*Better, more intricate words would have failed at an accurate portrait; meticulously-kept, perhaps — though it made one wonder how the person whose phone was cracked on all sides and barely alive enough to turn on could manage it.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter v.*

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*Case number: 28738389*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. spontaneously committed the following insubordinations: property damage, [...]*

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*(Back then, Beatrice said, he wasn't looking for friends. He was looking for a match).*

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...

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Attached to the frescoed wall of the training room of Kouyou's *villa*, were more than a hundred post-its in various shades of pink — each one of them bearing the name of martial arts style.

Most of them had a little tick scribbled next to it, plus some shaky-handwriting commentary — things like, *fuk yeh I did*, and *higher grade doesnt count*, and, *weird name cool*. Kouyou's masterful calligraphy added some ruthless, elegant criticism on the tickless ones — *maybe*, for example, *if he stops stomping around like an elephant*.

“Kid, get out of the way!”

Dazai didn't move an inch as a piece of scaffolding came falling, cutting the air through the repair structures embracing an entire side of the *villa*. It landed on the grass of the artificial-rivers and blooming-trees' framed garden, mere inches from his frame, raising an aggravating amount of dust.

He sighed. “Damn it.”

“I would rather you took your attempts somewhere else, if you may,” the owner's voice spoke up, at his shoulders. “Mori might just make a fuss if he believes I'm aiding his pet demon.”

“Good afternoon, Ane-san. As splendid as a wilted flower,” he greeted, throwing an offhand glance behind his shoulder to her unmistakable cherry blossom silhouette. His eyes fell on the white stain growling at her side; with *professional* distaste, he added: “Hikari. You look awful as ever.”

The Executive’s dog — a beast in a sparkly pink collar whose race he had never bothered learning, apart from, *pointy teeth* and *pointy ears* and *stupid face* and *is definitely taller than me when it stands* — bared its teeth at him, drool landing on the cobblestones.

The disgusting *thing* hated him, of course — it always had; though the question remained of whether that time he had found him trying out *its* dog food was to blame, or the general hatred all dogs felt for him was.

“I would compliment your renovations, but from what I can see, you’ve simply moved on from *Japanese and rich* to *more Japanese and richer*,” he added, dragging hungry eyes back to the building scaffolds. The workers were all very careful — but if he could just manage to get hit clearly enough to the head, it really should have *not* hurt —

“I appreciate the input,” Kouyou commented, moving to stand next to him. The shade of her umbrella didn’t touch him, pointedly.

“Mori wants you to move to the center of the city, you know?”

“He can try,” She smiled.

“Careful. They already love to drag your name along to that of revolution,” Under the porch, a small group of women in kimonos were discussing the sky — and probably something heavier, too. There was blood on the tips of their nails; one of them held a burned strand of hair. “Did you do it, when he died?”

Kouyou’s eyelashes fluttered, imperceptibly. It was strangely flawless, the way she understood — her eyes didn’t even bother to follow his scrutiny. *Perhaps*, Dazai mused, peering over a microscope that wasn’t there, *those who couldn’t forget simply came to expect the reminder.*

“Quite,” One of her hands reached up; pale skin against pale skin, she pulled a burnt strand from the base of her chignon — leaving it to shatter her picture perfect watercolors, disrespectfully unignorable against her knuckles. “I renew it every year.”

“Seems a lot of effort.”

“You think so?”

“Tanaki does it too,” Dazai recalled. “For one of her sisters. But she waits for it to regrow, before she does it.”

“What’s the fair length?” Kouyou questioned — not quite in the tone Mori used to teach a lesson; not quite in her usual own, either. “How do you decide *when*, exactly, you’re too close to not honoring it? To forgetting?”

Hikari drooled near his shoes. Its eyes followed a flying bird, unbridled in their unsatisfiable hunger; Dazai felt wings he didn't have ache. "Probably when it starts itching, I suppose."

She hummed; fixed the hair back in place.

He showed his tongue to the still-growling mutt on her other side, eye falling on the weight in her unoccupied hand. "Is that a Christian bible? What's with the newfound faith?"

"I'm researching the *Nine Rings*," the Executive replied. "From what I recall, they *loved* their lore. It might give me a clue on their Boss' prized artifact. Demon child, you *are* aware you're no longer welcome across these gates after you tried to hang yourself in front of my maids —"

"Found it in Q's room?" he guessed.

She paused. "How did you know?"

"Smells of Under Port," Hikari settled his muzzle near its shoes, and he mimicked a kick. "And no one else in our inner circle cares about God. Say, where's the dog?"

Her smile was only slightly sweeter than her mutt's. "You better be talking about Hikari."

"No, no," Dazai assured. A piece of drywall landed mere steps in front of him; he frowned at the workers. "I'm talking about *my* dog, not yours. I have business with him."

"Yes, you rather seem to, lately," He did not meet her searching gaze. "Everybody is raising eyebrows about it. Don't tell me devils get lonely."

"Not at all," He offered her his brightest smile, leaning down to tie his shoes — only to sink his hand in the closest artificial river and spray freezing water into Hikari's unfriendly face. "Just bored. See you in the training Pavillion!"

He managed to reach the already-repaired side of the *villa* with little complications, which disproved Chuuya's promises that the woman had made it so that her gates would electrify him on impact. He made sure to kiss every maid and subordinate's hand he came across; stole a water bottle from the kitchens and emptied it out on Hikari's doghouse — and when he reached the Pavillion's doors, he barely had time to blink before a red stain flew by.

Chuuya crashed against *Golden Demon* with ease; their intertwining luminescent limbs painted the frescoed walls covered in post-its he had been spying through the windows in a thousand colors. The Ability could not, technically, ever get tired of the slash and pull of the fight; neither could Chuuya, usually.

"He still hasn't thrown those calligraphy homework in your face?" Dazai commented, eyes on the bundle of papers on a slightly less bloodied corner of the room.

"Not yet," Kouyoy offered, appearing behind him — Hikari, blessedly, nowhere to be found. Perhaps she thought two guard dogs were too much of a hassle. "Though he insists they are unnecessary."

“Because it *is*, ” came the annoyed remark, from the thunderstorm of kicks and blades in the middle of the room. Chuuya didn’t even spare them a glance, as he insisted: “I know how to write and read. That’s all I wanted.”

The Executive’s sigh could have rattled the entire building. “*Decent* calligraphy is not *good* calligraphy. And there is no true point in a mediocre existence, is there? You have no care for beauty?”

“Beauty won’t keep anyone alive,” Chuuya floated himself up to stare the Ability down; his burned eye seemed to glisten. “And I know better ways to handle my time.”

“Here’s an incentive,” the Executive announced, with all her sharp, *un-clawed* teasing. “The demon child is going to tease you to the ends of the earth if your handwriting does not evolve into something less... *cavemanly*.”

“It’s true, I will,” Dazai intervened. “Hi, Slug!”

The remark landed Chuuya’s feet on an already wrecked part of the pavement, raising a cloud of dust as he escaped *Golden Demon*’s mows. He met Dazai’s eyes and cheerful wave like they were to blame for the sound. “What the *fuck* did you just say?”

His rant began, somewhere in the corner of his attention. Dazai studied the open book in the Executive’s hands, squinting to find a title amongst the thin lines of scriptures. *Bless those who persecute you*, it read. *Bless and do not curse. Do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath — for it is written —*

Kouyou’s nails were manicured over scarred skin. She had been sporting a distant gaze ever since the conflict had been declared; her eyes only seemed to sharpen when they settled on the blood staining Chuuya’s gloves.

*It is mine to avenge; I will repay.*

“— and he asked me what the capital of *Paris* was, the other day!” Chuuya was spluttering, still, effortlessly *capable* and relentless in the chase the demon Ability would not allow him to interrupt. “Are you guys *sure* he hasn’t fooled you into the whole prodigy thing?”

“*Beep*, ” Dazai said, “*Boop*. ”

A well-aimed kick stuck *Golden Demon* into the wall.

Another sigh. Kouyou leaned on the doorframe. “Imagine the wonders he would accomplish if all that hateful effort was put into his homework.”

“Would you *mind* not calling them —“

She glanced in Dazai’s direction. “How come the two of you stopped training together, anyway?”

“Assface can’t keep up with me — *hey!*”

“Nothing to do with the destroyed corner of the training grounds they’re still rebuilding, then?” the woman chirped, right as *Golden Demon* dragged her disciple by a hole in his dress shirt. *Karma*, Dazai let himself nod. He could *very well* keep up. A bit too well, if the reparation prices said anything. “What did we say about that little rage of yours?”

“A ridiculous thing —“

“Which *is*? ”

Chuuya seethed. Eventually, curled up on a corner of the roof, glaring daggers at Dazai, specifically, he muttered: “Contempt is a veil on the eyes. A conflict is won by those whose emotions are of aid, not contrast. *Yadda yadda*. ”

Kouyou smiled, just shy of patronizing. Clearly, in her quest to get her hand near Chuuya’s muzzle and not have him bite, she had learned some tricks. “See? You learn fast. You shall get the hang of this, too. God knows if it wouldn’t give your Doc’s soul some rest. He spent so long trying to get you to —”

Very pointedly, very apathetically, the boy changed the subject with a: “Why doesn’t the Mackerel have to —”

“I’m not hers,” Dazai intervened, helpfully. “Nor have I ever been dragged to watch ballet on the weekends to work on my elephant steps. Is that fun, by the way?”

The adversaries met in the middle, once again — as Kouyou sighed, long-suffering and delicate, tracing *kanjis* on the floor with the tip of her umbrella. All she did was endlessly theatrical, only in all ways Dazai’s obnoxiousness wasn’t — where he was exorbitant, she was plastic *old money*, waiting for an invisible audience to marvel at the standard she was.

And Chuuya was hers, despite his mistrust and the skeptical glances he *still* threw her way. Not audience and not enemy; a part of the play she never went anywhere without.

“You’re not going to turn him into a *mini-me*, ” Dazai informed her, to be nice. “He lacks your lack of care. He’s too rough at the edges.”

“He’s not much of a Mafioso,” Kouyou admitted. She raised a hand to quieten her Ability down. “Cursed by the streets. And those Flags’ of his’ *clique* behavior. But it truly does not matter. He will learn. Everybody does.”

A saying around the Port Mafia went: *If the wind kills you, it was Kouyou’s people*.

There was no real place for refinement in the Mafia, but her technique did contribute to the secrecy factor. Boss was too amused by her infallible tendency to turn stone into crystal.

The man had called Chuuya a diamond, once; crystal seemed *easier*; but his roots were rocks and whatever a boy from Suribachi could afford to steal. A star falling as loudly and inconveniencing as something not quite awake could be.

“You’ve been saying that shit for months now,” Chuuya huffed, some minutes later, making his way to them. The glint of *Tainted* was mild; but Dazai could see he was using it to keep

himself upright. “Calligraphy or fighting or *demeanor*. Whatever it is. Your demon has yet to land a serious hit on me. Can’t we just leave it at that?”

“You’re really a dog in the soul,” Dazai sighed, in the middle of entertaining himself by ripping every page of the Bible he had stolen. He hoped Q wouldn’t be too mad, upon return. “All you care about is playing catch.”

Chuuya’s hand flashed in front of his face, slapping his forehead.

He stepped on his feet.

“You’re already lethal, little god,” Kouyou exclaimed, louder than their ruffle, settling between the two of them. “I’m simply going to make your work easier.”

A huff. “My work is *plenty* easy.”

“You want to know when you can *say* you have won?” She wiped a scratch on his chin with the sleeve of her kimono, settling a knuckle under his chin, pushing his head up.

Dazai raised his hand. “When Mori doesn’t make you babysit Elise?”

She didn’t even bother to look down at him. “When there is no blood on your hands.”

Chuuya rolled his eyes, pushing her hand away with excruciating — unaware, clearly — gentleness. “Yes, Ane-san,” he huffed. Much like hers, his edges lacked sharpness; only, Kouyou was gentle for the sake of tightening her hypnotic affections around him, and Chuuya was gentle *because*. “That seems like it will work just fine in the Port Mafia.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will find a way. And *stop* calling me that.”

An awkward silence seemed to settle — something shattered between the Executive and the boy’s point of contact, and Dazai’s unimpressed stare. He cleared his throat, eventually, waving the book to make sure they would both be watching as he threw it out of the window — right into a scaffold.

“*Oops*,” he said, eyes wide. “I slipped. What a shame. Hatrack, we have business to —”

“Come on, then, Chuuya,” Kouyou borderline shouted, spinning the boy around and leading him to where *Golden Demon* was floating in the middle of the room. “Your string of victories today has been impressive, but I’m sure you can do something more.”

“Ah,” Chuuya cleared his voice, directing him a pointed glance over her shoulder. “Ane-san, we *do* have to —”

“Those post-its of yours will certainly not fill themselves up on their own. Didn’t you say you wanted to master, *ah* — *Every single kicking ass technique?* ” Her smile was untouchable. “I will see you, demon child. Bring my best regards to Mori, yes?”

That *something* in her eyes, distant and shuddering, peeked again. “The *Nine Rings* need all of our efforts to be ended, do they not?”

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*[As he spied his way around the villa, unwilling to be found just yet — climbing over the maple trees to spy into the windows — he had heard a sweat-covered Chuuya mutter, in a tone so awkward Dazai had felt his bones creak along: “How are you holding up?”*

*Mosaic — that was, according to his bored reviews, how most of Kouyou’s subordinates would describe her. It was easy to forget just how still — how statuary she was, sometimes, until dirty wheels drew lines all over her patchwork.*

*Composed until the very end — clearly set on giving out exactly what would keep that one flower wilted and good; but so devastatingly, so evidently fond of him Dazai felt like laughing — she vaguely said: “It’s been a long time.”*

*“Whatever,” he replied, strained. “You still have a right to feel shitty, no matter how long it’s been.”*

*Kouyou shook the thought away with a lithe motion of her head. “I know better than to let my past get a hold of me. I won’t bless it with my attention.”*

*“Weird,” Chuuya commented, offhandedly, hands in his pockets. “I do recall someone drilling my head with something about how — ignoring what I have left behind will render the path blurry, or some shit .”*

*Golden Demon attacked. The boy jumped away.*

*“Ma’am,” he added, belatedly.*

*“Aren’t you just cheeky,” she spelled out, on the verge of unamusement. It left her shoulders tired. “It doesn’t matter, Chuuya. I was young and blinded by revenge. Now, I am — Older. I’m smarter. I have the support of the Boss. This time, I will eradicate them for good.”*

*Her umbrella traced the ground — again and again. Her eyes followed, head tilted to the side.*

*“This is mine to avenge.”]*



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(Back then, Beatrice said, *I suppose I didn't want to be alone anymore*).

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Setting fire to the *villa* was not quite unintentional enough to call it a mistake.

“Dazai Osamu!”

“I’m gonna kill you,” Chuuya let him know, the aggressive roar of the heartbeat in his wrist pressing on Dazai’s fingers. The idea had been to make sure he wouldn’t float away before he could push the two of them out of the Pavillion’s window, taking advantage of Kouyou’s momentary distraction — now, the feeling of scarred skin felt a bit complicated. “I’m gonna murder you,” he insisted, as they slalomed around the garden, “She’s gonna murder you, she’s gonna murder me, she’s gonna *murder us* —“

“I told you!” Dazai screamed, as they sneaked through the scaffolds slowly casquading to the ground — dancing through the rising flames the electrical system had caused. “There was no time! I forgot to buy our tickets for Rengoku!”

“We could have taken the next train —“

“There’s only one ride everyday, and it leaves in fifteen minutes!”

Chuuya’s halt-in-his-steps managed to slow him down, despite the breathless screams of workers and Kouyou’s girls alike. One of his sleeves had caught fire; he patted it frantically. Dazai had lost his shoe somewhere, and he *knew* the boy had seen the sheep patterned socks.

“Dazai,” the boy said, very serious, “This house is thirty minutes from the station.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you.”

“Boys!”

Over the lines of maple trees and flames, Kouyou’s pink silhouette stood on her threshold, rage morphing her into a fairly good imitation of the gargoyle-looking statues at the entrance gates. “You get back here! *Now, Chuuya!*”

Dazai grinned, cupping his hands around his mouth. “*Yo-oh!* Ane-san! You should do something about the fire!”

The base of a fighting boot collided with his nape. “*You shitty son of a —*“

*Golden Demon* appeared from nowhere at all, roaring behind Kouyou’s shoulders like a too-bright shadow. “If you don’t get back here now, I swear to —“

“We’re going on a *friendship trip!*” he added, helpfully, clasping one hand around Chuuya’s chin and squishing his cheeks. All the stages of grief adorned her porcelain face, simultaneously. “You don’t mind, do you? You’ve got your *Bible Studies!*”

“*Fuck it all,*” Chuuya snapped. Impromptu chasing was amongst the unnegotiable requirements two fifteen year old had, reasonably, declared the very moment Hirotsu had been set on their tails. “Are you gonna move anytime soon, you waste of —“

They landed in the cobblestoned paths intertwining throughout the gardens, and Dazai circumnavigated them up and down the small bridges and stone benches, jumping over the artificial rivers and bumping against the maple trees. The next river they leaped over managed to trick his overly frantic companion; he landed on one knee inside the *freezing* waves, slamming his side against the bamboo slide carrying the water down.

Dazai was almost pulled back by the impact. With feeling, and right to the sky, Chuuya cried out: “*Motherfucker!*”

He felt himself sigh.

They made it to the station in ten minutes, by a series of miracles involving hanging off the car of a very distracted businessman and climbing over the station’s walls instead of going through the gates.

“Let’s,” was all Chuuya was able to pant, as they painfully crawled to the Tickets stand. “Let’s *never* do that again.”

Dazai barely managed to groan his agreement.

Losing their ride in the name of the employee’s lunch time seemed a very real possibility, until Chuuya slapped a disgusting amount of bills under his nose. It changed his expression dishearteningly fast.

“Bribery,” he considered, pickpocketing a snackbar as they made their way through suitcases and busy travellers. “Would easily survive the last man on earth.”

“But there will be no one to bribe, you idiot,” Chuuya replied.

He shrugged. “The last man on earth will be just mad enough to throw bills at a rainstorm.”

The boy opened his mouth to retort — only for his expression to fall, and his fingers to enclose in a death grip around his coat belt, dragging him behind one of the metallic columns.

“Hey —” Dazai protested, shoulders throbbing with the pain of the impact.

“What the fuck is he doing here again?” The words came out as a hiss, as Chuuya squinted at someone near the approaching train’s doors. He did his best to lean forward, studying the crowd, until — “Is that your Officer friend?”

“He doesn’t do train turns,” he muttered. “He must be here for something else. Let’s get the furthest wagon possible from —”

“*Matsuda!*” Dazai called, extracting himself, skipping in his directions with waving arms. “Officer! Here, old man! Remember me? *Hi!*”

Hands clawed at his back, uselessly trying to push him into the train tracks road. “I’m gonna tear you from limb to limb,” Chuuya promised, his tone slightly hysterical, “I’m gonna tear your teeth off and make you eat them from the fucking *eyes*, why are you like this, *why are you like* —”

“Kid,” Officer Matsuda blinked, surprised, watching them make their stumbling way through the small circle of passengers surrounding him. “Chuuya. What are you two doing here?”

“It’s a train station,” Chuuya muttered. “You want to arrest us for traveling?”

“I might arrest you for that clearly stolen snack bar, but not for the train itself,” the man replied, eyeing the box in Dazai’s hands — and the lipstick stains on it. “But there are bigger crimes, I suppose. As long as you eat something.”

“It could be mine, you know,” Dazai informed. “Progressiveness is at the base of development. Are you trying to limit my self-expression?”

“You’re one annoying kid, aren’t you?”

He saluted. “So they tell me.”

Chuuya nodded towards his notebook. “*Bigger crimes*, like whatever you’re investigating?”

Matsuda’s gaze turned sour. “Aside from any *associations* of yours, namely ones which have turned this city into a damn battlefield in the last few days — you two were in my cell until a few weeks ago.”

“That’s the past,” The boy waved the matter away. “This is the future. What happened?”

The Officer studied them. Dazai blinked, slow.

A sigh. “We were called in for a bomb alert.”

Dazai deflated. “That’s all?”

His gaze turned stern. “It could have killed all these innocent people. We were lucky it was bullshit.”

“They wouldn’t have sent *you* for something like this,” Chuuya insisted, crossing his arms. “This is not your jurisdiction. You’re the kids’ men.”

“You’d know.”

A scoff. “Don’t start that shit right now.”

“You know, I still have tons of stuff my guys sequestered from your Sheep back in the days,” the Officer informed him. “Maybe you could email it to them. Unless the Mafia has special channels?”

“Bet they’re super fast,” Dazai — who knew the trading system of the syndicate had worked terribly before he had intervened — jumped in. “And efficient. A marvel to look at.”

“I’m not here to reminisce,” Chuuya said. “If you want to be helpful —“

“You *know* I want to —“

“— why are you here?”

A pause. Matsuda glanced over to the crowd, fingers tightening around his notebook. ““You heard of a young, seemingly rogue Ability User? They’re being blamed for the *Blossom Institute*’s massacre. Witnesses swore they saw them around the area.”

In admirable coordination, they stilled.

Unfortunately, Matsuda took notice of their exchanged glance — the implications of it; of a search Mori might praise them for, but that would certainly make them late. “You...” His eyes widened. “Are you two *involved* in this —“

“The train’s leaving!” Dazai exclaimed, finger raised towards the opening doors behind them, taking the decision for both of them. “Would you look at the time! It was *great* seeing you without bars in front of your face, Officer. See you soon!”

“Boys, *wait* —“

“Stay away from me or I’ll report you. And say *hi* to your ex-wife,” Chuuya warned — and then, to their lungs’ protest, they were running again.

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*[“Here is the first story every child born in Rengoku learns,” Beatrice started. “There was once a child.”*

*The child got lost, as clever children do. They wandered out of the Institute — out of the Orphanage; not that we were allowed to call it that — and ended up in the woods surrounding the town. They used to devour a wider part of earth, back then; tickled the walls bursting with ivy, and called curious children like a Siren’s song. There weren’t enough tragic stories about what happened to kids who went down the paths of what would one day become the Forest, to keep them out.*

*In their terrified search for a way back, the kid met three animals: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf.*

*The leopard saw them paddle towards his den and stepped out. He looked the child right in the eyes and asked: “Are you lost?”*

*The kid answered: “I am.”*

*“Well, don’t worry about it,” the leopard reassured them. “You’re young, still. You will find your way in time. Until that day comes, why don’t you come with me?”*

*“Come where?” asked the child.*

*“In my den. A sorgent runs under it, and beautiful trees loaded with delicious fruits surround it. You can rest and gather strength for your trip back.”*

*“Maybe one fruit,” the child agreed. “A bit of water.”*

*“Or maybe a thousand fruits,” the leopard insisted. “And more water than you will ever need.”*

*But the child wanted to go home, so they grabbed a simple apple and some water, and they left.*

*A lion saw them wander around, so he left his den. He approached the child and asked: “Are you lost?”*

*The kid answered: “I am.”*

*“Did you meet a leopard on your way here?”*

*“I did,” the child confirmed.*

*“And you didn’t eat his thousand fruits?” the lion said, surprised. “You didn’t drink all his water, until none was left in the sorgent?”*

*“No,” the child assured. “I didn’t.”*

*“That makes you smart,” the lion congratulated himself. “Smarter than anyone else. Almost nobody reaches my den; they get stuck on the first step. You are better than most.”*

*“I’m not,” the child replied, as the nuns from the Institute had taught them. “No human is better than another human. I just honor my God.”*

*“Bah!” the lion spat. “Who cares about God? Who cares about other humans? Let me make you an offer. Why don’t you follow me?”*

*“Follow you where?” the child asked.*

*“In my den! I live with other animals there, and they all bow to me and do everything I say. They recognize I am better than them. They will surely recognize you are, too. Say — if you follow me inside, I will ask each one of them to give you their mantles, so that you won’t feel cold. It’s a glacial night.”*

*“It is a glacial night,” the kid agreed. “But one mantle will suffice.”*

*And since the child wanted to go home, they grabbed a mantle from one of the servant lions and went on their way.*

*A she-wolf saw him wander through the trees, so she left her den.*

*“You are lost,” the she-wolf announced.*

*“I am lost,” the kid replied. “How did you know?”*

*“Anyone who reaches me might be more found than most, but they’re as lost as everyone who enters this forest.”*

*“I don’t understand,” the kid apologized. “What are you going to offer me?”*

*The she-wolf laughed. “Offer you? Why should I offer you something, when I’m so happy having it all?”*

*“Nonetheless,” she added. “I might give you something. But I want your apple and your mantle.”*

*The kid frowned. They had been so humble, until now — had taken one fruit only in the face of an infinity; one mantle only even if the night was freezing. And now they were supposed to give them up as well? How would they reach home? How would they survive hunger and cold?*

*“Aren’t people supposed to help lost travelers?” the kid responded, because the nuns had taught them so. “We shall treat every suffering soul as if it’s God himself.”*

*“Ah, but you forget,” the she-wolf taunted. “I am no person, and you are no God. I am a wolf and you are a child.”*

*And like animals do to children, like Gods do to people, the she-wolf ate the child.*

*The next day, the nuns searched everywhere for them. The people of Rengoku screamed their name — walked the forest up and down. Upon finding a bloody piece of clothing and the headless body of a child, they lowered their heads and wore their grief.*

*Three days later, a silhouette appeared at the edge of the forest. The child saw a nun kneeled on the ground, praying upon a small grave.*

*“Hello,” the child told her. “Are you lost?”*

*And thus the forest became the Forest, and the kid lived].*

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The train was filled to the brim. It was only a mixture of dumb luck, Chuuya’s mastered guard-dog scowl, and the general unnerviness people’s shoulders tended to assume when Dazai smiled at them — that dropped them on a row of empty seats.

They spread a stolen map in the middle seat, taking up more space than necessary — a move that gained them several dirty glances. Sweet pooling under his bandages, Dazai showed them his tongue.

“This is the *Forest*,” he explained, as the train swept across rusted tracks. He tapped the map. “Capital *F*. The locals call it that, at least. It surrounds Rengoku entirely — According to Beatrice’s email, the train should leave us at a ten-minute walk from the town.”

“Why did they give it a name?” Chuuya asked, around a stolen lollipop.

Their foreheads and knees almost bumped against each other. Dazai felt the childish need to start a pushing fight, head to head, just to get revenge for his stolen coat — hanging around the boy’s shoulders to hide the bloodied results of *Golden Demon*’s gashes. Tight on wider shoulders but exhilaratingly brushing the ground — Dazai couldn’t decide if he wanted to mock or whine. He thought about Mori’s hands on freckled, scarred shoulders.

“Sometime after the *Great War*, a miracle of sorts blessed the woods. This gigantic wall that had been built as a defense was destroyed — the border just *blew up*. Some kid was the only survivor. Someone decided it was a sacred place,” He shrugged. “It didn’t help the people much. Rengoku was immensely hard to reach from the main cities, and a nearby factory blew up as well, ten years ago.”

“A miracle,” Chuuya echoed, skeptical. *Why is everybody so eager to find Arahabaki?*, he had scoffed, in Rimbaud’s face. “What kind of miracle? What religion?”

“Someone was healed, someone sacrificed, someone killed,” Dazai blinked. “Usually one of these. And Christianity, I’d assume. Beatrice is pretty zealous about that cross. Inconsequential, still — Religion is interpretation of faith. Holy always means *holy*.” A pause. “That’s what Q used to say, at least. In simpler words. *Whoever God’s it is, it hates me*.”

Chuuya grimaced, pushing the lollipop around. “I hate that stuff.” Sweets were as deadly as cigarettes, as far as Mori was concerned. Fifteen years olds were as deadly as the angriest man around.

He ate it in a very aggravating way; it involved teeth. Dazai was aggravated. He pulled it out. “Not very inclusive of you,” Some nearby passengers rolled their window down; he threw it out.

“*Bitch.*”

“Wet dog.”

“Beanpole.”

“Dust fairy.” He hooked his hands around the train straps; tilting back, he added, “Personally, I have attempted to follow the path of *seven* religions in my short life.”

“Yeah, *sure*, ” he snorted — not quite as if he didn’t believe him, but as if already imagining him bald and dressed in a tunic. “And how did that go?”

“Considering my one goal in existence, not too well,” Dazai answered, unblinking. “The monotheistic ones don’t like suicide in the least. Buddhism was pretty cool. Unfortunately, while they don’t condemn suicide, they’re much too big on life and how it links to the universe and its inhabitants, *yadda yadda*.”

“Isn’t that exactly your kind of thing?” Chuuya replied, curling an eyebrow. “*Life and death are not opposite but equals* or whatever your jigs are about.”

“Guinness Records will be amazed at the horrible imitations a common slug is capable of attempting,” At the end of the train, a child began to wail, painting a scowl on most passenger’s faces. “What do you presume God’s corpse might look like?”

The question tasted as absurd on his lips as it did deep into the other boy’s unmatching eyes, framed by overwhelmingly *normal* sunlight. His shrug might have delivered the final blow to the agonizing deity. “Like any other, I assume.”

“That’s fair,” he replied. He felt two gloved fingers press the middle of his forehead even before he spoke — it didn’t stop him from asking: “Say, what does a dog have against faith?”



The panorama running beside them was as gray as concrete, framed by wolf roads and hills of melting snow. Ever so chameleonic — enough to wear a suit mere days after he had joined the Mafia, and a leather jacket mere days after Professor N had called him a *clone* — Chuuya matched it to the very last uncomfortable dot.

“What does someone like *you* even care about religion?” he muttered, at last, taking back his fingers to drag lines across the window, transferring creases to glass, for the sake of leaving it dirty. “Aren’t you a fucking all knowing prodigy, supposedly? What do you care about God and his damn corpse?”

“Faith is an emotion,” Dazai pointed out. “I’m interested in those. As for religions — Humans have come up with smarter things, during the centuries, but hardly quirkier. It’s what you do with Physics, right? You enjoy it because it explains your Ability.”

“You need to get over this spying habit of yours.”

“I also hear you like poetry! Don’t you find it a bit useless to spend all that time studying stuff that fundamentally doesn’t matter?”

“It *does* matter,” he huffed, and Dazai tried to imagine telling the street punk who had tattooed his sole on his cheekbone that he would enjoy rhyming schemes, sooner than a sheep’s loyalty could last. Chameleonic to the point of sincerity. “History would be *shit* without someone to tell what people thought of it. And Physics explains the whole damn *universe*, not just my Ability —”

“Nothing more relevant than the discovery of what some drunken fool would think of love and the world, right?” He sighed. “The best thing about this burdensome world are its *people*. It’s what keeps them *alive* that matters.”

Perplexion waited for him in his facing seat; with the heaviness of every metal panel in his container, Dazai thought: *might as well*. If he could never understand, he might as well get as close to it as possible. “Don’t change the subject,” he chirped. “Everybody is calling what you did last month a miracle too, you know?”

“Codes,” Chuuya recited. “French, Japanese — I don’t even know. Gravity. All the stitches they gave me. Nothing divine about it.”

His fingers were intertwined on his lap. Dazai had been trying to prove his theory right for weeks, now — waiting to see them spasm, imperceptibly; the way his shoulders sometimes did; the way his eyes blinked a bit too erratically, at times. *Side effects*, Mori would have called them, in a more decent world.

In this, he had taken a look at those electrified bones of his, and told Dazai, more cheerfully than he supposed fanatic Professor N would have — *the price of scientific lighting is somewhat fascinating, isn’t it?*

*Does it hurt, sometimes?*, he wanted to ask. *Do you even feel it?* Instead, he offered: “Perhaps another attempt at self black-holization would make you more pious.”

His pause lasted an inch too long.

“If it’s what Boss wants,” he said, eventually.

*Me*, Dazai thought. *What about* —

“Still. What, did Professor N take you and your pseudo-fake twin to Church every Sunday? One *Holy Mary* for each minute in the tank?”

Chuuya showed him his teeth, dog until the end, fists tight in his lap. “You’re not funny, jackass.”

“Nothing about your life is remotely funny,” he replied, honest. “What else am I supposed to say?”

“We don’t even know who the *pseudo fake twin* is, anyway.”

His fingers twitched around the strap, again. Leaning until his side was plastered against the cold glass, he searched, then searched again. He wanted to put his fingers under the boy’s choker and *pull*. He wanted to cut him open.

*Ah*, he realized, after traveling inside his bones. *Jealousy*.

“Some of it was was interesting, though,” he offered. “Adam was — certainly something.”

Chuuya scoffed, but not maliciously.

“Hey,” He nudged him with one knee, overheated fabric against overheated fabric. He was always at reach. He was always letting himself be reached. Dazai thought him rather stupid; enough to be forgiven for it. “Dog. Tell me.”

“You’re annoying,” he muttered. Detached curiosity dragged his eyes through every passenger; uncaring, and yet *desperate* to be let in, after ruining his knuckles knocking. “*It* gets unsettled in sacred places. Louder.”

There were more useful words to waste. “Arahabaki.”

It wasn’t a question, but he nodded anyway. “It’s like — I don’t know. It vibrates. *Hums*. As if the ground recognised it — Fucking stupid. He’s all codes, not a god. Maybe I’m influencing myself. Kouyou dragged me to the temple on New Year’s Day. My bones almost imploded.”

“Louder,” he repeated. “Not just *loud*. So you *do* hear it.”

“Most of the time, yeah,” He shrugged. Dazai wondered if he knew his pupils grew wider whenever the god’s name fell from his lips. “Buzzes in the back of my fucking skull. I was scared of dogs when I was a kid. Kept telling the others I heard them growling wherever I went.”

*Fear of dogs*. Dazai wanted to laugh; the season had passed, though. “Can it communicate?”

“Not exactly,” Chuuya huffed. “It doesn’t have a *mind*. It’s *there* — A useless limb. I can ignore it, most of the time. But it’s *always* there. Like — like bathing with a battery, or drinking a shit ton of coffee. It always feels so tight.”

“What does?”

Blue and amber flickered to him again. “Me.”

*It doesn’t fit*, he had explained to Mori once, patiently, spread open on his clinic bed, bleeding from every inch of him. God’s corpse might just be the body that had fallen from the sky. Maybe, he had thought, he would be reborn if Dazai bled on his grave, on his last day. *It doesn’t fit, so I cut it out.*

“Does it like you?” he asked.

The boy snorted. “*Like me?*”

“It’s aware of you. Does it like you?”

His lips quivered. Chuuya wore his heart on his sleeve; a mask of its own right, when every emotion he cuffed around it was slightly enraged — just a hint out of control. As angry as a man could be for feeling it.

*No*, he corrected himself. For not feeling it enough.

“No,” the boy concluded, dryly. “It doesn’t.”

As good of a curtain call as any.

“You see that?” he said, knocking his knuckles on the glass. Chuuya’s eyes landed on the greenish river under the bridge they were crossing, embracing some abandoned houses. “That’s the *Kitanai Kawa*.”

A blink. “The *Dirty River*? Seriously?”

“Are you *seeing* that thing?”

Chuuya grimaced. “It does look like it would melt a man’s skin off his bones.”

“Because it *would*,” he offered, helpfully. “Or — Almost. Our brochure says that most of the toxic materials from the explosion of the factory ended up there. It — *Sanitized* itself a bit, with time, but the water might still cause several fascinating skin diseases and everlasting effects if not immediately removed,” He caressed the skull painted next to the line. “How —”

“No committing suicide on the job,” Chuuya shot down, immediately.

“You’re no fun.”

“Trust me when I say nothing would make me happier than your final demise.”

“You’re a true friend!”

“I am *not*, ” he said, pointedly, with all the might of a kindergartener ready to shrill the teacher’s name, “Your friend. You suicidal maniac.”

Someone cleared their throat. The woman gripping the straps next to their seats snapped her eyes away from them, holding her kid tighter.

They moved their heads closer.

Murmuring, Chuuya continued: “Speaking of *friends* — Did you hear about where they want to lock Q up when they find them?”

“I’m surprised *you* did. Is someone finally taking advantage of having chatty pseudo subordinates and a pendant for camaraderie?”

His stare was unamused. Chuuya had never quite known how to leave other kids with bloodied nails alone.

“What’s with the sudden care?” Dazai asked. “*The Owner* asked you to bring him the corpse of the weirdest kid around next?”

“I’d bring your bandaged ass, if that was the case,” he muttered. He hadn’t demanded his help for any new treasure hunt; from visits to *The Alley*, Dazai knew it didn’t mean he had put an end to them. “You talk as if their creepy ass doll isn’t *your* little-me.”

“If anyone here looks creepy is *you*, with those rusty tufts you’ve got for hair —“

“*Rusty tufts?*”

“— defying the Japanese medium type —“

“You look like a dead mackerel!”

“Slug!”

“*Attention, to all passengers,*” the speakers called. “*We are approaching Rengoku.*”

“Why would I be mad about inspiring *brands*, anyway?” Dazai made sure to reply, climbing to his feet in all the wrong ways. “Maybe I want to be buried as a successful man.”

“Buried,” the redhead echoed. “That’s why you want Q dead, isn’t it?”

Dazai folded the map. “*Ah*, accusing me of harboring such violent feelings for a sweetheart like Q —“

“You’re the only one who can control them,” Chuuya continued, undeterred. “Which makes you *necessary*. Which means that you can’t die, or Boss is fucked.”

“How long have you been munching on that? Ever since meeting the kid?”

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he insisted. “You don’t want to leave possible bombs behind.”

“You know what your problem is, Chuuya?” he replied. The train came to a stop; the backward motion almost sent him flying. “As most people, you tend to believe others just as you are — fundamentally good-intentioned.”

“I’m *not* —“

He leaned down, flicking him on the forehead. “Think of it like this: you protect people because you *want* to. Your beloved Yokohama, whom you turned into a black hole for,” The automatic doors opened, allowing the flood to escape into the cold wind. “Me? I owe people things. And I owe them to people who I *need*, if I want to end my life as I wish to. ”

“You could kill Q whenever you wanted,” Chuuya scoffed. “You could kill *yourself* whenever you wanted. You haven’t. You want me to believe it’s just because Mori doesn’t want you to?”

“You know how it is,” He bounced, longing for open space; longing for a place *away* from talks of death with the most alive thing around. “Not making the Boss mad is an essential step to becoming an Executive, is it not?”

The train station of Rengoku was a wood and metal box in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by tall trees and wild glass covered in melting snow. Strays offered untrusting eyes to the people disappearing into impatient cars and loving arms; and then it was empty. With loads of boredom to spare, Dazai skipped down the hill, dead to the other boy’s calls.

To punish the senseless cruelty of the wind whipping his uncoated frame, the third time they accidentally turned the wrong direction, he tripped Chuuya. In the time it took him to scream a *hey!* , he did a cartwheel, and he landed on his knees. He said: “Let’s play *99 Hangman Knots*. ”

“*What?* ”

They stumbled and tumbled down the hill, his voice filling every corner of the valley, uncaring for the pushes and the kicks and the rolling down with half intertwined bony limbs.

They turned, and Rengoku appeared.

The town was a ghost made of bricks. It seemed to sprout from nowhere at all, the grass and the trees and the dusty street abruptly interrupted by village houses and wood fences whose skeletons alone had been left. “Damn,” was the boy’s conclusion, surveying the far away cage of the Forest. Dazai considered making fun of him. He turned around, listening to the unnaturally loud *crunch!* of his shoes — the only sound for miles. “Nice place they’ve got here.”

The closer they got, the clearer the few outlines of the town became: modest buildings in decay, wild nature digging its way through the rock, and a solitary silhouette standing next to a surprisingly steady sign: *Welcome To Rengoku*.

Beatrice was waiting for them.

Her usual pastel figure was nowhere to be found; the long dress wrapping her figure was as black as the crows perched on the fence, and her hair had been tied up and covered with a veil of the same color. She didn't seem to notice them approaching, busy as she was fiddling with the cracked lines of her wristwatch. The haze acting as a secondary veil on her eyes dissipated, slowly — but it took her a few instants to turn to face them.

“Oh,” she said. “Here you are.”

“Here we are,” Chuuya confirmed, doing his best to hide his heavy breathing. “Brought any poison?”

“Must have forgotten it in the car.”

“Good for us. What personality are we getting today? Just to get on with the program.”

This time around, she flinched. “Can't say I'm sure.”

“Don't worry,” Dazai reassured her, widening his arms. “We'll figure it out. Have you regained any more memories? Flashbacks of sorts?”

“I...” She set her jaw, fingers stuck around her necklace. “My bruises. When I touch them, I get — I'm not sure what to call them. They don't *hurt*, but it feels like they should. You —” She hesitated, studying him. “You broke my arm.”

“I did more than that,” he corrected her.

She tightened her veil around her head, playing with the hems under her chin. “It was in your email.”

Dazai shrugged. “You had a right to know,” he said. “I wish for free reign on my death. If I can know how my corpse will end up on the floor, you can know what was done to yours.”

The woman studied him. “Corpses are never going to be anything but corpses.”

“They weren't, once,” he replied. “And memories can be forgiven too, can they not?”

“How human.”

“To forgive?”

“Not quite,” she said. Didn't add a thing.

On the fence, two crows cawed in unison.

“So,” Chuuya cleared his throat, as allergic to meaningfulness as ever. “Happy to be back home?”

A complicated expression morphed Beatrice's face. "If you think being here might get me the answers I want on — on V, I'm willing to try."

"Great news," he said. "Lead the way."

The air didn't quiver when their feet landed on the destroyed cobblestoned streets of the village — but with the way Beatrice's face fell, Dazai wondered if he had simply missed it. The dismantled buildings were barely recognizable — whatever she was seeing, it wasn't ruins and bundles of snow.

She led them unhesitantly, her black seams brushing the ground. Her fingers fiddled with her cross; at a second look, he noticed her lips brush — a silent prayer.

"You haven't been back since —" Chuuya started. "You know. Since V's death?"

"No," she confirmed. Her frown could have been either grief or guilt. "I was already living in the underground when I heard about the explosion. I wanted to come back, see if my parents..." She cleared her throat. "The man who took me in convinced me not to. Everyone had died. No reason to waste time."

"How old were you?"

"Old enough to stop caring, after a while," she replied. They circled an old recint, the metal of its entrance arch rusty and covered in ivy; behind was an abandoned kids' park, littered in fallen leaves and remnants of swings. "The *Nine Rings* wanted to punish the village. *He* told me they hadn't offered the protection payment, attempted a — A rebellion of sorts."

Dazai hummed. He jumped over the fence, leaves shattering under his merry steps, and settled upon a corroded roundabout. Attempting to turn it, he made a face at the hellish noise. "And you didn't quite believe him, did you?"

She brushed the sides of her dress, marble once again. "Everyone was always so *arrogant*, but — I don't think they would have rebelled."

"The *Nine Rings* seriously blew up a factory just to destroy a village?" Chuuya echoed, scoffing. He was eying his careful analysis of the roundabout with a pathetically interested face; only when Dazai took pity on him — and loudly sighed about *clearly needing a hand to turn it, Slug* — did he scoff and make his way to him. "Such a small place, too?"

"Didn't even have the face to kill them personally?" Dazai sighed, sitting down on the handle. "How pathetic. For God's sake, Chuuya, you have to push to the *left* —"

"I *am*, you dipshit —"

"The previous Boss had no objective but that to cause chaos," Beatrice replied — either uninterested or too distracted to pay attention to their spinning frames, nauseatingly going along to the accelerating roundabout. "Not unlike the Port Mafia's previous leader, he might have just begun to lose it, near the end. Perhaps it's inevitable, with our line of work."

She tilted her head to one side, then to the other — as if listening. Crows cawed upon the abandoned slide; something vaguely hostile bled down her blinking eyes. “He thought big messages to small threats would keep the big threats away. The whole area became dangerous for a while, and now there’s no village to pay protection money.”

“That’s why you don’t slaughter *everyone!*” Dazai let her know, voice rising to battle the vertiginous turns. The winter wind whipped him with viciousness; he laid his head back until the world was upside down. “There is no point in teaching lessons to a corpse! They are not there to learn it!”

“The Port Mafia has done worse,” she replied. Her eyes settled on a piece of rubble at her feet; she kicked it away, watching whatever memory had trapped her mind roll away with it. “Especially your Executives.”

“*We* have, and *they* have,” he agreed, easily. Chuuya yelped as he almost lost grip around the handles, unintentionally speeding them up even further. Grinning wildly, he let out a barely-there, *wooh!* “But none of us destroyed your village, did we? We are not your villain.”

Her lips painted a line on her porcelain face; white knuckles fit a marble statue just fine — but he couldn’t shake off the feeling of having said something wrong.

As she resumed her path — all but an order to end the games — Beatrice concluded: “You are villains all the same.”

He hummed. “And?”

It took them a few tries to stop the roundabout; Dazai face-planted onto the sea of leaves the moment he stumbled out. By the time they had managed to catch up with their guide, heads spinning, the centre of the village appeared in front of them.

Wild grass, rubble and rocks creaked under their heavy steps, caressed by Beatrice’s wind-like gaze. A building on the other side of what must have been a market square shone under the sun, its shattered stained-glass windows framing a rusted bell, swinging with the wind. On top of the heavy wooden doors: *The Sacred Institute*.

“Well,” Chuuya commented. “One hell of a reputation for an Institute.”

“One hopes they performed as satisfyingly as preannounced,” Dazai agreed. “Did you have to pray before every lesson?”

“Two times,” Beatrice confirmed, distantly. A gentle kind of teasing; a bad memory tossed and turned until its edges softened. “We would get struck on the nails if we yawned. Everybody came out of the Institute knowing it all, though.”

“That sounds like torture,” Chuuya grimaced, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He wondered if the ground was already holy enough to donate Arahaki its wake up call.

“People in Rengoku had a reputation to uphold,” she replied, like a recorder. “We’re enclosed by the *Forest*, a land of miracles. Thus, we are blessed. Blessed people have duties.”



“And curses,” Dazai pointed out.

“Yes.” Her frown deepened. “And curses.”

Chuuya cleared his throat. “So, this is where you three met?”

Raising one arm, she pointed to one of the broken windows on the highest floor. “In a little room. They used to bunk together. Always had, since they’d been abandoned on same day.”

“How do you even abandon a kid in such a small place?” Dazai mused. “You all knew each other. No ideas or whatsoever of who the parents might be?”

“It was something of a silent agreement,” she responded, after a few moments of thinking. “We all knew that it was *someone* here. They knew, we knew, everyone did. Nobody cared much. They’d been left to the church, so they weren’t wanted. What was the point of pointing fingers?”

Chuuya’s nose scrunched up. “Living here sounds like fun.”

“It wasn’t,” Beatrice scoffed, face fractured by her veil. “It really wasn’t. And yet —“

She breathed in. The ivy on the walls seemed to sing along.

“They would climb on the roof and throw rocks to my house,” she recalled. “We would talk on the phone. We tried to find each other — I had to climb on my roof too, but it was too far to see much. They would tell me about what fruit they’d managed to steal from the market, about their latest plan for when we would finally leave the village.”

*“You’re coming with us, of course, he always said. And V looked so annoyed about it. Bea doesn’t even want to leave. We don’t even know if Bea will live long enough. V wanted to be mean so badly, but he always just sounded worried. He would answer every call the same way. Won’t you say hello, Bea?”* she gulped. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t, and he...”

Silence embraced them, full of expectations. Chuuya threw him a glance; Dazai shrugged.

“Well,” the woman said, shaking the memories away from her eyes. “It doesn’t matter. We can go in, if you want. I’m still not quite sure of what you’re hoping to find, but —“

She stiffened.

Her lips stayed parted — her eyes settled on *something*. Dazai had barely time to watch her hands convulse, black gloves moving like scorpion tails in the cold air — and abruptly, she wasn’t there anymore.

“Hey!” Chuuya called, watching her run towards one of the buildings. “What are you — wait!”

They ran, enclosed by an upcoming storm that was nowhere to be seen at the horizon. It rose the hair of his arms, still — electricity and rust on his tongue. Crows took leaps into the sky, singing songs that were more screams than melody. Her veil whipped by the wind, they found

her hands plastered on the half destroyed glass of a window, eyes searching the dismantled skeleton of the house.

“How,” she breathed out. The glass moved along to her shaking fingers. “How are —“

“Dazai,” Chuuya called.

His gaze had settled on a crack in the wall of another house. His outline was shining red; he met his eyes. “There are people here.”

“Oh,” He blinked. “Are there?”

A sneaky detail in a two-way painting; once they noticed the first line shape something else, it was impossible to see past it. Behind the window Beatrice was studying were two boys, twirling around a kitchen; in another house a wrinkled woman, sewing; in a shop, a man bent over a working table.

Not one building was empty — the people seemed to merge with the greyish skeletons of their homes, as if their skin had grown along. Mouths open, no words coming out — their steps were too quiet.

It was their eyes, though, that made him pause.

“Corpses,” Dazai concluded. Warmth pressed against his back; Chuuya’s weight and fight-stance unmistakable. Their irises held the abyssal blankness of the end of a tunnel. In a lower voice, he added: “Like the ones at the Under Port, I bet.”

“But they don’t look wounded,” the boy replied.

“They could have been killed in any way. And if these are —“

“Akio,” Beatrice whispered, eyes stuck on the mechanical chase of the two boys. “But — Mamoru and — and Akio, they’re —“

Dazai *felt* a new idea spawn inside her skull. “Tenshi, *wait* —“

She stumbled upon the weight of those vowels — but it took her no time to disappear through the smaller streets, digging the earth as Chuuya cursed her out, chasing after her with one, two, three jumps on the roofs. *He knew*, Beatrice had said, *that I called this place my home — in spite of. I think he hated it for that. He hated everyone who had made it such for me.*

There was no need for introduction for the small house Beatrice fell to her knees in front of.

Even with its fallen roof and torn doors, it *looked* like her — the delicate curtains on what had once been windows; the handmade fence over a small garden. Floral, childish drawings covered the front door — a gift parents hadn’t had the heart to erase.

He knew who would be inside; Beatrice knew, too — and yet, the sound that escaped her mouth upon forcing the door down was more of a scream.

“Dad,” she breathed, stumbling towards the old silhouettes decorating the blown up counter of the kitchen, the broken TV with cables that didn’t need the fixing that was being ordered upon them. “Mom, *mom* —“

Their shoulders were dusted by rubble, remnants raining occasionally from the hole in the roof; it covered the woman’s hands too, as she gently mixed it with the flour on the counter.

Dazai felt Chuuya’s eyes pierce his side. He accepted their call — met them from the other side of the threshold. They traveled down his figure, landing on the other side of where his gun rested — no time to wonder if he had been looking for confirmation or permission. Dazai had never particularly cared about either of them. Mutual understanding, then, he supposed. Necessary collaboration.

He nodded.

“Mom,” their guide was calling, hands tight around the old woman’s shoulders. “Mom, Mom, it’s *me*, Mom, listen to me —“

He stepped through the open door and shot Beatrice’s mother in the head.

Both their reactions were visceral: the woman’s body was blown back by the impact, crashing against her kitchen with a hellish clank. Not a sound came out of her mouth, though; or perhaps the shout leaving Beatrice’s lips covered it.

She threw herself in the older woman’s direction; then, as if a switch was flipped, she turned to Dazai. “*You* —“

Chuuya appeared from seemingly nowhere, slamming against her shaking frame and dragging her away from the kitchen area. One touch of his gloved hands sent her flying to the opposite side of the room, landing next to the TV her father was still fixing, unbothered. When she tried to reach out to the man, Chuuya stomped one boot to the ground

Invisible cement crushed her body; when she screamed, it was half curses and half desperation.

“*You*,” she screeched, terrifying eyes behind a black veil. “*You sons of a bitch!*”

“Nothing personal, Tenshi,” Dazai replied, calmly, making his way to the mess of pans and rubble on the ground. He knelt down, cleaning the old woman’s face — the red trailing from the hole in her forehead kept drawing lines down her wrinkled features. “I apologize, Grandma. Nothing personal against you either.”

“*Mom!*”

“She’s fine,” Chuuya shushed her. Dazai didn’t move his gaze away from the woman’s open eyes, still stuck in their peaceful bubble. “Like the corpses we told you about. She’s dead, Beatrice. She doesn’t feel a thing.”

That much was clear. The woman was still locked in that mysterious floating state — not an inch of suffering marked the tilt of her mouth. Her hands were seemingly reaching out — as

if looking for their missing dough.

“Doesn’t feel pain,” Dazai listed. “Obeys invisible orders. Is allegedly dead, and yet doesn’t appear so in the least. So, we can conclude...”

The hand he offered didn’t wait; Chuuya immediately handed him one of his hidden knives. Under the sound of Beatrice’s questions and shrieks, Dazai turned the blade and sunk it in the woman’s chest.

“*Stop!*” She could only move her head like a madman. “Stop, *stop* — what are you *doing* —“

“She’s dead,” Chuuya echoed, eerily blank. “She’s already dead. It doesn’t matter.”

“You don’t know that —“

“You *knew* they were dead. They’re alive because of some shitty Ability, nothing more.”

“*Fuck you!*” she cried, thrashing around. The *thump!* he heard could only belong to the TV her father was fixing. “*Fuck you*, fuck you, he was right about you, *he was fucking right* —“

Dazai cut a square down the length of her bust. He sunk his fingers in the removed flesh, pulling the two sides down like book pages. The pool of blood under them widened, infiltrating his shoes — he searched through bone and viscera, assaulted by a smell so thick his eye watered.

“Anything?” Chuuya asked.

He scrunched his nose. “How distasteful.” He sunk one hand through the woman’s rib cage, moving her heart aside and reaching out to her lungs. “Bingo,” he concluded, when his thumb closed around something too hard to be viscera. He pulled it out, polishing it with an edge of the woman’s ripped shirt — a cross, thick and damaged, oily with remnants of bodily fluids.

Chuuya’s hurried steps echoed behind him, following the hiss of a weight being laid on Beatrice’s body. Dazai felt him crunch down next to him, reddish aura dropping the temperature to goosebumps.

He sniffed the treasure. “Shit, it smells like death.”

“It *is* death, moron,” Dazai reminded him — reaching out with his free hand, tapping the back of the boy’s one.

Chuuya studied the serene lines of the woman’s face. “So everyone in this village is under the influence of these things? Why?”

He tilted his head. “Oh, for a way easier reason than whatever you’re thinking.”

“Which is?”

Beatrice was still struggling against her invisible restraints. He hummed. “To make her a gift.” Bringing the cross close to his mouth, Dazai called out: “Hi. Am I talking to Dante?”

Unmatching eyes widened. “No, *wait* —“

“We are here, as you know,” he continued, meeting Beatrice’s gaze from the other side of the room. At some point — some distant plan — she had quietened down. “We’re waiting for you.”

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” Chuuya snatched the cross from his fingers.

From where he was kneeling on the ground, fixing cables for a TV that had been pushed aside, Beatrice’s father stood up. His bulky frame looked unnatural; he raised his arms with the agility of a mechanical toy, peaceful, as he opened his dress shirt.

Black peeked through, red lines blinking faster and faster.

Chuuya shouted something. Dazai felt him push him out through the nearest breach in the dismantled wall, hands lighting up. To his pounding head’s chagrin — and the hungry impact wave sending them flying’s joy — they weren’t fast enough.

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*His name was Dante, Beatrice said. As for V’s name, we never found out.*

*He didn’t particularly like that name. The nuns had given it to him, while V had been left on the threshold of the Institute with a piece of paper so dirty no other letter could be seen. Rengoku is a small place. It was founded decades and decades ago, by western immigrants. We all had unusual names. Dante hated his own the most.*

*The first time he introduced himself to me, the name barely escaped his lips. I thought it was weird, but I didn’t say a word. I had my motives for doing some things, and they tormented him too.*

*I told you the first story every child in Rengoku was told was the one of the Forest. I lied. My first story was another kind of warning.*

*The first of them was as boring as physical illness.*

*I was born sickly and weak; I barely survived my first months of life. I grew up surrounded by blankets and medicines, waking up in the middle of the night with a weight on my chest and my parents’ tearful certainty that I was going to die. The town doctor had assured them that I*

wouldn't live past fifteen with the kind of remedies we had in Rengoku. I had to be brought to the city, as fast as possible.

My parents, of course, refused. People of Rengoku didn't leave Rengoku. They stayed and married and made children, lived and waited for the Nine Rings to visit, paid their tribute, prayed and died. No one in town critiqued my parents for their choice. No matter if it would kill me. No matter if they brought me flowers and cried upon my bed whenever the sickness got too bad.

I could resent them for it. I don't. The three of us knew there was a reason for my sickness. The three of us knew it wasn't something I could heal from.

So I waited to die.

In the middle of it, I met a person who refused to bow his head in front of my parents' decision, and wait for my funeral.

"Why won't you say hi to me?" was Dante's question, every time we met. His voice would crack, youthful and childish and too old at the same time, and he would ignore V's pull to his sleeve. I always said no. He always asked again.

We met everyday. He and V would hide behind my classroom door and peek into the window, trying to make me laugh. The nuns would get mad at me. For some reason, that never stopped me from laughing.

For a while, it was just this — them spying on me, lacking the courage to actually say a word. I knew they would find it, someday. Dante was too obsessed with it. V would have done anything for Dante. In the end, I was right.

"Hello," Dante told me, one day.

He was shorter than me. His presence, though, could have filled the town and Forest to the brim. V's silhouette, half hidden behind him, with his quietly enraged eyes, might have destroyed them.

I didn't answer him. I knew better.

That was the start of it, of course. This was always the question running through my mind: why me?

I found out much later that Dante had discovered my secret while searching through the archives. I do believe that's what birthed his obsession: the things I could do for him. But that was long after he started peeking on the window of my classroom, all wide eyes and childish wonder. That was long after the first time he held his hand out and told me: "Let's be friends."

They didn't need a trio. Of that much I was sure. He and V worked seamlessly together, intertwining and crossing each other as easily as breathing. They weren't the only orphans at

*the Institute, but they had been abandoned the same day. V thought it was fate. Dante thought it was no coincidence. And yet, it took me long to understand it wasn't the same.*

*They didn't need a trio, but we became one all the same.*

*V was never particularly happy about the idea, but he idolized Dante too much to say a word about it. Used as he was to the two of them — to a twin bed in a dark room of the Institute, exchanging the few secrets left between two people who told each other everything — I was a question mark.*

*Most days, V was too scared to say a word to anyone who wasn't Dante. He would stutter his way through adults' questions and hold onto his friend's sleeve. Slowly, he started talking to me. He would hold my hand when we laid on the roof and counted stars, would climb out of his window to talk to the phone with me, would tell me about the things he liked and the things he hated. Loud noises, crowds, strawberries, woods, me.*

*But he never managed to look me in the eyes.*

*Was I happy? Was I relieved when the most reluctant of my first friends stopped hating me? Not exactly. Friends were a new thing for me. The other kids pitied me too much to like me. Most importantly — He didn't stop hating me, and I didn't stop wondering what I was doing wrong. We found a balance. We found it for Dante's sake.*

*Rengoku wasn't the kind of place where people were happy. It was the kind of place where they lived and prayed and died. And yet, Dante was an ecstatic kid.*

*Why shouldn't he be? He had everything he'd ever wanted. He had V by his side, and he'd somehow roped me into joining their little adventure team. He didn't care about how temporary my existence was; refused to talk about it, unless it was to spit on my parents' lack of action. We would explore every inch of the town, go as far into the Forest as possible, make fun of the way the nuns sang at dawn.*

*There was only one problem in his life, as far as we were concerned: the Nine Rings.*

*I was used to them. We all were. Once every two weeks, the lines of suited men would come and demand our money. The town was theirs, they reminded us. The town was theirs and they protected it, and we should be thankful. They would stay the weekend: grab the nearest women and bring them to their cars, to the one motel in town; grab all the liquor from the bar; grab more money than what we owed them.*

*Whenever someone complained — a parent or a woman, an old man or a kid — they would grab their guns and shoot.*

*Rengoku's streets were cobblestoned. The blood was always hard to wash away. We stayed quiet through it.*

*Dante hated them with fierce passion. We would lock ourselves in their room whenever the visiting days came, and he would walk up and down and scream obscenities about them. The Nine Rings were the scum under his shoes. They had killed his and V's parents, he believed;*

*that was why they'd been abandoned. They went around as if they owned it all, unpunished for all their crimes — rewarded for it, even.*

*Punishment was something of an obsession for him. His faith was severe, more like that of an adult than of a kid. He didn't need to be told to repent for the bad things he did; V and I would find him kneeling down in prayer whenever our games brought us to areas we weren't supposed to go to, whenever we stole something, whenever we did something wrong.*

*He would hit his own fingers and take away his own privileges. He would make us watch.*

*"Bad people deserve to be punished," was his second favorite sentence. "But not in secret. What's the point?"*

*"Bad people will be punished after their death," I would remind him. "That's what the nuns say."*

*"After death..." he would sigh, contemplative. "That's not fair, is it? Why do good people have to suffer here, but bad people can be happy here and suffer over there? It's not fair."*

*V would never say a word. I don't know what he thought about the whole thing; a part of me believes that he didn't agree with Dante's obsession. Perhaps it had more to do with the face he would make whenever self-inflicted pain struck his friend's features. Perhaps he didn't care about Dante punishing the rest of the world, as long as he didn't punish himself.*

*But Dante had a strict code for bad people. And to him, the Nine Rings were the worst people.*

*When I was thirteen, one of the Nine Rings decided I would be his entertainment. My parents tried to explain my sickness — I could barely run on a good day, and my heart was too frail to survive rawness. The man, of course, didn't care.*

*This is what I remember from that day: meeting Dante and V's horrified eyes as the man dragged me to his car. They were hiding behind a bush. I couldn't see it, but I knew V had his hand around Dante's sleeve, keeping him down. I remember being grateful for it; being grateful that at least one of my friends was smart enough to not challenge the unchallengeable.*

*And then I remember this: Dante mouthing me my own, very solution. That was how I found out he'd discovered my secret.*

*Perhaps I should be ashamed to say that I didn't hesitate. I'd been warned against revealing that part of me since the first accident, when my parents and I had discovered the only true cure to my illness and the reason I had one in the first place. Thirteen years of commands shouldn't have been so hard to forget. Perhaps I should be ashamed to say that I didn't feel a thing when the man dropped dead, one hand on his car door.*

*I'm not.*



*The Nine Rings couldn't understand how the man had died, but since the wind could have blown me away and he had no wounds, they stopped thinking about it. "He thought about fucking her too hard," was their laughing conclusion. Then they drove away.*

*Dante never forgot. And since he knew my secret, he decided it was time to reveal his own.*

*When I think about it, it's all rather amusing. We were three kids, and he thought our gifts were blessings. I thought they were weapons left in the wrong hands.*

*I don't know what V thought; I know he had started holding onto my sleeve too, had started looking all the way up to my nose — not my eyes, but it was better than before. I know Dante had decided we would do something about it all, about all the wrongness in the world, and we were stupid enough to believe him. He was so bright. Why shouldn't we?*

*Of course, it didn't work.*

*I remember that day better than I remember the death of the Nine Rings' man. We had locked ourselves in their room. I remember there was no blood, because that wasn't how it worked. I remember us three holding hands. I remember the way understanding had dawned upon Dante's face; how quick he'd been to cover it up with a coldness I'd never seen on him before.*

*Quick, yes, but not enough. And the blink of honesty I saw then is what haunts me at night.*

*It's the most foolish thing a man can do, I think, and yet they do it all the time. Not understand what something means until they feel its lack for the first time. This much I knew: Dante and V had been left on the doors of the Institute on the same day, and since then, they'd never been apart. This much I knew: Dante would have given V up for my sake. This much I knew: he was a liar, first and foremost to himself.*

*I remember V's eyes, the reassuring smile he'd offered Dante right before and the complex one he'd given me. He died, and I still don't know what it was supposed to mean.*

*I killed him, and I still don't know what it was supposed to mean.*

*Cowardice is an easy way out in the hardest races, and I was a sickly child. There was no blood in my hands, but our experiments had stained countless innocent travelers whose disappearance no one would notice and — most importantly, because I was and still am an egoistic child — I had caused the death of a person I loved. I had eaten and slept with my parents after killing a man from the Nine Rings. For some reason, I couldn't do it anymore.*

*Cowardice is an easy way out, so I took it. I ran, and I didn't stop until I reached Yokohama. I ran, and I didn't stop until the Nine Rings accepted to take me in.*

*There, I met one of those miracles Dante liked to talk so much about. There, I understood that Rengoku had never been anything but a prison — a bundle of shadows, each one darker than the one before. It had to be, I thought — it had to, because the man who took me in was light itself.*

*He was different from anyone I had met before. He grew me into someone who wouldn't fear looking at herself in the mirror. He taught me that there was more to me than illness and guilt from the past.*

*I lost him too.*

*In his name, I searched for a seal that would give me enough power to carry out his legacy. And to wash away V's blood from my hands, I started killing. To this day, his is still the first and only corpse I have nightmares about. To this day, I wonder if Dante ever did punish himself for that bad thing we did.*

*A woman came, a few years later, a demon on her shoulder and heartbreak on her bleeding chest. I dream of her, sometimes. I dream of Dante's hand holding mine under the stars, of V's dead eyes accusing me of ruining his life, of the one man who tried to save me and died for it.*

*But I dream of her the most, I feel. She tore the Nine Rings apart. She believed it.*

*A few months ago, another woman came: me.*

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There was a child, sleeping behind the bushes.

The Forest was bathed in sunlight, golden rays breaking through wild branches climbing to the sky in waves of falling leaves. The grass underneath him was wet with dew, filtering through his clothes. It was the warmest he had ever felt.

“She used to say she would cut your tongue off if you didn't quit it with the stuttering, didn't she?”

V was smiling. It was a distinctively unfriendly expression, no matter the curious eyes he kept on the sleeping child's frame, between his standing legs — a thousand miles from the man conversing on social anxiety pills with a stranger.

“Sometimes,” Dazai confirmed, sitting up. The grass reached his elbows; he ran his fingers through it, and offered: “She never did like metaphors.”

Birds sang from the branches. The woods went on and on from any and all sides he could drag his eyes too, infinite in an unrealistic way. Slumber rattled his bones; a lulling crib — he

licked blood off his lip, and hummed along to the awakening of the scratches and bruises covering his body.

*Explosion*, he recalled. *Explosion*, and —

“Beatrice told us a story about a kid who got lost in the Forest,” Dazai said. He nodded towards the sleeping frame V was studying. “Was it him?”

“I don’t know,” V replied, shrugging, “Wasn’t it all of us?”

The child shifted. Bandages peeked under the hand he had dragged to his mouth, sticking his thumb in between scratched lips. Dazai had always carried his hair too long.

“Which part of this is real?” he asked. His right wrist ached in a strangely tactile way; when he looked down, he saw nothing but bandages.

V tilted his head to the side. His motions were that of a stranger; he inhabited his body as if unused to it. “Why do you ask?”

“Tenshi stole information on Abilities from our Archives,” Dazai explained, easily. “You already know Abilities don’t work on me. Still, this place is not real, clearly.”

“Clearly.”

He raised his arm; dangled his aching wrist. In the distance — a distance so wide, it might even outrun that Forest — he heard the metallic juggling of cuffs. A flash pulsing on his eyelids — stained glass windows, blood rushing to his feet, red hair and velvet gloves.

“I’m chained up somewhere,” he said. “I’m assuming you worked your cross-magic on Chuuya, but it wouldn’t work on me.”

“The Forest isn’t an Ability. It’s a landscape of miracles,” V blinked, somewhat patronizingly. “You can’t nullify holiness yet, can you?”

Dazai studied the never ending view. It tasted concrete under his fingertips; the rush of wind whipped his bleeding scratches with stubborn existence. “Maybe not. None of this is real. Are you?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.”

A new voice appeared, high between the trees — deeper than it had been that morning, dangling and twisting in the same waves it had in an old warehouse, behind an illegal fighting ring. “That might just be more complicated than you think.”

“Tenshi!” Dazai exclaimed, pleased. She was half-laying on a branch, black veil discarded and gown spread; somebody had made the unwise choice of putting a rifle in her hands. “You could have at least brought some wine along, when you betrayed us.”

V hummed. “On a first name basis, I see? That’s nice. My Beatrice here has never been good with friends.”

“You would fucking know,” She cocked her rifle.

“We should get to it,” V leaned down, pushing the sleeping child closer to the brush — hiding him from the kicking sun. “You should be Dazai Osamu, if my information is correct.”

“In the flesh,” He offered a bow.

“And your partner,” he continued, “You’ll forgive his absence. He’s currently dealing with his own sins with some version of us, somewhere in this forest. Not everyone can escape judgement as easily as you. Nakahara Chuuya is his name, correct?”

“Legally,” Dazai confirmed. “Alas, he’s not my partner. I *have* been attempting to convince my Boss to officially insert him in our database as my emotional support dog, but I fear it might be assumed he’s capable of offering — any sort of *pacific* support.”

“That’s good to know,” V said, distracted. “My name is Dante.”

The wind howled. Calmly, Dazai watched the child’s fingers twitch; his arms hug himself tighter.

“Forgive my question,” he started. His wrist was still aching; if he moved his hand just *so*, he thought he could knock his knuckles against another pair. “But have you sinned in dishonesty at a local pharmacy, lately?”

Dante laughed. “I apologize for that. The person you spoke to was V. I wouldn’t have been so merciful as to advise you to leave me be, but he’s always had too big of a heart. It’s all right. I forgive him.”

“How compassionate,” Dazai said. “But does he want your forgiveness? Did he ask for it? Otherwise, it’s somewhat unfair.”

He smiled.

“*Unfair*,” the man echoed. He tilted his head; set his eyes on Tenshi’s distracted, empty-eyed frame, traits softening and hardening at once. “It *is* all so very unfair, don’t you think?”

“The confessional is in the town,” he let him know. “I can take you there, if you want.”

Tenshi snorted. “Your partner said something very similar. A bit more prude, though.”

“Not my —“

“He said that, too,” she cut through.

“It *is* unfair, don’t you think?” Dante said, once again, as if he hadn’t heard a thing. He looked at him with something like pity in his eyes. “Being given a world at our disposal, and

being told most of what we do with it is sin.”

Dazai shrugged, raising a hand. “I wasn’t really raised religious.”

“You were raised guilty. We all were. Knowing mistakes will go unpunished as long as they can burn bright enough to leave a sigh,” The man frowned; he kicked the grass in a too-childish move. “What if you can’t? What if flares want heaven as well?”

Watching the man morph his features into any sentiment was disorienting. His face was undoubtedly V’s, crooked nose and young features — even his shirt sported a cartoonish pun, this time involving monks.

“So that’s it,” Dazai concluded. “You’re playing God in the name of flares. Is it fun?”

“Not really,” Dante sighed. “Used to be. Used to be harder, too, though. Goodness and badness are complicated to see through human eyes — the weight of responsibility used to crush me.”

“You could simply not do it,” he proposed.

“Oh, no. I have to,” He tilted his head to the side, again. Blinked. “Your partner doesn’t agree. Sort of marvelous, how he’s able to concentrate on what I’m saying, despite the — Oh.”

Tenshi snorted again, disgraceful. “*A child who has been given a powerful Ability, and who’s convinced himself it gives him the right to do whatever he wants* — he says. ”

“How hypocritical,” Dante huffed. “Isn’t that basically what he is? Gods tend to lack humbleness, I suppose. Say, Dazai, how come you didn’t tell him you knew Rengoku was a trap? It got him killed, after all.”

A beat of silence passed. Dazai got the feeling it wasn’t either Dante or Beatrice’s pause.

“I did try to communicate it,” he offered, at last, unconcerned. “The wonders of Morse Code. Overestimating the intellect of slugs is a lesson I will certainly not forget.”

“You don’t seem worried.”

“Not particularly,” he confirmed.

“So young, and yet so deeply stained,” Dante murmured. “I would like to believe your dreams are tormented, but I’m not so sure. I felt it, when you were tormenting my Tenshi — The leaking *fault*. ”

Dazai nodded, interested. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“You have some gal, calling yourself human.”

His lips twitched upwards. “But there’s nothing to do about the dog, correct? If I understand your Abilities correctly, you’ve managed to reach a Singularity. Not much to do against one

of those.”

On the branch, Tenshi tensed up. “What did that bitch tell you about my Ability?”

“That’s not a very nice way to refer to your brainwash-less self,” Dazai tutted. “Your walking dead army — They’re not quite dead, but they’re certainly not alive. I’m assuming they’re stuck in a limbo. Some place not different from this one — the people calling you *The Poet* swear you can give them an Heaven.”

“Or an Inferno,” Dante confirmed. “They can come forward as they like — Repent, offer their bodies for a chance at forgiveness. It doesn’t mean they will all get the same afterlife. It would be,” A smile. “*Unfair.*”

“Except it’s not an afterlife. It’s a never ending hallucinations — an excuse to use their corpses.”

“They are certainly not aware of it. Where’s the harm? I need hands, and they need judgement.”

“To be clear,” Dazai asked. “What’s the scale, here? Yokohama? The world? Have you been gathering these —“

“*Souls,*” Tenshi spoke up, at his pause, bored. “That’s what he calls us.”

“Yes. How poetic!”

“I’m glad you think so,” Dante commented. “To answer your question — Places hardly matter. We shall all be judged. It might take a while, but everyone will return where they rightfully belong.”

“Yokohama is just the beginning, then,” Dazai concluded. “The testing field.”

“Something akin to it. I have to say, this city is certainly a lair of devils of its own right. It was hardly difficult — finding sinners. You just have to look.”

He settled his eyes on Tenshi’s rifle. “And what is the difference between those sinners and her?”

“For one,” Dante said, “She will never die.”

“But everyone else will, if you release the grasp of your Abilities on them.”

“Once everyone has received their judgement, I will see no reason to keep an army alive.”

“But you can never be done with it,” he replied. “Because Tenshi will certainly get sick again if she doesn’t use her Ability, doesn’t she?”

The man’s face seemed to fracture itself — the moving ground of a beginning earthquake, rattling the sunlight only as far as it would wash it. No word came from the woman on the

branch — she threw her rifle into the grass, right at Dante's feet, and stared at the sky with a blankness that could not be natural.

"At least, gaining from what Beatrice told us," Dazai continued, undeterred. "She spent her childhood sickly and tormented by what she could do — until she killed that *Nine Rings* man. Perhaps it has something to do with life forces," He blinked up at her. "People die after you *greet* them, don't they?"

It took Dante mere seconds to reconstruct himself — an exercise in the name of expertise; the modeling he put his more-alive puppets through. "I'm impressed," he admitted. "Perhaps I shouldn't be. You are missing one single piece."

"Which is?"

He leaned down on the grass — picked up the rifle. His fingers caressed it, as if they could still find trace of Tenshi's skin on it. "My Ability — *Divine Comedy* — allows my voice to influence only people who are thirty three seconds from death."

He whistled. "How specific."

"Was a pain to discover," he agreed. "Of course, it was all meant to create *balance*. Powerful Abilities require conditions — It might just make their User less inclined to use them. It's all about containing human nature — Isn't it, Nakahara?"

No answer. Subtly, Dazai moved his fingers in the grass, pressing against the cold metal and the flash that wasn't there — searching.

"Anyway," Dante shook his head. "I was lucky enough to find my other half. The one who completes me. And not in a Singularity, as you seem to believe — Simply in a perfect match."

"My Ability completes you," Tenshi muttered. "Not *me*. Or else you wouldn't change my personality like a spinning wheel."

Inconsolable, Dante murmured: "Your reluctance sticks with every single one of them, though, does it not?" He sighed. "I wish forcing you to use your Ability on yourself hadn't been necessary. *So Gentle And Virtuous She Appears* is a gift for the eyes, but your corpse wasn't one I ever wished to hold."

A veil of disgust covered her face. "That's how I know you're not trying to emulate V, at the very least. He would have *loved* that shit."

"She kills them," Dazai summarized. "Then, with that nice wristwatch she has, I assume you count down seconds — Her Ability doesn't kill instantly. And once the right time arrives —

"I come in," Dante concluded, still gazing adoringly at his companion. "Isn't it just *harmonic*? Judgement Day, brought by the first man and the first woman. Punishment and reward, gifted by love itself."

"Say, why is the Port Mafia going to be judged among the first ones?"

His smile widened. “You understand — It is rather complicated to create *Souls* in your beloved Yokohama, when you people work so hard to keep all the sinners to yourself. Your beloved balance has to tip left or right, at some point. It is inevitable. I’m ready to be the tiebreaker.”

“Oh,” he sighed. “I know someone who will be terribly happy about that.”

“Putting an end to you might take some time — But we have waited millennia for Judgement Day,” Dante continued. “My *Souls* should be launching their first attack right now, I believe — Tenshi did tell me it was best to begin when *you two* were out of the city.”

His arm was rattled — viciously enough that it *pressed* against his eyelids — visions of stained glass windows, of the silence — of Chuuya’s rage, dangling next to him from hanging chains. *Fucker*, he thought he heard. He wondered what Chuuya’s limbo looked like. *Fucker* —

“Worst of all,” Dazai sighed, “Chuuya’s sticky hand is touching me. This truly is a bad day.”

Dante chuckled. “The Demon Prodigy and his thousands of secrets. It’s a true shame I will never be able to see your limbo. How many plans are you hiding under those bandages of yours?”

“Who knows!” he sing-sang. “Perhaps not even one. You?”

“Me?” The man showed him his naked hands. “I’m not hiding anything. I’ve been sent here to punish those who believe they can stain this world with their dirt and not receive any punishment. God is real — so are his chastisements. Unfortunately, they take too much time to arrive.” A sigh. “It’s not fair, is it? The people they hurt *deserve* to watch them suffer while they’re alive. What’s the point, otherwise?”

“That’s why you chose the *Nine Rings*, ” he guessed. “Because they were destroyed before *you* could get to them. You caught two birds with one stone: got Tenshi back and created them back from dust just to torture them.”

“Precisely,” Dante nodded, enthusiastically. “But do not fear. Most of your mafiosi aren’t like them. The civilians, either! The dreams I sent to them are beautiful. Now, they don’t have to worry about a single thing. They can rest in their hearts’ deepest desires and give me their hands.”

Devotion dropped from his eyes; he started at Tenshi through blinding sunrays. “Life is much more beautiful when you don’t have to worry about living it yourself. Isn’t it, my love?”

She opened her mouth, leg dangling from the branch, abhorrence dropping down her cheeks.

Abruptly, her features went blank.

With hazed eyes, she agreed: “Yes, it is.”

“How romantic,” Dazai observed. “You love her so much, you left her in our dungeons.”



Webs bloomed on the window of his features. “I never asked you to hurt her.”

“You knew it would happen,” he replied. “You know our numbers. The blood on our hands. You want me to believe you don’t know our methods?”

“George Kingstain is paying the price of his crimes,” Dante insisted, eyes still focused on Tenshi.

“Because you made him one of yours.”

“And because one of yours killed him on sight,” the man sighed, contentedly. “The Port Mafia doesn’t forgive traitors easily, do you? It was certainly one bother less. I only regret not being able to feel his demise. My Ability doesn’t go that far.”

“Still, he died a member of the *Nine Rings*,” he let him know. As subtly as he could, he raised his arm, dragging his wrist up. *A scar*, he thought, *there’s a scar right on Chuuya’s* — “And he died attempting to hurt her. You certainly cared less than you did at fourteen —”

Dante’s fingers clenched around the rifle, and without even moving his gaze from Tenshi to aim, he shoot a bullet right through his shoulder.

He felt lighting in quick motion — the rumble of the rifle, echoing across the trees, not even moving the child under the bushes from his sleep; the pulsing wetness in his skin, the muscles of his arm on fire, the grazed skin of a wrist that wasn’t his — of a scar.

A beat late, he felt the pain.

Two beats later, he was hanging from his wrists inside the abandoned Institute, only one of them connected to familiar skin — and then a bone was snapping, and a bullet was being fired, and someone was groaning, and he was falling and falling and *falling* — and he was landing.

Under the bushes, thumb in his mouth, the child slept.

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There was a scar on Chuuya’s wrist.

The sky was red the first time Dazai saw it — a thunderstorm with no lightning, framed by crimson clouds raining divine blood onto a field in the outskirts of Yokohama. He had

forgotten to bring a marker, so his hands were free. Chuuya's nose tickled his ribs. He had gathered his gloves and put them in his pocket.

A small, black dot — right at the end of his palm, where two blue veins intertwined between fading freckles. Stained; something was *stuck* under the skin — not trying to get out, not trying to unravel. There.

He made sure Dante's bullet would graze it.

Chuuya's solution to the signal, he discovered, hanging from the ceiling of the Institute — was to snap his own thumb to free his hand, grab Dazai's gun, and shoot the chains keeping them hanging.

From then, it was white noises — one side of his body dropped, leaving all his weight to be held by his injured arm. Pain travelled like spreading webs on a glass throughout his body, the hole in his shoulder widening with every breath.

Gunshots echoed; Dazai's head landed on the concrete with enough violence to raise vertigo.

The crash of Chuuya's body was distinctively louder. When he felt his body only half drop onto his own, pulled by the point of contact keeping their palms attached — a metal band crashing their hands so close he couldn't feel blood pulsing — he pulled him off the destroyed pew.

"Your hand," he croaked. He settled his free hand on his shoulder, unsurprised by the warm blood he found on his fingers — his other one spasmed in its cage, desperate for space. "Your — Can you —"

"Come on," Chuuya replied. Urgency mixed with ache, making him sound as drunk as he had after Beatrice's wine. "The water will —" He paused; a slip up. "We need to — He's attacking the Headquarters."

His stumbling body almost fell against his own; Dazai blindly grabbed his arm to keep him from collapsing. He heard him hiss, dragging their chained wrists to his injured hand to cradle it.

"You're under their Abilities," Dazai said. His tongue felt like sand. He had the vague idea of standing up, somewhere in his head — the stained glass windows were beautiful to look at, despite the dust. "I can't nullify it without them."

"Tough shit," Chuuya climbed to his feet, the bundle of bone and blood held to his chest shaking. He was dragged up. "They might have left hours ago. The attack might have started *hours ago* — It's getting dark outside, who knows how long we've —"

A strange sound came from behind the heavy doors. A march; the howling wind. Blood kept oozing off the wound on his shoulder; his eye was blurred. He listened to the heartbeat on the wrist pressing against his, and asked: "What did he show you?"

“None of your fucking business,” Chuuya snapped. He took one trembling step forward; then a more confident one. “I’m killing that motherfucker and getting out of this mind control shit. No thanks to you.”

“You’ll be dead in twenty seven seconds.”

“I know.”

“You can’t just up and kill him or —“

“I *know*, can you —“ He breathed out from his nostrils, only offering him his shoulders. “You knew it was a trap. Stop acting like you didn’t expect this to happen. Tell me when you’re feeling just *magnanimous* enough to let me know *why* it had to, and *move* .”

Dazai stared.

*It’s rude to analyze the unaware*, Mori would have tutted — amused in that way that meant he *could* keep going, but he *would* be reprimanded; just for the fun of it. *The fascinating loses shimmer once it knows itself special, though, doesn’t it?*

*Trust*, he considered. Perhaps it was the blood loss, pooling under their leather shoes. *Foolishness?*

“I tapped your hand,” he said, curiously.

That got him to finally turn, even as he forced their joint hands to pull the doors open, unmatching eyes on fire. “You tapped my hand.”

“Port Mafia *silent escape plan*,” Dazai clarified. “Three taps on the knuckle mean bomb nearby. All the lower ranks know.”

“I was taken in by Boss’ right hand man the day I joined,” Chuuya replied, incredulous. “I didn’t *know*. You tapped my *fucking hand*?”

A weight slammed against the doors.

He ripped his gun from Chuuya’s limp grasp, leaning his ear onto the wood to listen.

“There’s at least three of them,” he concluded. Better to strategize; better than whatever that convo has meant to be. He studied their joined wrists. “If I get you free, you can use your Ability to —“

“We’ll need to steal a car, if the *Souls* came with vehicles. The station must be closed by now,” Chuuya interrupted him, gulping down the way he clenched his wounded hand in a fist. “And someone needs to fight against whoever they’ll send. We can’t both have one hand incapacitated, and your shoulder —“

“And you can’t break both your hands,” Dazai added. “Or we won’t be able to help home. So —“

“You need to kill them. I can try and steal a rifle from whoever you put down, but —” He grimaced — handling a trigger with a broken thumb wasn’t the best idea.

He tapped the injury on his shoulder with the tip of the gun, exploiting the electric jolts to wake himself up. “Alright, then.”

He raised his gun and pushed the doors open.

A reconstruction of the scene would only appear much later in his mind — the lifeless glares of raggedly-dressed women and men, their mechanical motion pointing weapons at their faces; the setting sun painting the ruins of Rengoku blood red. Through the haze of pain, Dazai pulled the trigger until his thumb needed no orders, and ran.

Well directioned pushes from Chuuya were the eyes on the back of his head; more and more *Souls* appeared from every ruined street, the once busy people inside the houses joining the fight with empty eyes.

By the tenth bullet he had put into a man’s forehead, they managed to step close enough to the convulsing body for Chuuya to grab his fallen revolver — and to *notice*.

“They’re getting up again,” he said, pulling the other boy behind a fallen wall. On the other side was the apocalypse — crawling figures holding onto their weapons, marching and climbing and writhing no matter the bleeding gashes of their bodies.

“They won’t stop until we cut their legs off,” Chuuya spat out. Now that he saw him under the full light, Dazai noticed the lingering signs of the explosion on his body — whatever healing consequences Dante’s power had, they couldn’t do it all.

One particularly nasty cut went across his cheekbones, climbing the bridge of his nose and separating his face in two halves — something that would certainly scar. “They might crawl with their arms, actually. But we can’t waste so much time.”

It was with an unexplainable sizzling shiver down his ribs — that Dazai realized he hadn’t seen his naked hands in an endless while.

Abruptly, he pulled him down. The rain of bullets running on top of their heads bounced uselessly on a mountain of rubble at their backs.

“Some of them aren’t from the town,” he said. “I recognize them from the missing files, so they must have —”

“There,” Chuuya hissed, pointing their joined hands to the further end of the town. “Cars.”

“They might chase us.”

“Better on wheels than on foot.” His destroyed fingers gripped the revolver; a jolt of suffering struck his body. Still, he pulled his chin up. “Run.”

Bullets flew behind them, their rhythmic melody a disturbing contrast to the absolute silence the *Souls* fought and fell with. Dazai shot them down with ease, his aim trustable as ever —

and somewhat useless, given their resilience to stand up again.

With an unfamiliar sort of thrill, he let himself fall into a seamless dance — pulled by a single breath out of Chuuya's mouth; unhesitant about leaving his shoulders naked.

*I always end up thinking you'll understand*, Dazai thought. He wondered if it could have been an apology, with different people. That was how it worked. He offered a hand and Chuuya knew which finger to grab — he gave an inch and Chuuya shouldered his way inside every plan he came up with, fit where he shouldn't, *stole* a mile.

Jelly legs managed to do their job, dragging them to the short row of pricey black cars crowding the entrance of the town. They crunched down behind them, running along to the rain of bullets digging into the other side of the vehicles — until Dazai shot the window of a car.

Under the deafening burglar alarm, Chuuya punched the webbed glass, sticking his hands in.

They crawled inside. Dazai settled on the driver seat, their joint wrists falling on the gear shift out of necessity — he slammed the door shut right as a bullet passed through the destroyed window, lighting-quick in brushing Chuuya's nose.

The boy let out an embarrassingly high yelp, voice cracking. "Start the fucking car!"

Dazai's shoulder protested the tight grip of his fingers around the steering wheel. His eyes ran across the dashboard.

He gulped.

"*Hello?*" Chuuya insisted, violently trying to locate their chasers in the rear view mirror. Bleeding fingers shaking around the revolver, he put a bullet in every car wheel he managed to reach. "Hurry up!"

The rear window exploded — pierced by two more bullets. They lowered, knees bumping against the car, under the storm-like sound of marching on cobblestones.

"What are you *waiting for* — "

He threw up the truth from whining lips. "I don't know how to drive."

A pause. Chuuya's glare could have destroyed Rengoku a second time. "*What?*"

"I *said* I don't know how to —"

"I heard what you said!"

"Why would you *ask* then —"

"It's colloquial!"

Irritation pulsed between his eyebrows. "That's not what that word means —"

The outside mirror imploded next.

“Can you just — “

“I never learned!” Dazai insisted, throwing his gun in Chuuya’s lap to search for a key. His feet danced on the pedals. “There’s always someone from the organization dragging me around — Hirotsu says I’m not old enough to drive, anyway —“

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’m fifteen!”

“You’re *a mafioso!*”

“Why don’t *you* drive since you’re so smart?”

Chuut’s eyes widened a single fraction. His lips parted — then fell closed again.

He pressed his hands on his eyes until he saw stars. “You don’t know how to drive either.”

“Listen —

“You *don’t know how to* — “

“— Albatross *promised* to teach me — the Flags had a whole *success or failure* party in plans, some stupid shit involving two different cakes — “

“*How* do you *not know how to drive?* You have a motorcycle!”

“That is *not* the same — I know how to parallel park, Lippman — Well — He did say to just leave it anywhere hydrants wouldn’t explode —”

“That’s useless!”

“How don’t *you* know it, asshole? Fucking burgeoise-kid looking —“

“*Excuse me?*”

“— what, you think there were cars in Suribachi City? *It was a crater!*”

Unannounced, the neck of a rifle pierced through the glassless window of Chuuya’s door. The mouth brushed Dazai’s temple, pushing the redhead’s back into his seat like a crowbar on his neck. He met a woman’s hazed eyes — her finger tickled the trigger.

“Start the car,” Chuuya croaked out, choked by the weight. “Start the fucking car!”

Dazai’s fingers stuck the key in the ignition. He turned it, then slammed both his feet down.

By some miracle, one of them managed to hit the accelerator, right as Chuuya raised their trapped wrists and pushed the rifle away from his temple. The stray bullet scratched the

frame of the windshield, landing between his legs — the *Soul* was pushed away by the impact.

“Go, go!” Chuuya ordered, coughing. “Push *something*.”

“That’s useful,” Dazai replied. He smashed his fingers on the buttons surrounding the satnav. “You know, this would be a *wonderful* suicide scenario if you weren’t —“

A mechanical, vaguely female voice filled the panicked silence: “*You will reach your destination in: three hundred and seventy-four hours.*”

“Not that!”

“*Shut up!*”

Dazai grabbed the gear shift with his handcuffed hand and *pulled*. The car started moving backwards; he heard a promising *crunch!* and the *thump* of the armed woman falling from the hit.

“*Forward!* Forward, not —“

“Can you die?” he snapped.

“It’s like *Motor Race III* —“

“This is nothing like —“

He moved the gear in the opposite direction and stepped on what he assumed was the accelerator — with a roar that couldn’t be good for the wellbeing of the engine, the car flew forward, clumsily rolling down the hill.

“Can’t you go straight?” Chuuya protested, by the third time he was violently pushed against his car door. “Watch the bush —“

“There’s no way this is so complicated,” Dazai muttered, ignoring him. His feet stumbled on the three pedals, abruptly braking and restarting the journey. His headrest gave a new shape to the back of his skull. “I’ve flown a helicopter, this can’t —“

A bullet divided the air between their seats, breaking out a spider web on the windshield. They turned their heads, searching over the back window.

“*Shit*, ” Chuuya cursed, fumbling with the two guns in his lap. Black cars were speeding behind them, soaring down the hill to catch up. A man was leaning out of his window, rifle pointed in their direction. “Go faster —“

“I can’t go faster than this,” Dazai insisted. The pulsing of his shoulder had become a background noise, pressing against his eyes with the viciousness of poison. He paused. “I don’t think.”

“The *thing* says you can go up to 160 —“

“I don’t think that’s possible —“

“That’s what the speedometer says.”

“Why do you know it’s called a speedometer and not how to drive a car?”

“Shut up!” Chuuya’s injured hand grabbed the stolen revolver, bleeding down on the metal in its attempt to close around it. The boy’s curses didn’t help the process. “Just, drive, I’ll —“

He curled his body onto the space between the seats, breaking Dazai’s injury even further apart with the pull. Squinting, he began firing at their chasers.

Peeking into the rear view mirror, Dazai’s heart fell lower than his stomach.

Faster than his mind could follow, he traced their steps back to the first moment they had grabbed the weapon from the fallen *Soul*. An old conversation resurfaced into his mind — and *abruptly*, the lack of slowing down from the cars behind them made sense.

“You don’t know how to shoot,” he concluded.

Chuuya elbowed him in the side of the head — *maybe* involuntarily. “Fuck you, I do.”

“You evidently *don’t!*” He started laughing, disbelieving, car skirting between trees. “Have you ever even *held* a gun?”

“Of course I *have* —“

“For any other reason than stealing the bullets and throwing them with your Ability?”

Chuuya fired another shot; from the mirror, Dazai watched it destroy the left light of the first car stalking them. “I — It’s just a better method!”

The aggravation to overcome his brain seemed to freeze it; he felt every bone in his body curl up, ready to choke the life out of him. “You’re *genuinely* stupid, aren’t you.”

Another elbow. “If you could stop and throw bullets with your fucking hands, would *you* use a gun, fucking smartass?”

“*Yes!*” he pointed out, agitating their joined wrists. “For situations like *these!*”

“How was *I* supposed to *know?*”

Dazai groaned, tightening his fingers around the steering wheel and pushing forward. The side-view window had been long destroyed — at least one of the tires had been hit, if the jumping rhythm of their run meant anything.

The car swerved up and down the rough street, skirting along the tall trees framing the road. A familiar view appeared at the edge of his vision — an alternative path.



“What are you doing?” Chuuya protested, when the sharp turn he took dropped him on his wounded shoulder. Dazai focused the lighting strikes of pain down his leg, pushing on the accelerator as they followed the nonexistent passage through the trees.

The branches they ripped off as they went drew lines down the painting of the car, and one of them managed to get a few leaves stuck in his hair. “Are they still following?”

“Yes! And you’re closing us in!”

With a shot that, miraculously, managed to make the armed woman behind them drop forward, Chuuya pulled himself up again. Dazai felt a bullet hit the back of his seat, the impact throwing him onto the steering wheel mercilessly — dragging the other boy down with him.

He spluttered: “Stop pulling me!”

“You stop pulling *me*. I’m trying to drive.”

“And you’re being *shit* at it —“

“And *you’re* shit at shooting *and* driving, so who’s worse?”

“I drive a motorcycle just fine!”

“Yeah,” he spat out, shivering. “Sure you do.”

The margin of the shortcut was an intersection, the natural road stabbed by familiar train tracks. Dazai frowned, searching through Chuuya’s curses, the sound of bullets and the fatigued car, and his fogged up mind. Another instrument joined the chaos of sinphony.

He stilled.

He pulled the wheel all the way down again. Chuuya yelped, thrown backwards by the motion, as he landed messily against the dashboard. A trail of blood pooled down his temple and cheek; he snapped: “What are you doing —“

The car swerved, dragging several branches down and repainting its side in the patterns of the ancient trees. The wheels almost gave up under the sudden pressure of the tracks, as he pushed on the accelerator until they accepted to climb up.

“Are you — driving on the train tracks?” Chuuya’s eyes widened. “*Dude*, even I know you can’t — there’s a bridge!”

Dazai kept his eyes forward. “Yes, Chuuya.”

“You want to drag this *thing* on a bridge with no railings?”

“Not exactly.”

The car skipped, throwing both of them to the side. Their handcuffed hands grabbed the gear shift, using it to hold onto their seat. He waited to find their chasers in the rear view mirror again, waited until the wheels climbed up the tracks on the bridge, then turned to find Chuuya's eyes. "Hey. You ever seen the *Water Demon* music video?"

Something in the gaze the boy offered him told him he believed the shoulder wound had permanently gotten to his head. "*Shit*, Boss will kill me if I made you stupid."

"Just answer the question!"

"The Hirose one?" Chuuya rambled, eyes on the approaching cars. "I mean — Once? Maybe? Her Pop phase was kind of disappointing —"

"You lack taste," Dazai snapped. "*Chuuya*."

He met his eyes.

Realization lit his face up in several colors. Slowly, he turned to study the sides of the bridge. The *Kitanai Kawa* stared right back at him, grey waters meeting funerary eyes.

"Oh," he said, lowering his eyes to their joint wrists. A stray bullet passed right by his cheek — it was less deadly than the grin slowly making his way to his face. "Oh, I *despise* you."

Dazai slammed his foot on the accelerator. Right as the chasing cars crowded close enough to bump against their hood, he turned the wheel all the way to the right — hurling their car off the bridge.

The fall was a series of snapshots — the sudden lack of footing, the rush of wind through the shattered windows, the grunt out of Chuuya's lips as he *pressed* against his car door, pushing it open. Ungloved, and thus *unfamiliar* fingers strangled his own; Dazai didn't know how long it took for them to intertwine.

With a pull that seemed to widen his wound until the chasm went all around his shoulder blade, he was dragged out of the car, into a free fall towards the river.

"Now!" Chuuya called.

Dazai gritted his teeth, plastering his caged hand as close as possible to the metal of the cuff — pressing and *pulling* until it hurt, pulsing along to the blood drooling down his chest. It only worked for a single second — but their hands were separated.

Combat shoes landed on the side of the car; it shone crimson and bright against the falling sun, that unnatural light bleeding from Chuuya's tense frame. His hair floated around his head like a halo — Dazai searched for the sun behind him, and couldn't find it.

"*Blow them to pieces!*" he sing-sang.

The car bounced back with the swiftness of a feather — when it struck against the cars gathered on the bridge, it weighed more than the entire structure.

Gold bloomed in the sky, the explosion rocking the earth with the might of the apocalypse. It was so white it was blinding; it thumped against his ears until he could hear nothing but screeching white noises and his own blood.

All-encompassed in that deaf darkness, hand bleeding from the released effort of separation, he felt fingers intertwine with his own.

Then, they were falling.

## Chapter End Notes

things i looked up while writing this chapter

- trading terms
- english for secretary
- is french an actual language
- scar textures
- yosano akiko, pictures

trivia: the police dog, tadeo, carries the most common japanese dog name i could find (according to my friend); moreso, the name means “courageous”.

introducing officer matsuda, who we won't see for the last time! murase and chuuya's relationship was one of the most interesting parts of stormbringer, in my opinion — so i decided to explore some of it with a similar character. his bond to murase is entirely made up, of course; but i do think it isn't too unbelievable that he might have had some support in his sheep-observing business. hope you'll like him

see you next time <3

# AT

## Chapter Summary

*The sun wasn't yellow, he found. The thing dragging him to the border was red and stubborn. With ferocious intensity, he hated him for it.*

*His contempt had never stopped Nakahara Chuuya from doing a thing, though. Pushing against the invisible force plastering them down, they swam to the white circle on their glass roof.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter vi.*

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*Case number: 72937783*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. took part in the attack issued by [...]*

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He despised ties the most.

They weren't as all-encompassing as other pieces of fabric his carcass twirled inside of — they didn't stick to his skin like teeth in wet concrete when it was summer, like the bandages. They didn't frame his wrists and his calves and his ribs, butterfly-thin and *everywhere*, just another reminder of a corporeality he had not asked for.

It wasn't that he didn't want a body. It was more of a distant jealousy — the knowledge that he might not have had it, and it might have been better.

*The ties*, he explained to a cat, once, so perfectly knotted around his neck, lighter than the bandages but less detested by Mori's eyes — *pay attention*, he had tutted, behind him, arms encircling his shoulders to tie it for him, never mind that he already knew how, *if bloodied, you should at least look respectable* — the ties have one defect: they aren't nearly long enough to hang himself from.

Sinking, he found another: they stole air.

*Dear*, she would say, *dear, breathe*.

Pain exploded in the bridge connecting his neck and shoulder. Electric shocks forcefully separated his eyelids, allowing the dense water to blur his eyes. It was dirty, somewhat sour on his tongue when a storm of bubbles surrounded him. There was nothing to see — nothing to hear but the muffled rush of water and the aching cries of his shoulder.

*Oh*, Dazai thought, with sudden clarity.

He raised one hand and fought the heavy waters to slam it on his own mouth, relaxing every muscle of his body. *Oh, this is perfect*.

Every inch of him protested the abdication, kicking and punching and tearing the walls of water down in an effort to swim up. There were rocks in his pockets, he dreamed. There were rocks in his pockets, and he was going to die. There were —

Red thunder flashed in the glass of his eyes, slashing one straight line through the darkness. For a moment, he thought the smeared traces floating in front of him were blood.

Hands cupped his cheeks, shaking him so violently the bones of his nape creaked. The darkness bloomed into a blue-and-gold so bright it felt slightly unnatural — into red serpents curling in the water and caged by a familiar, despised piece of clothing.

A rope clenched around his lungs, squashing them until his head started spinning; he was pulled up.

The sun wasn't yellow, he found. The thing dragging him to the border was red and stubborn. With ferocious intensity, he hated him for it.

His contempt had never stopped Nakahara Chuuya from doing a thing, though. Pushing against the invisible force plastering them down, they swam to the white circle on their glass roof.

As soon as they broke the surface, jaws falling to suck in as much air as possible, they regretted it.

Dazai's bullet wound became a secondary concern — the flames that littered every inch of his skin, eyes, and lungs took precedence. A prickling sensation climbed inside his mouth — a throat ache he initially attributed to his desperate gulps of air.

Keeping his eyes open made his head pulse. Mud was everywhere — under his bandages, under his eyelids, inside his mouth, on the walls of his lungs, in the tender skin of his wound. Breathing was a painful chore, the air itself turning into venom.

Somewhere over the beating of his heart, he could hear Chuuya's wild breathing pattern and sharp motions. Every step got them underwater again, until the world became a rhythmic alternation of blurred and muffled followed by scorching confusion.

"Shore," he heard his voice croak, "*Now.*"

They tossed and turned against the currents, reaching out blindly until their hands grasped the rocks and grass of the shore. Dazai's shoulder broke in two halves with every haul — Chuuya's destroyed hand could barely even keep upright.

He made peace with the possibility of that poisonous monster devouring his eyes — he could feel pustules and burn marks appear on every inch of uncovered skin, seeping under his clothes and drawing flames on his chest.

"The," he heard Chuuya choke out, half a scream and half a cry, knelt on the ground. "The houses — the, we need to — melt my *fucking skin* —"

His sight had been reduced to clean stains of the world on a dirty window; they stumbled their way up the hill. The house was a small square of bricks covered in ivy. Broken cobblestones lead to a front door that only came down after they slammed both their bodies onto it, heavily enough to make Dazai's head spin.

Ignoring their throbbing skins, they drunkenly made their way up and down blurred rooms, uncoordinated and feverish. Bruises bloomed all over his skin from every piece of furniture

he was pushed against, every fall caused by blindly stepping on each other's feet up the stairs. It took three tries to find a bathroom on the wrecked balcony of the first floor — all the other doors locked, too far and too useless — and a string of curses coming out of Chuuya's mouth when he mistakenly used his shattered hand to punch a hole through the first door.

Dazai registered a tiled floor and blue walls, the rising moonlight painting a white cloud of light on ancient looking furniture — a bathtub, towered by a shower-head slowly dripping on the dirty marble.

“Fuck,” Chuuya was still chanting, hysterically, as he dragged him to the shower. Pain seethed through his every word, voice rough as he gulped down those watered flames. Their hands, destroyed and tied and pale, fumbled with the faucet, clicking until the stream of water started raining from the shower head. “*Fuck*, motherfucker, it *burns* —“

Everything was black, was red, was blue, was the white of the lighting slashing wounds inside his skull, inside his wound, on his knee when he bumped it against the marble to hurry inside that saving cage. The first droplets of water hitting his skin felt like heaven; the moment his battered skin registered their touch, though, it only burned harder.

His back hit the wall, his feet slipping on the wet ground. The rain cleaned his eyes, sank its nails on the mud on his face and hands and body and tore it apart with no mercy. A stranger — familiar, *enemy* — body fought him for the cold water spotlight; they pushed and kicked and punched and fell and stood up again.

“The, the clothes —“ Dazai gasped. His bandages merged with his skin a bit more every second, seething and hissing against the burn marks and the pus and the pustules. “It’s — sticking —“

The shoving away turned into dragging closer, as handcuffed hands did their best to tear their owner's clothes apart quicker than the other. *The tie*, he thought, *the tie first*, the weight of Mori's elbows on his shoulders, his breath near his ear. Chuuya's hat ended up somewhere in the sink, his pants upon the shower head. His coat, still around the boy's shoulder, fell to the ground with a metal clank. The pills, he thought. The pills —

Nothing had ever felt as good as the *tip tap* of the water drops on his marred flesh — he could feel every single of them; could feel it slip down his throat.

“Your — the bandages,” Chuuya croaked, rubbing his hands on his eyes. A half curse of pain escaped from his lips — forgetting his incapacitated hand. “The skin, you need to —“

“Don't.” His body was starting to fully register how cold the shower was — that it was still winter outside, that he was wounded, that he wasn't alone, that he was alive. Teeth battering, he threatened, in Mori's voice, in a fool's plea: “Don't touch me —“

“You need to clean the skin —“

“*Don't* —“

“I’m turning around,” Chuuya snapped. “*I’m turning around* , just — do something about it.”

Flesh, he thought. His vision was filled with it. *Skin*, he scratched the previous idea with, because the valleys of his tongue were ugly and dirty, and jealousy wasn’t an excuse to explore them. There were spiral scars on his back too, he noticed, chased by raindrops and lines of red that might be hair and might be blood. He stood there, under the storm, and it was flesh, it was skin, it was a boy his age. He wore red underwear.

Dazai’s lungs felt inhabited, his bones overweight.

“I’m not going to watch,” the only thing alive for miles swore. His hand was a red mess, dropping blood on the marble of the bathtub, a living wound just reopened. He could see it shudder. The thumb was all wrong. “Just — hurry up.”

He stood there, watching that fake rain slip down the too pale, too unfamiliar skin. The bandages hung from the edge of his elbows, from his shoulders, in his useless fingers. *You’re gonna ruin your depth perception*. He opened his mouth, then shut it again, so heavily he bit his tongue.

Tasting blood, he readjusted his flesh upon his skeleton. He declared: “I’m done.”

Promptly, his knees gave up on their quest. Their joint wrists dragged the other boy down as well; in a mess of limbs and blood and mud, Dazai’s head hit the wall, under Chuuya’s curses.

“Your wound,” he muttered, once he managed to breathe in, so quiet it was barely audible over the rush of water.

Dazai followed the direction of his gaze, finally studying the result of Dante’s rage. The bullet was still there, visible and stubborn, surrounded by pink skin and an astonishing quantity of blood. Dazai didn’t know when it had reopened for the last time — he watched the red trails pool down and hummed.

“You need to,” He gulped, biting down a grin. “You need to pull the bullet out.”

“*What?*” Chuuya snapped. He was pale under the moonlight. It didn’t fit him. “You should just wait until —“

He glared. “Until someone miraculously realizes where we are? It’s been in there for too long, and that water will only infect it more. I’m sure you’ll be a great nurse.”

“We can’t even stitch it —“

“Sure we can,” He wearily raised his free arm, slamming the faucet shut. He grabbed his pants from where they’d been thrown onto the floor, searching inside the secret sewn pocket of the belt — extracting his prize: a needle.

Chuuya let out a hysterical chuckle. “You’re fucking *joking*, I hope? I can’t even —“ He dangled his hands, one a mess of skin and bones, the other chained to his own. “I’m gonna



put a bigger hole in your chest, and you'll bleed out like a stupid fish on the shore —“

“Ah, that,” Dazai blinked at the metal bracelet around their wrists. The bleeding scratches they'd caused each other by rubbing and trying to escape were bright. Red, white, marble. Water weakens metal. Marble. In his confused state, he nodded. “Yes, right, I'll just —“

The first burst of pain went unnoticed; so did the second. By the third time he had slammed the handcuff on the edge of the bathtub, he started feeling the impact on his knuckles. He could hear Chuuya's muffled protests, could hear the marble screech and the metal fight back.

*Flesh*, he thought Mori had said, *bandages and flesh. Would you rather I cover your eyes?*

He pounded the hand down on the marble again and again and again, the *thump thump* of a drum, of a heart. Red, white, marble. Skin, flesh, crosses. In a last resort, he decided to take a note out of Chuuya's book, pulling his hand out in a sharp motion.

He'd broken many bones. A thumb wouldn't make much difference, he mused, cheerfully. Watching the lifeless finger hang crookedly from his finally free hand, he smiled — only after his throat started aching he realized his mouth was morphing the flames climbing up his bones into a scream.

“...*fucking stupid?*” Chuuya was screaming back at him, hands grasping at his wrist, fingers red from the forced bracelet and fingers red from their matching injury. “Are you stupid, are you stupid, what the fuck did you do, why did you *do that* —“

“Now you have free hands! That's great. You're going — You're going to have to tear a thread from the fabric on your own,” Dazai laughed, breathlessly, helplessly, throwing the needle in his lap. “*Ha* . I'm going to throw up.”

By some miracle, he had the presence of mind to lean his head over the edge of the bathtub and empty his stomach on the floor. The taste was rusty, a bit of blood and a bit of missed lunch. Had Chuuya eaten, he wondered? Probably not. They were supposed to meet after lunch, but he never —

He spat on the ground. Dragged his hand to clean his mouth; used the wrong hand; giggled out a wail. “Ah, this is annoying.”

Eyes wide and angry, Chuuya passed the thread he'd ripped from a piece of clothing between his lips, trying to make it go through the hole of the needle. He paused to pinch the skin between his eyebrows. Dazai hadn't been frowning; it was, he assumed, just an excuse to keep him awake.

By the time Dazai had settled his nape on the marble, the boy managed to work out the thread. He watched him gulp, studying the wound.

“I can't use my Ability,” he concluded. “You would nullify it —“

“That's certainly unfortunate.”

“You can’t pass out.”

He whined. “That’s even more unfortunate.”

“You can’t pass out,” Chuuya insisted. “Don’t you fucking *dare* pass out. You have to tell me if you feel like you’re going to bleed out.”

“From such a *teenie-weenie* wound?”

“Since you just smashed your hand into pieces, who the fuck knows,” the other replied. “Don’t even got alcohol to make you stupider than you are.”

“Morphine is a *wonderful* invention.”

“I hate it.”

Dazai stared. “Why would you —“

“I don’t like being pumped with *stuff* when I’m unconscious,” he snapped, cutthroat. “Can’t even check what it is, because — Guess what. I’m *unconscious*,” His eyes fell on his shoulder again. “I’ve never stitched someone else’s wound.”

“Of course you haven’t,” he groaned, then chuckled again. “Why should you have? Doesn’t need to learn how to shoot, doesn’t need to learn how to heal from wounds he *doesn’t get*, doesn’t —“

With no warning, Chuuya’s fingers — shaking from something too electric, too *involuntary*, to be fear; as if risk was a call for torture; as if he was hanging from a bloodied spear again — sunk into his raw skin.

*There was something deeply intrusive and addictively uncomfortable*, his mind had the delicacy to remind him, *about actual fingers digging and searching and tearing injured flesh apart*. He felt an inch of pity for all the corpses he’d disfigured and men he’d tortured; the viscera he’d snooped through.

Muscles too tired to fight against it, head hurting too much to do anything about it, his body decided shutting down was the only option left.

A slap on the cheek tore his eyes open, startling him. The fingers finally managed to grab ahold of the bullet, extracting it with a curse from their owner.

“Stay awake,” the boy himself growled. “Hey.” Watching his eyelids drop again, he slapped him on the opposite cheek. “I said *stay awake!*”

A whine escaped from his throat, tired.

The bullet was dropped somewhere on the floor. Red fingers busied themselves with piercing the skin and pulling the thread, and piercing the skin and pulling the thread. Dazai’s head fell back. He could feel his heartbeat in his eyes. He couldn’t feel anything.

The oxygen was igniting material. Water drops bounced on the marble floor, leaking from the old shower head.

He watched droplets run their race down Chuuya's freckled skin, dripping from his eyelashes and landing on the skin under his lower lip, on his shoulders, on the lines of his chest, on the bruises on his knees. He studied his hands, unfamiliar and naked, sunkissed and bloody, human and not quite; carefully, he tried not to touch Dazai anywhere that wasn't the wound.

*Plastic*, he mused. Was it truly supposed to be plastic, codes, and fake red lymph? *Plastic*, he mused, *why paint freckles on a piece of plastic?*

"Hey," he rasped. "We match."

Chuuya didn't even raise his head. A spasm went through his injured hand, though.

Realization slammed into his chest right as the boy leaned down to snap the thread with his teeth. It lasted less than any non violent thing in his life — he felt the wet tip of his nose brush his marked skin, and that thread was dirty and wrong and a terrible idea, and Chuuya's lips were chapped.

"This isn't like Arahabaki."

He flinched. Victory traveled through Dazai's veins; an immoral kind of feeling, ugly the same way his reflection was. Find the target and shoot. Find the soft skin and *pierce* it. Find the problem and solve it, whether the pained party desires it or not.

"We don't even know if he can control you," he reminded him. "Whatever happened in the Forest was not his Ability. Maybe —"

"Dazai," Chuuya interrupted him. "Shut up."

"This isn't like Arahabaki," he insisted. "This is not you being controlled."

A scoff left his mouth. He threw the needle to the ground and cradled his hurt hand, grimacing. "Like I'd fucking let Arahabaki control me."

"You let him share your space."

"*Share space*," the boy echoed, sharply amused. "It stopped being funny when —"

His Adam pome climbed and fell. His forehead dropped on the edge of the bathtub, tired rage painting his features ten years older, ten decades younger. "It was never funny."

Dazai tightened his lips. It was cold; he could feel it fully now. They were in a bathtub. There was no one else.

"I'm not going to apologize," he said.

It seemed redundant, to explain something so trivial, when Chuuya had already understood deeper things — less and more important ones, things he'd kept close and hadn't noticed

were gone until his hands had felt cold.

He wasn't sure if that was what the boy wanted — he assumed so. He'd learned to tiptoe in an underground clinic, to know what flicker meant something awful and unnatural had left his mouth. His features were a familiar *chiaroscuro*, one most of those who dared to offer an ear to him ended up being subjected to.

*That boy, he just doesn't understand.*

Chuuya's wet strands dangled in the air, darker than usual, seemingly longer. The texture of his finger was weird when wet — was weird when *naked* — but Dazai *despised* the familiarity their touch in the middle of his forehead arose. It smoothed the creases there out; it left a mark, like all that his mind couldn't quite give rationality to.

Blankly, he concluded: "I know you won't."

"That's good."

"It's not how you work. People are just consequences for you."

"It was an *unfortunate* consequence," Dazai continued, because he needed him to understand. Because Dante had called them *partners*, because he couldn't — "Apart from my entertainment. But we needed to fall into their trap, and we needed to see Dante. If everything goes as it should, anyway, he'll be dead soon. We won't let him create problems."

"A consequence," he echoed. No judgement; simply stating a fact. "The brawn of the operation."

"It's just how it is."

"Even if we kill Dante, I will die thirty three seconds later."

"It's a simple possibility," he replied. "We do have doctors."

"Fuck you."

"Consequences are —"

"I don't mind bearing the consequences. I would appreciate being informed of their possibility. I would appreciate," he added, pointedly. "Having the chance to defend myself from them."

"You were supposed to understand."

The boy shrugged. "I didn't."

"You will," he replied. Something in his tone made the line of the other's shoulders stiffen. Dazai searched for a taste in his words, but couldn't find anything particularly different. "I'll get you to."

“I’m not,” Chuuya said, drained, eyes hidden in the white marble. “Your damn dog.”

Dazai studied the black lines pulling his wound together; it wasn’t a perfect job, but it would last until they managed to find a way home. His battered hand called his attention, the crooked tilt of the thumb somehow even more unnatural on the white tiles. It hurt in a deaf way.

Quietly, he settled that mess of bone and flesh next to its twin, on the floor of the bathtub. He could see a scorch of Chuuya’s eyes follow the motion from their hiding place, watching their destroyed fingers lay side by side.

*Last thing you need*, someone tutted, in the back of his skull; where it was quiet and where it *itched*, like his skin could only begin to breathe by being scratched by a hand different than his own, for once, *is to obsess over another part of him*.

Tiredness settled on his bones like a blanket. He could feel his eyes close. To shake his system awake, he wrapped his hand around its twin; he clenched, dead flesh and thirsty bones, wondering if Chuuya’s bones could be rubbed hard enough to make sparks again. As one, they flinched.

“Hey,” he repeated. “Look. We match.”

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They crawled their way up the hill until the moon was high in the sky, listening to their squeaking wet soles and heavy gulps of air.

“Look,” Dazai would point out, every minute, wasting precious air for the sake of it. “A toad.”

“That’s a frog, moron,” Chuuya would reply, naked hands deep in his pockets, pointedly not looking at him.

“It’s *clearly* a toad.”

“Do you even know the difference?”

“Do *you*?”

“I saw a stone statue of a frog in *The Alley*. Is *The Owner* a toads connoisseur?”

A nasty glare.

“Toads are shy,” He nodded. “Look at how it’s hiding behind those horse excrements. I can almost see its blush. Shameful. Look. *Look*. Are you looking? Oh. It’s eating them. Maybe it’s a frog.”

Another nasty glare. “Frogs don’t eat shit.”

“And toads *do*?”

““Fuck do *I* know?””

“Toads *hide* behind escrement,” Dazai ended up concluding, after a few pensive minutes. “If the escrement are taller. And then they jump and eat the flies. Flawless hiding technique. I wish I was a frog. A toad.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Chuuya sighed. “That was an abandoned paper bag. *Not* shit.”

Like a mirage, a thousand years later, a rest area appeared at the edge of the highway.

No cars were parked next to the fuel dispensers, oozing off a sharp smell through the cold wind. The entire area was abandoned, apart from strays sleeping the night away. They passed the bright lights and the smell of gas, and pulled the glass doors open.

“It says *pull*,” Dazai knocked his fingers on the featherlight webs on the glass.

Chuuya scoffed. “Whatever.”

Some wordless song was playing from the speakers, under the sound of tapping fingers on a computer of a bored waitress behind the counter.

She didn’t offer them much more than a nod, eyes passing right through their half soaked clothes and the blood stains on the fabrics. Dazai had finally gotten his coat back; it was difficult to decide which one of them looked more like he’d been run over and killed on impact. He was halfway through a fever.

But the *coat*. The coat was back.

The waitress flatly stepped to their table to get their orders. She didn’t even glance at their badly wrapped hands. He took it as a compliment, and made sure to send a pointed look to Chuuya — who’d been so ready to criticize his makeshift bandages, cut out of the curtains of the abandoned house.

*You’re the mummification expert, I suppose.*

*(Chuuya had also, quietly, offered him his uninjured hand to wrap in the bright azure fabric. For once in his life, Dazai had decided to keep quiet).*

“So, do we believe him?” he started, once their orders had arrived, and they had promptly exchanged their dishes and drinks. “Dante, I mean. On the attack to the Headquarters.”

“We don’t really have a choice,” Dazai made a face at the sound his wet pants made against the booth. “I don’t see why he would lie. He’s probably been preparing his attack for a while now. I doubt the only brainwashed people are the ones we got on file.”

“But how does it *work*?” Chuuya insisted. “I don’t get it. None of the *Souls*, or whatever they’re called, looked dead. And they didn’t look like the men in the Under Port. What happens when he saves them from death? Does he just *heal* them?”

Dazai played with the straw of his drink. He met his reflection on the glass behind the boy’s head; took in his blue and purple eye bags.

He lowered his gaze again. “As for the wounds, you’re the only one who was almost blown up. I made sure to jump as far away from the explosion as possible, and Dante can’t have healed me. He must have tried — the Archives say my Ability only works when *I* touch other people.”

“Really?”

“Lying on official documents is my favorite pastime,” he said. “Well. My second favorite,” Because lists gave credibility. “I’ve taken a liking to poisoning your food when you’re not looking.”

Chuuya’s mouth dropped slowly, giving him a rather disgusting sight of his munched food. “There’s no way they didn’t check to see if I was actually dying. They must have a method by now.”

“If we assume Dante’s Ability heals physical wounds while putting people in that limbo — *pauses* them too — your wounds might simply reappear once he’s dealt with. As for the healing itself,” he hurried to continue. “I think it might have something to do with V’s Ability, not Dante’s.”

Chuuya tilted his head. “But that *was* Dante. He’s just — broken in the fucking head or something. Grief induced split personalities?”

“That’s a nice way to call it,” he said. “But it’s weird. Didn’t he feel a bit — *underwhelming* to you?”

“You think that *was* V? But why would he play Dante? And why would Beatrice go along?”

“If they’re ever aware of it.”

“Why are you so sure V isn’t dead?” he insisted, abandoning his food after four bites. “Beatrice said he was their first attempt to create a *Soul*, and it failed. You think that they were wrong? That Dante only realized he was alive after Beatrice left?”

He bit down his lettuce. “I don’t know.”

Chuuya frowned.

“I’m being serious,” he swore, whining. “I’m not omniscient. The facts are the facts: that man introduced himself as Dante, and he did use his Ability on you. Or, at least — the Forest did.”

“What’s up with that, anyway?”

“Ability-related incidents can modify reality,” He shrugged. “Places where *Singularities* happen are basically a nuclear field. I’d assume the lab where you were trapped is just as dangerous, to this day.”

A strange face faded under his drying curls.

“His plan is also what we thought it would be,” Dazai continued. “Beatrice is under his control, so I don’t know how much we can trust anything she told us. I don’t even know if we actually escaped or if he let us go. Maybe he hopes you’ll join the conflict and turn against the Port Mafia.”

Chuuya studied the blue fabric around his hands. “And the only way to find out if I’m actually under his control is to wait.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Basically.”

The music changed to a familiar tune, a rich voice filling the empty bar. Instinctively, Dazai raised his eyes. Blue and amber ones were already there, though they were quick to lower again, quietly scolding themselves for their reaction.

*And they’ll never catch us*, Hirose Fumiko belted out. *They can try, try, try, though.*

He tried to comment on it — whether positively or mockingly, he wasn’t sure — but a fit of wet coughs wrecked his chest. His eyes watered — a mixture of headache, pulsing bones, and the flames carving circles inside his throat.

Silky ice tickled his forehead. He had to wait for the thunder to pause to look up — when he did, he met Chuuya’s reddened ears and the hand he was hurriedly taking back.

“You’re burning like a fucking toaster,” he muttered. “Could you let me know if you intend to pass out any time soon? I’ll just leave you in a bush or something.”

“I don’t want to die in a bush,” he replied, mildly offended. “You could at least abandon me near a beautiful woman. Possibly a dead one.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“I would also appreciate it if you could refrain from putting your slug hands on me. The drool left on your wake annoys me.”

“Try not to fucking die,” Chuuya spat out, venomous. “And I won’t have to worry about your shitty body.”

“Aw. You’re worried?”



“About what Mori might do to me if I come back with your corpse, yeah. *Never* about you.”

*That* almost made him smile. Tauntingly, as ostensibly as possible, he sing-sang: “Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

Chuuya’s eyes snapped up, repulsed. “That would imply there was something to forgive. And *that* would imply I ever had any sort of positive expectations from you.”

“I think you really do,” Dazai mused.

“Trust me. I don’t.”

“I don’t know if I trust you,” He shrugged, settling his eyes on the azure maze of bandages on top of the table. Blood had seeped through the boy’s wounded hand, staining the fabric in blooming shapes. His twin fist twitched on his lap. “But, as per your own actions until now, *you trust me.*”

Chuuya bit his cheek. “*You* fucking trusted *me* enough to expect me to understand what your stupid tapping on my hand meant.”

*Why*, Mori asked him. Mori wasn’t there, he told himself. *Why, Dazai?*

“That was a wrong calculation on my part,” he replied, bored, dangling his legs. “*Oops.*”

“Yeah,” the other boy grunted, raising his free hand to pull at his choker. His eyes settled on Dazai’s plate — a bit further. His hands. “Same here.”

*They’ll never catch us*, Hirose insisted, lingering on the last note. *You know it and so do I.*

“Did you actually burn off your fingertips, or is that just one of the Mafia’s stories?”

Dazai wiggled his hands melodically, watching his eyes follow. “Why, you want to do it too?”

A childish, unspoken *yes* settled in his traits. “Kouyou said that it’s — Well, *did you?*”

“Guess.”

He reached forward, taking his hands into his own; thought hard and deep about it, squinting at the scratches down his palm. The process behind it was too stupid to follow; eventually, he said: “Why do you have this many scars? Boss is a doctor.”

Not exactly what he had expected. “Mori believes in the value of perpetual remembrance,” he offered. He hardly recalled the first time the man had explained it — if Dazai ended up under his tools, he’d get a reminder out of it, necessary or not. “If he stitches me up, he has a right to make it *ineffaceable.*”

Chuuya hummed. “And what did he think about the burned off fingertips?”

He grinned. “That it’d make for a *great* Mafia story,” He took his hands back; stretched them, a strange feeling lingering. “Why the choker, anyway?”

“What?”

Dazai hadn’t exactly *planned* for the question to leave his mouth, so he was left to scramble for an appropriate reaction. “The choker. Why do you wear it? Is it like your weird gloves thing?”

“I like it.”

“You *like* it.”

“Not everything has to be *deep*, asshole. And not everything has to be monumental,” he muttered, a hint of blush covering his freckles. “I liked it. It’s cool. Lippman used to bring us dressing props from his sets. Can’t I just like it?”

He *could*, yes, but Dazai had also the permission to be weirded out by it. Sometimes it felt uncomfortable to think of Chuuya as someone who had actual interests — who’d had friends, who had once had a family, who listened to music and perhaps even had a favorite color, apart from a favorite brand of bullets.

It went against everything he had told himself from the first moment they met, when he’d decided perhaps the whole deal about not staring into the sun made sense.

“Well,” he concluded, moving his empty plate aside. “I suppose we’ve rested enough. The Yokohama highway is a nightmare at night, so we should probably go.”

“*Yeah*,” Chuuya dragged out, exaggeratingly turning his head around. “On foot, right?”

“You can *fly*. Why are you even complaining? Your concern about *me* and *my* physical prowess is touching, but —“

“I *didn’t* —“

“How does the flying thing work, anyway?” he insisted. “I’ve always wondered. Do you just reduce your body mass? Do you change the gravity in the air surrounding you? Are you just so small the wind can carry you away?”

Chuuya opened his mouth — either to answer or to curse him out again — but he was interrupted by the bell of the entrance doors.

A man walked heavy strides inside, half burned out cigarette in his mouth. Grizzled hair covered a surprisingly round head, that fit a bit weirdly on his overly muscular body. He leaned fingerless leather gloves — bright red, a match to his jacket — on the counter, and waited until the waitress nodded and made her way to the back, playing with his keychain.

Once again, Dazai met his companion’s gaze.

Both their eyes turned to study the parking space outside the windows, landing on a beast of a motorcycle that had been left in the dead center of the empty area.

The greatest surge of pain he'd felt that day birthed a whine in his throat. He thumped his forehead on the table, ignoring the *sharper-than-a-razor* smile tearing Chuuya's face apart — and the glee with which he grabbed his hand and dragged him out.

Motorcycle Guy ordered a simple coffee, which he downed without blinking. He threw a few bills on the counter, either blind or uncaring in the face of the waitress' scoff. They waited for her to disappear in the back of the shop again — jumping over the counter to lock the door behind her — and followed him.

"We couldn't even pay," Chuuya muttered, as they pushed the doors open.

"Now you're an upright citizen?" Dazai replied, disbelieving. *Let me peek inside your head just once. I'll even clean the blood.* "But when it's about caging a poor woman in a kitchen —"

"Don't you start."

To his merit, it didn't take the man long to notice he was being followed. After crossing the first row of fuel dispensers, a few strides away from his ride, he turned. His eyes traced the evidently shorter figures making their way to him, unhesitatingly.

He curled one eyebrow.

"Hey," he drawled. "What *d'ya* kids wa —"

Dazai raised his gun and put a hole in his head.

Chuuya didn't even stop to watch him fall to the ground; he skipped over the pool of blood, enlarging a bit more every second, and hurried to the motorcycle. He found him in the middle of tracing the black paint of the ride, hungrily studying the shiny clutches and the maze of controls he didn't even want to pretend he understood.

"This is a *Harley-Davidson*," the boy told no one in particular, the firmament upon their heads trapped in his eyes. "This thing is a *jewel*. The most expensive of the collection is worth more than Hirotsu makes in a *year*."

Dazai scrunched his nose up. "I should have known your materialism had fueled your hunger for the Executive position."

Money was a complicated deal in the Port Mafia. There was tons of it; every man and woman knew, in a corner of their brain, that they walked and breathed bloodied richness. It was hard to be sure of where all that money ended up, of course; Dazai had never actually received a paycheck. He just always had money in his hands and zeroes on his account.

Ane-san had a treasure room in her lake house; Hirotsu a wallet filled to the brim with credit cards. Mori never had money in his pockets; Dazai always had to pay when they were out together.

Chuuya ignored his retort, easily. “Albatross would go *nuts* over this thing.”

“With that hand of yours driving it,” he considered, because his fever was spiking and his tongue was hungry. “I’m sure you’ll be able to show it to him in no time.”

The pun got him punched right where the badly stitched up bullet wound was. It was pushed down, then — because there wasn’t *time*, he knew; because it had been *expected*; because.

After grabbing the keys from his lifeless hands, they abandoned the body to bleed out on the concrete, and climbed on the motorcycle.

“Can’t I drive?” he dared, hopeless.

“You exploded the only car you’ve ever driven,” He pulled him in by the tie. “Tough luck.”

Much like Chuuya’s own bike, the beast came alive with a roar that Dazai felt all the way to his teeth. Much like Chuuya’s own, mere seconds after they entered the highway, Dazai immediately decided he despised it.

No amount of screaming and kicking and scratching got him to slow down, though — Dazai could print his fingertips on the sides of his ripped shirt as they sped down the empty road, faster and faster by the second.

He sighed. He spent the rest of the journey watching the way his red locks whipped the night air.

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Despite how impossible the concept had seemed, the appearing *Five Towers* at the edge of their vision made Chuuya accelerate.

“Is that,” he said, barely audible over the roar of the wind — unstable in a dangerous way, *promising*. “Is that fire?”

One particularly sharp turn painted a whole 180 degrees circle on the road, making Dazai clench his thighs around the seat. Fast as they were going, he could count Chuuya’s ribs under his palms; loud as the air itself was, he could feel his butterfly heartbeat under his fingertips.

“What are we expecting to see?” he asked.

“Quite frankly,” Dazai replied. “Hell.”

He was never good at descriptions. He had always, however, had a talent for predictions.

The first traces of blood appeared two blocks from the Headquarters, darker than petroleum and the moon’s newest puddle-mirrors. The bike skirted upon them, leaving red wheel prints on the ground.

Deeper they went, the less traffic they found; at some point, the only vehicles obstructing their way were the ones turned upside down and abandoned in the middle of the street. Flares lit up the sky; the orange and white lines of explosions surrounded them like thunder. It took them another three turns to find the first corpse; the bike jumped over his severed head, but Dazai saw a piece of skin stick to the back wheel.

Gunshots appeared abruptly — a symphony so disharmonic and *evident* he wondered how it had been muffled. Perhaps his ears were too used to the statics.

Corpses lined the streets, limbs spread out and brain blown out, splattered against cars and halfway through escape. Giving your back to the enemy was not tolerated in the Port Mafia — obeying honor was not tolerated in the mind of a dead man walking. The balance was there, somewhere.

“Shit,” Chuuya’s hands tightened around the clusters until his destroyed fingers *had* to be hurting. His eyes searched for familiar faces on the ground.

Dazai’s eyes set on one of the buildings to their left. Right as the motorcycle brushed the ground to avoid a bundle of fallen bodies, he leaned forward and whispered: “Kingstain.”

The boy’s lungs constricted under his hands. The bike swerved — they bumped against a car so viciously both vehicles were rattled, neatly avoiding the quick sequence of bullets from the hidden sniper.

The gunshots painted a scattered line behind them, stalking the motorcycle; accelerating, they managed to outrun them, running over dismembered body parts and abandoned blood pools, mere bumps under their wheels.

“*Words*, shitty Dazai,” Chuuya snapped, barely a breath against the wind and the orchestra of open fire. “*Not* metaphors.”

“No,” he taunted. No time for pettiness, no time for victorious shivers. *No, no*. The Headquarters appeared at the edge of his vision, at the finish line. “Get it yourself.”

Blood had gifted a new face to the second tower of the Headquarters. It poured down the shingles and the glass doors — melted down the stairs until it was hard to distinguish where the red carpet ended and the stone started. More and more bodies rested on the steps, their wide eyes and shattered bones almost too scenic for it to have been pure chance.

The butterfly wings under his hands stuttered, gasping. Judging by the way Chuuya stiffened, at least one of those actors was someone he knew.

A metallic clang called their attention; men and women in Kevlar vests jumped out of upside down cars and bundles of flesh, and started firing to the entrance. Silhouettes in the Port Mafia's black suits responded to the call, setting the night on fire.

*"Protect the Boss!"*

The voice was a siren, rising like fireworks from the bundle of *Black Lizards* hiding behind a van they were attempting to turn upright. Through the glass, he saw the crimson of a familiar scarf.

A kick hit Dazai's chest.

He barely had time to understand that the cold thing he was laying on was too physical to be a simple pool of blood on the ground — a woman's corpse, her lifeless eyes stuck on him — the tense line of his driver's shoulders meant rage, and —

Chuuya was speeding away, entering the funnel wave of projectiles with a roar that might have come from the vehicle — might have come from him. He disappeared in a cloud of dust, of too bright lights and deafening white noises, cutting through the line of bullets Mori was being hidden behind.

"Protect the Boss," they kept chanting. Dazai was stuck under flesh. *"Protect the Boss with your life!"*

Silence fell; dust dissipated. The motorcycle had stopped in the dead centre of the battlefield. Bullets — *so many bullets* he could have spent a day counting them, and another shooting them all — were stuck to his body, glimmering scarlet, trembling, a beacon on the night.

Chuuya grinned.

*"Get fucked!"* He pressed his foot down and drove straight into the crowd of enemies, sending the bullets back to each body he encountered with twice the impact they had originally had.

It was hard to see much more than this: red lighting meandering through obstacles, taking down dozens of them with a single skid. He was fast, but not fast enough — it only took the fallen a few breaths to stumble their way up again, uncaring of the bleeding holes all over their bodies, dragging themselves up the asphalt, climbing the stairs.

Dazai opened his mouth, but his suggestion was never offered.

A feminine hand clawed at his neck in a death grip, tearing even the bandages apart with her nails. He met the eyes of the woman he'd thought dead upon him — she threw him to the ground, deaf to his shoulder's protests, pushing against the stitches.

His hands searched the ground. Only after slamming it on the Soul's head, watching it breach through her eye and appear on her nape, he realized he had grabbed one of the small Japan flags that decorated the Headquarters entrance.

She fell backwards, arching until the weight of the flag abandoned her on the ground.

“*Sama!*”

Through the smoke and the rising flames of a row of cars Chuuya’s intervention had blown up, Dazai set his eyes on the van the *Lizards* had managed to get started. Mori’s silhouette was unmistakable — his scarf slapped the air behind him, a single arm reaching out even as his guards pulled him towards the vehicle.

Running straight into the projectiles of three firearms from the other side, Sama offered the Boss one last bow before firing.

Dazai didn’t know how many she took down — it was hard to hear more than the squelch of flesh and the moans of the dying; hard to forget she was the most capable of the *Lizards*. He only knew when she went down — Mori’s face shut down with the ease of a falling petal.

Amidst the smoke and the lighting, he met his eyes. Anything unrecognizable was wiped clean; what was left of his traits shaped itself into mere observation.

He nodded at Dazai, and stepped into the van.

Stuck on the ground, his pierced attacker’s eyes rolled around lazily.

Lights flared in the corner of his gaze. He hurried behind the nearest car, sneaking his arm inside through the blown up window and firing his answers to the dark silhouettes on the other side of the street. Taking them down wasn’t an issue — their motions were too mechanical. *Keeping* them down was.

Glass rained from the sky; Port Mafia’s rifles shot in quick succession, bullets bouncing on the concrete and decimating the waves of Souls coming from nowhere at all. He stepped on a corpse, sinking his foot in the torn well of his chest.

Over his head, the moon was obscured — he tilted his chin just far enough for his eyes to register dirty metal and wheels rolling pointlessly, as the seven-seats van Chuuya had just thrown towards a small group of *Souls* flew over his head, landing with a roar so impossibly heavy, he almost fell to his knees.

“Bad dog!” he whined, though Chuuya was nowhere to be seen — only the sound of his war cries echoing. “Don’t throw *cars*, Mori will put them on the shared *Damages Account!*”

A lingering presence tickled his nape; he didn’t turn until he’d already shot it down, but when he did, he recognized his devastated face.

“*Sir!*” a voice called.

An organized battalion was making its way to him. Led by the man Dazai had never named his second, they took down *Souls* on their way to him. With a single loss, the *Secret Force Unit* reached him, crunching down in front of him behind an ambulance.

They didn’t look panicked — they never did; whether professionalism had been stitched on their faces, or driven by the desire to appear as stoic as their teenage leader — but a quick count of heads revealed a decisive decrease in number.

They bowed to him, with evident nervousness. “Sir, we were waiting for your orders.”

“Waiting for my orders?” he repeated, unimpressed. “That’s boring. You just sat around while the Headquarters got attacked because I didn’t give you orders?”

“No, sir!” the unofficial second hurried to stutter. “We just — The attack came out of nowhere. Most squads haven’t been alerted, we were called by the standing guards —“

Car alarms started blaring louder. “What’s the situation?”

“They appeared from the apartments in the area and — and, the sewers? No cars, not that we could find. And —” He gulped. His hair was paler than the full moon taunting them in the sky; he couldn’t be younger than Hirotsu. Young people weren’t allowed near Dazai. “Sir, Matsumura, Sumida, and Makawa, they…”

“Let me guess,” he interrupted him, “They, seemingly without a reason, deserted and turned on you.”

The man paused. Sweat slid down the barrel of his gun. “You — You knew, sir?”

“What did you do with them?”

“We — We’ve been trying to kill them.”

*“Trying.”*

A mumble went through the battalion. They exchanged hesitant looks. “The men, sir — They’re not dying.”

*What’s your theory, then? What am I doing?*

Abruptly, Dazai made a decision.

“Aren’t they,” he insisted, skeptical.

“It seems to be a common factor amongst the attackers, sir,” another man intervened, bravely. “That’s why they haven’t been stopped yet. Their numbers won’t go down. We tried everything — guns, sneaky traps, explosives —“

“Yes, thank you,” The icy undertone of his voice stiffened the lines of every back. “I’m well aware of how to kill someone.” He stood up, unsurprised when the rest of the squad remained kneeled on the ground. “You’re telling me the *Secret Force of the Port Mafia* isn’t, though?”

A wide range of reasons to rage and fear battled on the men’s faces. Dazai studied the balding tops of their heads, and mourned his console.

The back window of the car acting as their barrier exploded; a blank-faced man peeked in, rifle in hand and eyes on Dazai. He took him down with a shot in the throat, meeting his hazed gaze as he slipped down the side of the vehicle — until he disappeared under the sharp edges of the window.



Right before he fell, his head tilted to the side, eyes focusing a inch more, as if listening.

He scratched his chin with the mouth of the gun, dragging his attention back to his cowed men. “What’s your name?”

The silver haired unofficial second blinked, eyes wide on the corpse, startled. “I — Ikeda, sir.”

Amusement curled under his lungs, easily muffled. “*Ikeda*, then. By the time I come back, every man in this street must be dead. Must you burn them to ashes, tear them to shreds, lock them in the sewers again and have them eaten alive by rats — I don’t care. Kill them. It’s what gets your pockets all full, correct? I have faith in you. I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

“Sir —“

“You wanted orders,” Dazai insisted. His hand pulsed; his shoulder ached. He wished, for a blink of a moment, that he’d let Chuuya keep the coat; his gravity would have fought the weight that seemed to pull him down. *Hush, hush*. “Here’s your order.”

A car skirted in their direction, thrown backwards by the impact of an explosion on the other side of the street. Dazai was still looking Ikeda right in the eyes when a stray bullet pierced his temple — splattering what was left of his head against the car.

His brains dripped down his cheek, slowly and quietly, wetting his eyelashes and his upper lip. When he fell forward, none of the wide eyed men behind him tried to keep him upright.

“Oh,” he shrugged, gently kicking the corpse away. “One of you gets the lead. Congratulations.”

A familiar roar cut through the fog. Chuuya’s stolen bike braked close enough to their group that Dazai’s coat fluttered behind him.

Right before it could crush them to dust, his gloves hand sank in the metal of the car coming towards them at bone shattering velocity. It rolled and rolled down the street, tearing itself apart a bit more against every obstacle and *Soul* it crashed against.

“Move,” Chuuya ordered, parking next to him. “Boss arrived at the extraction point. We need to check the main building, *right now*.”

“Bossy,” he commented, mournfully climbing on. He nodded to his men. “Do your job.”

They crossed the space between the towers at maximal speed, ignoring the lifeless *crunch!* of bones under their wheels. Stillness and suspenseful silence alternated the drumming rhythm of bullets and screeches, vanishing behind buildings.

Slowly, the corpses began to look familiar.

The night was a veil; it was hard to distinguish their own from the enemy — and known faces couldn’t be trusted. The bodies struggling to get up again, though, were easily grouped — X-

shaped slashes ran down their chests; some had their heads busted in and a collar full of jewels around their too pale necks. The Executives were on the battlefield.

“That’s bad,” Chuuya commented, taking a sharp turn and a road sign with them. Dazai bit his tongue, again. “If even *they*’ve intervened —“

“Their subordinates would eat them alive if they hid while the base gets attacked,” he replied, keeping his eyes forward. “It’s a declaration of war.”

The main building had already been breached. Men in black suits appeared and disappeared from the doors, as windows of the higher floors shattered behind corpses getting thrown out. Outside, a familiar squad was trying to stop the second wave of advancing *Souls*.

Purple lighting was waiting for them on the sidewalk. Much to his enemies’ chagrin, Ryurō Hirotsu had removed his gloves.

“*Keep up!*” the man was ordering, directing his *Lizards* with the ease of a smoked cigarette. “Don’t let them cross these doors!”

Right as they slammed the bike onto a group of three *Souls*, a body was thrown back by the impact of the manna Ability. Chuuya barely managed to pull back before it could land on them; instead, it crashed on the concrete in front of the bike with a sick *crack!*, blue eyes staring at them through their haze.

Dazai jumped down the bike, kneeling next to the woman and grabbing her arms. Hirotsu’s Ability had broken her ribs; her breaths broke free from her shattered lungs in whiny puffs, mouth gulping air with a desperation that didn’t match the absolute emptiness of her pale features.

“It’s not working,” he concluded, running his hands down naked skin. Her chest was coming apart under his fingers; he could feel the cracks and turns of her fractured ribs. “It won’t nullify. I have to touch Dante — it doesn’t work.”

Something bright — something untranslatable — bloomed in Chuuya’s eyes.

Before he could speak, he stepped forward, nearly throwing Dazai to the ground in his effort to kick his shoe through two flying *Souls*.

“*Grandpa!*” he yelled. “Stop fucking throwing corpses at us!”

At last, Hirotsu turned deady focused eyes on them. His hair was more dishelved than Dazai had ever seen on him — clothes so thoroughly stained in red even the hints of black had disappeared. There was a single crack in his monocle.

“There you are,” he commented. “Chuuya, Executive Kouyou has been calling you for *hours* now.”

Dazai had it on good authority that *if* the boy had actually brought his phone along, it would have been laying somewhere under the *Kitanai Kawa*, by then. Still, Chuuya ducked his head. “I had it on silent.”

“Care to tell me why a quarter of my own men decided to kill another quarter?” Hirotsu asked them, bending the nearest thing he could grasp — one of the flags — into a U shape. As soon as two Souls managed to reach ten steps from the entrance, he threw it with the ease of a frisbee. “And why they’re joining the *Nine Rings*?”

“It’s,” Dazai briefly, he considered the possible consequences of playing *run from the handler* right in this moment. “Complicated.”

The air sizzled. He felt the hair on his nape stand, sweaty bandages sending shivers down his spine. Later, he would remember meeting the blurry eyes of the man that had managed to sneak past Hirotsu’s solitary fight — the blinking red light.

Surprisingly enough, the explosion hurt his hand the most.

Debris from the blown up stairs surrounded them, rising with a grey cloud and a roar — and being mostly thrown back by the gravitational threads Chuuya trapped in, swimming in a protective bubble around them.

Hands and bodies pressed on the chapel of debris, pushing against the gritted-teeth defense. Dazai couldn’t hear a thing over the white noises; Hirotsu almost — almost, because he was smart enough to stop — gripped his shoulders. He shouted something. *Plan*, he thought. *Plan, what’s the plan?*

The entrance of the Headquarters was burning. The glass doors were nothing but sharp edges surrounded by flames, a portal to the dozens of puppets dragging their deadly wounded bodies inside, eyes aimless but *intent*.

“Chuuya,” he called. “You need to make a fire.”

Understanding settled on his features. “We need to get them all in one place.”

“How do we gather *all* of them?” Hirotsu insisted.

“Drop a building on them, for all I care,” Dazai replied. “You need to get every single one. We only get one chance to do what I’m thinking.”

“We don’t know which ones are still with us and which ones aren’t,” Chuuya reminded him, a hint of hesitance on the fight-hungry lines of his arms.

“It hardly matters. Get everyone.”

A flash of anger tightened his lips. “We can’t just *kill everyone* —“

Dazai gripped his wrist with his wounded hand — still *pulsing*, still childishly begging for an inch of his attention, still *matching* — and pulled him closer. The waves of gravity around them fell to the ground; the *Souls* stumbled, trying to regain their footing before Hirotsu’s immediate reaction could get them.

“*Get everyone here*,” he spelled out. He leaned forward, studying the reflection of raising flames in his eyes. “I’m not an idiot. Can you trust that?”

The thing moving his pupils back and forth along Dazai's face was anything but reliance. "Your Ability doesn't work on them."

"It doesn't," he agreed. Another inch, another cold breath on the dried blood on his face. "Yours does, though."

Chuuya pushed him back, vicious enough to make him stumble. Grasping the throat of a *Soul* who had tried to attack him from the back, he didn't look at him when he concluded: "Hurry up, Mackerel."

Gun in hand, Dazai sprinted down the sidewalk, climbing the stone stairs three at the time. The ricochet of fired bullets was barely felt; he kept his eyes on the shimmering, broken chandeliers inside — throwing himself inside the moment a projectile entered the parted lips of a makeshift guard.

The marble ground was nowhere to be found.

Red lakes had filled the streets — but it reached his calves, in the Entrance Hall. His shoes made a *sound* as they sank in the stream, wet and sticky. Before he could decide if it felt *good* — something brushed the top of his head.

Tilting it, he studied the lifeless bodies in black suits hanging from the ceiling, dangling quietly amidst the muffled sounds of chaos coming from outside.

The hall was almost empty; he trapped a few *Souls* under heavy enough pieces of furniture, not bothering to follow the blood footprints climbing the stairs. There was nothing they could find in there that Dante hadn't already put his hands on.

*It has to be somewhere*, he mused, searching the room. A pair of shoes brushed his hair; he stepped further into the hangman forest. *Where?*

A whine pierced the silence.

He stilled.

*You can keep your eyes closed*, Mori has reassured him, once. The stick-and-pull of thread and needle was hypnotic; Dazai didn't remember what he had done, only that he hadn't laughed as it happened. That Mori was there. *You don't have to look. Two eyes are such a burden sometimes, are they not?*

"Ah," he said. "Ah, Tanaki. Of course."

Loyal until the very end, she laid behind the secretary desk. The silver of her hair disappeared in waves of crimson, blooming startlingly intense against her pale skin. Tears disappeared between the two lines of scars of her face, landing on blurred tattoos.

Her abdomen had been ripped apart.

"The baby," she whispered, eyes frantic, stubbornly searching the room before returning to him, insistent. "Is my baby okay?"

He sat next to her, knee deep in her blood and shattered pieces of glass, watching the chandeliers dig caves in her skull. She raised a hand, fingers shaking so badly it looked almost voluntary. A deep breath left her mouth; he saw her viscera flutter along.

Behind the desk, ruby letters stared back at him, slowly melting down the wall. *Justice incited my divine creator.*

Under that, like an afterthought — a claim of sorts: *Kanai Chikako.*

Dazai offered his half shattered hand. Tanaki's fingers gripped it so tightly his vision blurred.

"You're going to be fine," he assured her.

"My *baby*," she insisted. Her voice was a butterfly in the eye of the hurricane. "My *baby*, Dazai, I — I can't *feel* my —"

Sirens blared outside. He stared at the crimson void under her weakly beating heart, and felt young — a child kneeling on frescoed tiles, watching his fingers redden with each hit. *Just speak*, they would say, merciful in assuming him more capable than he was. *Just past your lips and speak.*

*The problem with giving an answer*, he mused, distantly, *was that people expected him to always have another one.* They wouldn't like his words either way, but the expectancy in their eyes wouldn't quit.

"It's gone," he explained, as easily as a prodigy could. Then: "That's why you can't feel — them."

Confusion clouded her eyes. How did she get those scars, he wondered? Had there been more blood than this? "Get them back, then."

He resonated — the fight would be over soon. They would storm the hospital, the one Mori had bought from the underground to the roof, and they would patch her back together. Dazai was an academic liar, baptized in deception *summa cum laude* — but he made the effort of saying: "You will be fine."

Chuuya stormed inside, a red dot landing so violently on the ground that another crater opened under his feet. Blood covered him head to foot, like hair melted down his skeleton.

"I dug a pit," he explained, breathless, head snapping back and forth. "It's not gonna hold them long, we need to —"

A breath. Even the blood bumping inside his veins seemed to petrify.

The red outlines of his body faded, quietly. His face was an empty canva; a controlled cage of rage and confusion and disbelief and *something*, something so cold it spasmed his fingers. "Shit," he said, his voice an echo from behind a glass, "Shit, *shit*, Tanaki —"

He dropped on the other side of her body, her free hand immediately trapped between his own. Their heads bumped — Chuuya was too busy removing the azure fabric from his hands,

spreading it wide to cover the torn cave of her abdomen. Tucking in.

The sight was hysterical. Red bloomed all over the gentle color almost immediately.

“Chuuya?” she mumbled, cheek landing on the floor. Her eyes were rolling back in her head, her throat gulping down air. “Chuuya, where’s my —”

The boy tightened his lips — tightened his grip on her red fingers. Perhaps he tried to say something; whatever it was, it never came.

Recognition fractured his eyes as they settled on the writing on the wall. His knuckles were white; his lips parted. With an anger that *shone* — every ugly thing in the world all gathered in a circle to follow his self execution — he breathed: “Son of a bitch.”

Say, Dazai remembered thinking, *where does a human experiment learn to mourn?*

“Hirotsu’s men can bring her to the hospital,” he said, almost surprised by the stillness of his tone. Never surprised. “We need to deal with the *Souls*. ”

A vein pulsed on his jaw, his teeth gritted so harshly his head was shaking. “Chuuya.” Tanaki whined; a broken thing. The tips of her fingers were turning redder; the boy’s grip was too strong. “Chuuya,” he insisted, easily.

He let go of her hand, letting it fall to the ground. The stiffened lines of his shoulders relaxed, molded themselves into something softer. His bowed head tilted to the side, as if listening.

Dazai felt his bones grind to a halt. “*Wait* — “

Scarlet glimmered, blinding and hot. Amidst it, Chuuya raised an arm, slamming his clenched fist into Tanaki’s torn chest, sinking the azure fabric inside the wound.

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The blur would remain in some corner of his brain, heightened by the insistent ricochet.

Tanaki was screaming her throat raw, blood oozing off her wound with the efficiency of the seas — the sound had left his ears tingling. Dazai could hardly recall the unmistakable sight of Chuuya attempting a new attack — he jumped over Tanaki’s body, arms locked around his stiffened, *violent* limbs.

They rolled down the crimson river of the lobby, framed by the lights of the approaching sirens, gunshots and shots and the smell of viscera. As soon as he realized his touch was nullifying *Tainted*, Chuuya focused his nails and teeth into freeing himself, every inch of him working to tear Dazai apart.

*[Agreements in the Port Mafia went as such: gravity manipulation was the lesser of problems when one dealt with Nakahara Chuuya].*

Tanaki was bleeding out; Dazai could see her gasp for air in the corner of his gaze, as Chuuya's hands closed around his head, smashing it against the ground once, twice — he lost count. His expression was *there*, behind the blue — blank eyes, not a muscle of his face moving.

The silence was the strangest part of it all — not a victory cry, not a grunt when he slammed his knee on his fractured hand. Whatever it was he was seeing — wherever it was Dante had sent him — it had locked Chuuya's attention shut.

A punch twisted his nose; the next hit readjusted it into its original position.

It took every inch of his body to pulse along to every bruise — Chuuya's naked hands forcing his hands behind his back, teeth so close it was a wonder how he couldn't feel them *bite* — for his fingers to finally close around his gun.

“Have fun,” he made sure to say.

He cocked the gun and pulled the trigger.

Chuuya's body shook under the impact, as his raised fist stilled, the bullet digging a cave in his chest. Nothing changed in his expression — but Dazai could imagine him blinking, almost surprised. He wished, for one hysterical moment, that he could grab his phone and take a picture.

Instead, he rolled them over and kicked him in the stomach, making sure to sink the bullet deeper and deeper. Managing to slow him down enough to wrap his arms around him cost him sliced red lines down his arms — carrying him outside was nearly impossible, as they half tumbled and half fought down the stairs.

“*Hirotsu!*” he called.

He found him at the edge of what seemed a smaller copy of Suribachi City, only for a moment — the makeshift crater surrounded by suited men, rifles pointed down. Inside the earthly cage, aimless hands, familiar and unknown, attempted to crawl forward, climbing, *dragging*, their eyes devoid of any feeling — leaving Hell for the sake of it.

It was the lack of silence that made him pause.

The *Souls* were utterly silent — only the moans and laments of the fallen through the attacked streets could be heard, too far to belong to the melody tickling his ears. When he

managed to squint down the crater, he met the eyes of one of his men — desperately attempting to escape the embrace of two *Souls*.

Hirotsu freed him from the struggling weight of Chuuya's frustration, pressing his body down with his height advantage. It had been long since either of them had outwardly stepped away from his touch — out of habit, Dazai eyed their connected skins.

He kept his hold on Chuuya's naked wrist.

"What's wrong with him?" Hirotsu asked.

"I'll buy you a drink and tell you later," Dazai lied, pulling the boy's arm just *so* — enough to hide his vacant eyes. "Is everyone here?"

"Everyone we could find," the man confirmed. "We searched every area that's been breached, and my Ability users verified the upper floors were completely evacuated. Only..."

"Only what?"

Hirotsu straightened his back. "Some of the men were too — suspicious. Kouyou's emergency battalion was almost completely lost. We forced them down there as well, as you asked."

He nodded. "Good."

"Then," the man wrapped an hesitant hand around the collar of the boy's jacket. Dazai was assaulted by visions of strays getting carried by their mothers under the rain. "How do we find out which ones are — the undead ones?"

"Undead," he echoed. "Fascinating name."

The hand he had wrapped around the boy's wrist was the wounded one — he only noticed when he pulled him out of Hirotsu's lion grip, the pulsing of his crooked thumb a bundle of statics. He struggled; in a strangely blurred distance, Dazai felt his nails sink on his cheek, *tearing* the skin down.

He pushed Chuuya back, slamming his foot in his abdomen, watching him fall into the pit without a sound.

"Hirotsu?" he tutted, throwing his gun in the air and grabbing it as it came down. He aimed it to the only stain of red in that black sea, glowing through the hands reaching for him, crowding him like a savior. "Tell your *Lizards* to fire at will on the Slug."

Hesitancy parted his lips.

Dazai met his eyes, tasting the blood from the scratches on his cheek as it landed on his lips.

The man sighed. He raised his hand, unmovable against the ground, beginning to shake under Chuuya's counter attack — and when every eye in the street was on him, he cut the air. "*Fire!*"



The intricate weaving of bodies inside the pit disappeared behind the dust and the flashes of light. Bullets surrounded him, making his coat flutter and his ears pop, all directed towards one target specifically.

Chuuya responded to the attack with enviable vitality, sending back bullets with unstoppable energy. Soon enough, he did exactly what Dazai had thought he would: focused *Tainted* onto every inch of flesh touching him, until the crater was nothing more than a bacon of scarlet light, bodies floating and *throbbing*.

He crunched down, holding his knees, eyes on the rapturous expression on his devoid face — the brightest dot in that painting of the damned, hair floating around his skull like a halo. The divine was in the details. “Now throw in the explosives.”

The commander’s facade cracked. “Dazai,” His voice was calming. “We aren’t *sure* if everyone in there is — our men are there too.”

“The *explosives*, Hirotsu.”

He didn’t move.

“Don’t tell me you’re doubting my plans, Commander,” Dazai didn’t take his eyes off the crater. “Is my winning streak not enough for you?”

Cautious, he signaled to the *Lizards*. “How did you even — yesterday, why did you call me and tell me to supply the squad?”

“You know how it is,” He scratched the bandages around his eye. A dozen *Souls* had sunk their nails into Chuuya’s shoulders — he recalled black wings against the sky, cutting existence. “I’m a man of predictions. Now, hurry up. Chibi’s death can’t come quick enough, can it?”

He raised his chin, a hint of defiance in his ancient eyes. “I’m trusting you on this, Dazai.”

“And I’m trusting you to know Chuuya’s taste in flowers for his funeral,” He yawned. “Never cared to learn. On with the fireworks!”

He had to attend the show from behind an upside down car, hands on his ears and eyes intent as the crater exploded in embers and flying rocks. The red of *Tainted* shook under the impact — until it broke in a thousand shards, sending every car skidding down the empty street. The suspected *Souls* were the only ones to scream their throats raw.

Solitary and sudden, a lonely silhouette flew to the sky, escaping the fire. Before the vengeful puppet could decide how to self-implode and take the highest number of corpses with him — a flash of petal-fabric crossed the sky.

A familiar shout filled the night, Dante’s grip on a now useless body unclenching — *Golden Demon* had sunk her katana in Chuuya’s chest, slashing an impossible number of lines down his body. Abruptly enough to seem unfit, all came to a halt.

Dazai stood up, making his way through the running mafiosi — the meteors of car parts and pieces of concrete, flying by him with the unhurried violence of shooting stars, lighting the night up in warmth.

When he fell, he was there.

The weight was familiar in his too weak arms; he followed it down, concrete under his knees and the sight of Chuuya's eyelids closing on rolled-back eyes a thrill. *Corruption*, he had proposed, three days after one of two gods had been stopped, as they kicked each other's feet outside Mori's office. *Get it? Because it corrupts you.*

*It's not me it corrupts*, Chuuya had replied, eyes settled somewhere else. Dramatic, like always. Somewhat guilty, like always.

From the crater — from *Souls* that could not force their ashes to move; from mafiosi that had gotten caught in the crossfire — not a sound came.

"I can carry him, if you want," Hirotsu let him know, the back of his legs *almost* touching his spine — as he directed his men to put out the fires; just close enough to make sure no one would watch them.

Dazai blinked up at him. "It's Chuuya."

He seemed not to have anything to add.

In the corner of his gaze, he saw Kouyou's blood stained kimono run towards them. Ace was barking orders, somewhere — his men were dragging bones and severed limbs out of the crater. He thought of the man from the *Secret Force* — staring at him.

He studied Chuuya's furrowed face. No spiral scars cracking his skin apart like chasms; no blood that seemed to turn black at the edges. Droplets from the scratches on his own cheek landed on his nose.

*Not Corruption*, that ugly, known *thing* in his bones hummed. *Not Corruption*, but —

"Ah," Dazai whined. "You're gonna be mad at me for this, aren't you?"

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The doors of the Hospital's Chapel made no sound when Kouyou stepped through them.

“Oh, there you are,” Dazai sniffed, fatigued, his body almost bent in a half, shoulders pressed against the side of his bed, putting all his might into pushing it backwards. Dozens of Hospital beds had been set up in the Chapel; the unexpected attack had filled every free room. “Put out the house fire just fine, I hope?”

“You’re already awake,” she observed.

“Ah, yes. Drugs never put me out long,” He grunted. “Would you mind helping me? Maybe Mori had a point about eating more vegetables.”

The hem of Kouyou’s kimono brushed the frescoed floors; she dragged fight-broken nails down the pews that had been pushed to the side, studying the sleeping faces in the beds with no expression.

By the time she had reached the corner where both his and Chuuya’s bed — the final line he was attempting to press his own against — rested, she had the grace to offer: “Demon child.”

“Ane-san.”

“All the beds were screwed to the ground.”

He stared.

“Damn it,” He sighed, shoulders digging into the metal of the railings. Under the metallic protests of the IV connected to his arms, he straightened, kicking the pole with little enthusiasm. “I’ve been at it for half an hour.”

He made his way to Chuuya’s IV, reading the blurred, standard information adorning the plastic with squinting eyes. Under the arch of the plastic tube, the boy slept soundly, a mouthful of hair stuck under his oxygen mask.

“Dazai?”

“Was hoping they’d put poison in his,” he lied, with an obnoxious sigh. “Oh, whatever.”

Very loudly, and causing an exasperated frown on Kouyou’s sleepless face, Dazai proceeded to grab the closest plastic seat from the further rows. With morphine-laced legs, he dragged it all the way to the side of Chuuya’s bed — squishing the boy’s interiors with his upper half, and balancing his butt between the seat and the edge of the railing.

Eyes on the paintings on the ceiling, he added: “You don’t happen to have glue with you, do you?”

“Glue,” Kouyou echoed, lost.

“Yes, glue.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Shame,” Dazai clicked his tongue. “Would you mind checking the emergency cabinets? Yes, there. Right there. Stop looking at me like — *Yes*, thank you.”

“Sure,” the woman commented, stealing one of the blankets on the altar, wrapping it around her shoulders as she watched him meticulously spread glue all over his unwounded hand. “May I ask what you — *Oh*,” She blinked. “You just — Alright.”

“Revenge method number one hundred and thirty four,” he recited, gingerly tapping the hand he had stuck to his chest, over his shirt — right where his heart was hidden. “*For it may teach you some fucking honesty once in a while*. Our little Hatrack will certainly demand revenge for today’s soirée — I’m simply doing my best to get on with it.”

For some very long moments, Kouyou didn’t do anything more than pierce the side of his head with her stare. Dazai counted cracks on the ceiling; when he got bored, he began studying the edge of Chuuya’s oxygen mask.

“How do you even —“ she began, but quickly gave up on that train of thought. “And for how long?”

“Varies. Until it cools off, I suppose? I don’t think Chuuya knows how the clock works.”

“And you’re simply going to do it.”

“Technically, I should be fighting off bullets he would be throwing in my direction, right now.”

“And you *would* do it.”

“The other one hundred and eighty nine methods are much more aggravating, to be fair,” Dazai let her know, kicking his feet just to rattle the bed. Chuuya still didn’t wake up — lazy enough to sleep through the entire surgery, and then five hours more. “Well — I’m pretty sure he’s doubled up on them, actually. Slugs hardly have much to do in their measly existence.”

“And you’re simply,” she insisted, “Going to do it.”

Dazai squinted. “Yes?”

“Alright,” Kouyou concluded, nodding once — and then never stopping. “Sure. Why not.”

Silence settled upon them like a second chapel; the light snores and the beeping machines of various wounded knocked against it with weak insistence. His ear was pressed against Chuuya’s ribcage; he couldn’t decide if it was better to listen to the heart under his hand, or the one pumping against his temple.

“Hirotsu’s guarding the Chapel,” the woman started again, eventually. “He tried to get you two your own room, but you arrived too late.”

Surprise was reserved for less obvious things. He had to morph his features, nonetheless. “How nice,” he offered. Recalling the confusion that had overtaken him when he’d woken

up, he added: “Even nicer of Mori to actually let me in a Hospital. So there *is* an end to his greed.”

“*Greedy* is a bizarre way to describe him,” she replied, leaning on the end of Chuuya’s bed. “Boss is simply possessive, I believe.”

The weight on his throat was a mixture of fading drugs and wounds from Rengoku he had only begun to truly feel once they were stitched. He nudged Chuuya’s cast with his identical one. “Possessive?”

His voice sounded strangely young. He wished for a change to retake that scene. Always the issue between them, he supposed — she who looked for a child, and he who didn’t quite know how to be.

“*Greed* is such a displeasing word,” Kouyou hummed, twirling her umbrella against the railing of the bed. He could never decide if she would care about leaving marks, or not. “Possessiveness, at least, implies protection.”

“Or wishing to hold what you already have tighter,” he replied. “Greed, on the other hand, is never satisfied.”

The Executive paused. Her eyes were all for Chuuya — he recalled hearing tales of her insisting presence at his side, after Verlaine’s days. “If he were easily satisfied, we wouldn’t be where we are now.”

“Ane-san,” he called. He blinked at the ceiling, forcing his eye open until he could see every stain of humidity. “Sit on the other side.”

She curled an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You wouldn’t be visiting *my* deathbed if you didn’t have something to ask me,” Dazai shrugged, body sinking deeper into the uncomfortable embrace of Chuuya’s rising and falling body. “Unless you just wish to set *me* on fire and balance it out. Quite a terrible death. If you want to talk, you’re going to sit on the other side. Thanks.”

The look she gifted him was so predictable he could taste it under his mouth. The Port Mafia was a land of fools — which meant that most of its prisoners had given their best shot at figuring Dazai out, at some point.

Because she *was* smart, with a sigh, Kouyou stood up. She circled Chuuya’s bed, dragging a second plastic chair to settle near his pillow — *not* on Dazai’s blind side.

“This isn’t your deathbed, lad,” she decided to say, eventually. Her lower lip quivered. *Unfortunately*, she didn’t add, even if he couldn’t decide if she would. “You have slept less than Mori estimated, actually. Your recovery times are excellent, as usual.”

“You flatter me,” smiled. “Did I get it wrong, by the way?”

“Wrong?”

“Are you here to visit your protégée?” He nodded towards Chuuya’s lightly snoring head. “He’s the one who did those *terrifying* stitches, by the way. If Mori put you here to make sure I wouldn’t die in my sleep, you can thank *him*. ”

They both knew that wasn’t the case, but Kouyou still did nothing more than pull a red strand of hair off Chuuya’s forehead. “The wound was infected, yes. But forgive me if I don’t believe he was the one to rip a thread from filthy clothes and use it.”

“It’s easy to make people do what they already want to,” he replied. “The idea of me getting infected gave him the strength of ten lions.”

“And the bad luck of a spider at night,” she noticed, nodding towards his hand. The white plaster around his shattered thumb was a familiar weight, even if in a never-touched-before land. “He has one just like that.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured, conspirationally. “I’ll make sure to draw a little caricature on his, so you can still tell us apart. In case the raw dislike you feel for me doesn’t give you the answer, of course.”

There had already been no hilarity on Kouyou’s features, but somehow she managed to lose every inch of softness all the same. “I do not *dislike* you, demon child.”

“Obviously not. I terrify you. *And* I burned down your house. Chuuya helped, though. Fear and dislike are very similar things, to be fair.”

“You make endless assumptions about the human soul,” she observed. “For someone who cannot understand it.”

“And what does that make you *deduce* about me, Officer?”

At last, she dropped all pretenses. “Where were you?”

“I told you,” Dazai said. “A trip.”

“You were out entertaining that ridiculous theory of yours, weren’t you?” the woman insisted. “That outlandish mind control idea?”

“Ah, let’s turn that question around. What do you *think* happened last night?”

She scoffed. “The Headquarters were attacked by the *Nine Rings*. ”

Dazai sighed, kicking his feet until they were hidden under the armrests. *All you need is covered feet*, he recalled telling the woman, once, when they had been stuck in a stakeout in the coldest corner of the city — stealing her *yukata* to cover his own. “Yes, that hypothesis would be terribly embarrassing for us, wouldn’t it? We were *slaughtered*. ”

“It’s not an hypothesis,” Kouyou insisted. “Every single body we managed to recover bore their tattoo —“

“*Oh?* You managed to find someone?”

Her hands twitched. “Just one person.”

“And he was dead?”

“*Of course* he was dead.”

“*Mmh*,” He scratched his newly done stitches, pulling the hems of the Hospital gown. Mori must have fought to keep him in bandages. “And you’re sure he wasn’t one of ours? One of the fallen ones. Not among the many that promptly decided to betray us.”

She flinched.

The stained glass windows of the Chapel painted kaleidoscopic squares on the ground she studied, tracing them with the tip of her umbrella.

“They betrayed us,” she repeated. “And you made Chuuya burn them alive.”

“They were *traitors*, Ane-san,” Obnoxiously, he widened his eyes. “What did you want me to do, spare them? *Scandalous*.”

“*Ah?*” he insisted, when she kept quiet, moving the seat back and forth — and back and forth, *and back and forth*. “Unless, of course, you agree that there was something wrong with them. Unless, *obviously*, you agree that it makes *no sense* for half the organization to suddenly *turn their backs on* —“

“The *Nine Rings* have always been nothing but sneaky devils,” she snapped, eyes stubbornly set on him. “I’ve seen them corrupt the purest of souls — the most *loyal* soldiers. The Port Mafia has been in need of a cleanse of ranks for years. Scum from the previous Boss’ reign still survives, and tonight was the definitive proof. Their execution was inevitable and necessary.”

“But you didn’t want Chuuya to wear the executioner mantle?” he concluded, sighing, knowing he was missing the mark. “How uncharacteristic, for the woman who believes you should poison yourself before someone else does it for you.”

“Some of those men were his friends,” Kouyou said. *How much grief can he take before he decides this place is not worth it*, she did not ask, *just how many blades will it take me to kill him, when that happens?* “Some of them had been under his command many times. He has lost *much*, and blames himself for every ounce of it. Forgive me if I wished —“

Dazai barked out a laugh. He didn’t need to take notice of her flinch to know it had been a horrible sound. “Do you want to protect him, or do you want him to be like you? Your indecisiveness will kill him.”

“And *you*, demon child, will destroy him.” No fan to hide her face; she would smile even as she bathed in his blood. “You put him in the eye of the storm, and for *what* —“

“To get rid of the problem with one, singular, big *boom*,” He motioned an explosion with a single hand, swearing on his honor with the other. “Which I did. I would hope he’d thank me but, well — He does detest Hospitals, does he not?”

A hint of hesitance lit up Kouyou's features. Post Mafia members devoured composure every midday, though — she was quick to hide it. Dazai wondered when people would stop forgetting that Chuuya was just the perfect size to fit in his personal microscope — to be prodded and turned and studied and *obsessed* over.

“How many did *you* lose, anyway?”

“I have known you long and deep,” the woman scoffed. “I *know* you do not care.”

“Ah, but Mori is going to want my report,” he corrected her. “I wish to be as detailed as possible, that is all. You know how much he expects from me.”

“Ask Chuuya. He will know.”

“You know, your protectiveness is moving,” he mused. Chuuya's monitor beeped gently, sharper than the *thump!* under his ear. A despicable sound — Dazai had torn himself off of it the moment he had woken up. “Or it would be, if it wasn't so damn hypocritical.”

Strident, she tilted her head. “*Hypocritical?*”

“Yes!” He nodded, enthusiastic. “Chuuya takes the death of those he cares about at heart, doesn't he? How unfortunate, for someone so wonderfully skilled. But you know that already. And yet, you still didn't have any qualms about putting a bomb in the taxi of a man whose death *you knew* he would blame himself for. Did you?”

Kouyou fell silent.

“You *did* risk his life there, didn't you, *Ane-san?*” he considered. His eyes were growing tired of the ceiling; he reached until he found Chuuya's hat on the floor, and abandoned it on his face. “But that was *fine*, I bet. That was easily justifiable.”

“How did you —“

“A bit of this and a bit of that. I arrived late that morning. Chuuya was already upstairs, and I knew which taxi he had come with, so I thought to myself: why not prepare a little surprise for him?” He shrugged. “I had no bombs to use, but I got one of those prank toys — the ones that spray paint on you when activated, you know? — from the shop next alley. Went to put it in and, *oh!* Guess what was already there? *Nothing at all.*”

He tilted his head. “And so I prepared my surprise. I started getting suspicious when you sent one of your men away before the meeting was over. Remember? I thought to myself, *she must have a job of sorts for him*. But then the explosion happened, and no paint was anywhere! *Someone must have removed it when putting the bomb*, I thought.”

“And it couldn't be the *Nine Rings*,” she concluded. From a slot under the hat, he could see the tilt of her lips was — all but friendly. “Because Nakatomi came back with paint on his clothes.”

Dazai hummed. “Precisely. I must applaud your plan, though; blaming the *Nine Rings* was the perfect excuse you needed to get Chuuya mad, correct? Mad enough to slaughter,” He



sighed. “All to make sure he would do his best to get *your* problem solved.”

Her jaw was a blade, tickling Adam's apple with the glee of her youthful eyes. *Golden Demon* was nowhere to be found — he could feel its presence all the same. Breathing down his neck, holding its katana on the edge of his lips.

She didn't *dislike* him; he felt no longing for the one time she had dared to touch him. Hostility was their balance, and Dazai was a person of order.

“The *Nine Rings*,” she spelled out, quietly and deadly, “Are a *threat*.”

“Considering what they did to us without us even realizing,” he agreed, aware that they were following two different roads of thought. “But that's not why you're so pent up over this. You're just mad. A mad woman is not the strangest thing in this world — but you're Port Mafia. Your anger can't live quietly.”

“He's my subordinate,” Kouyou replied. “And I knew he would react fast enough.”

“Where does your cruelty start and mine end, I wonder?” Dazai commented, as if he hadn't heard a thing. “Sitting here preaching to me about treating your darling *badly*.”

“This isn't —“

“What's the difference? That you fool him into wanting slaughter, while I make it clear that he's doing what *I* want? He *chose* to be here. He *chose* to work with me. If he can deal with the consequences of your actions — he can deal with the consequences of *mine*, and of his own choices. Don't you think so?”

The *beep* of Chuuya's heart monitor sped up. A mere bump in the system — one that called his gaze down, at least, setting it on the ugly expression he wore in his unconsciousness.

One of his hands was abandoned mere inches from Dazai's shoulder. He planted his cheek where the sharpest bone of his hip rested, and studied the curled up fingers — the gloveless-skin, somehow less realistic than an Event Horizon in Yokohama's backyard.

*Touching is not a crime*, a cat had once sworn. He pulled the hat up again. A strangely cruel thing to tell a boy whose flesh was a thief amongst the capable.

“Dazai,” Kouyou said, in the shadows of fabric. It echoed strangely across the walls of the Chapel. She always stood at least three steps from him. “You need to stop the *Nine Rings*.”

Eyes set on a mole, he replied: “With all due respect, Executive — You're a broken record, lately.”

“You *need* to,” she insisted — the texture of her voice unfamiliar. “Whatever you think it's going on — the mechanics of it don't *matter*. What matters is stopping the *Nine Rings* and their new Boss.”

“Your revenge —“

“This isn’t about my *revenge*. This is —“

The doors of the Chapel opened.

Kouyou didn’t react to the lines of nurses making their way inside. She kept her lips pressed together even when they wondered about her unusual visiting times — did nothing when a pair of them attempted to take Dazai back to his bed, giving up amidst his whines, and refilling his IV while he curled on his side against the hard curves of a slug’s ribs.

“We will talk,” Dazai yawned, blinking at the more and more blurred outlines of her pink silhouette. Underneath the stained windows, she could have been a crucifix herself — unhesitant in her bleeding. “I need to sleep your protégée’s stupid handiwork off. You go torture some more *Souls*, why don’t you?”

“*Souls*?” she echoed, quietly. He hated this part of the drugs. He hated knowing he’d wake up. “What a silly name.”

He had to squint to find her through the glimmering shadows, the hat chain glimmering. Something like guilt, he thought — something like heartbreak.

“Ane-san,” he called, uncertain of why. He never did like it when the drugs began to work.

The next breath he took, he was sleeping.

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Someone had put a blanket on him, but made sure to leave his feet uncovered.

“That traitor,” Dazai’s numb tongue muttered, shaking his head until the hat fell on the floor. He imagined her throwing the blanket in; making sure her knuckles wouldn’t even *brush* his chin. It almost warmed his feet with amusement. Sunrise knocked insistently against the stained glass windows, painting blinding squares of colors on the marble.

Breathing steadily under his pulsing head and the burn of his shoulder, Chuuya still slept, drooling inside a blue line of reflected light.

Fingers tapped his IV.

Mori had a box under his arm, and no blood stains on his red scarf. He smiled down at him with the exasperation of a dangling hangman knot.

“You spent two hours in surgery getting that nasty bullet removed,” he started. “Maybe do those poor doctors do the favor of not dying so soon?”

“This isn’t my fault,” Dazai didn’t slur. Never wise to let Mori believe he wasn’t thinking. “You’re the one who recruited the grief-prone atomic bomb.”

A hum. The man’s eyes raced down to their most essential point of contact — the naked edge of Dazai’s chin, brushing a raised edge of Chuuya’s vest over the hip. *What does it feel like?*, he had asked him, once, over the cold blue of his Ability. *To steal it?*

*It doesn’t fit*, Dazai couldn’t recall if he had been bored enough to answer. *It’s hungry and it won’t digest it all the same.*

“One of your nastiest scars to date, I’ll say,” the doctor offered, instead of a rightful apology. He tapped his saline bag, though his eyes stayed on his bandaged shoulder. “Would you like to sit in a circle and discuss what we’ve learned from it?”

*“Supply your villa with firefighters?”*

“I will leave punishments in that regard to our dear Ozaki,” A pause. “And to whoever made you glue your hand to your chest,” He pulled his wrist, lips quivering when Dazai didn’t offer a hum at the sound of *ripping* — palm and fabric. “There we go. In hope you may be more truthful, should we say?”

“How gentlemanly of you.”

A pull; a sharp burn, all the way to his wrist. He watched the bloodied needle of his IV dangle from the tube in Mori’s fingers, knees twitching on the seat — watched as he sat on the edge of the bed, pushing Chuuya’s body to the side only *so*.

“You’re usually smart enough not to get your wounds infected,” he considered, knotting up the IV, throwing the needle onto the heart monitor. Dazai climbed out of his cocoon to huddle on the seat, studying the chessboard in Mori’s lap. “All those lessons didn’t stick?”

“You believe teaching the suicidal how to stay alive is a worthy waste of your time,” he replied, dividing the black and white pieces in equal halves on the bed, by Chuuya’s knee. “Who am I to fight you on it?”

Their games of chess had gotten boring pretty soon — around the first week of technically not *obliged* isolation in Mori’s clinic, what with the alternating streams of wins that ended too fast. New solutions had been required — completing a full color set; hiding pieces in shoes and guessing the number; requiring to solve riddles to move forward.

It was a warmer memory; something less stiff than the clinic’s *rigor mortis* — less connected to the fireflies in a jar and the butterflies on the wall and the glow of Elise’s living corpse. *I lost again*. Warmth was nice from any and all wildfires.

“Think of it as investment,” Mori winked. He had worn his old lab coat — maybe to mimetize; though he doubted anyone in that *Port Mafia-bought* Hospital wouldn’t have let

him roam freely. “You should thank Chuuya, later. Those stitches were a bother, but they *did* do their work.”

Pointedly, he turned to tap his oxygen mask, affectionate. The boy didn’t even stir, still drooling.

“You led the surgery yourself,” Not a question. Mori wouldn’t let a doctor touch him. “How come we aren’t in the clinic? Or your office backroom?”

“I barely managed to get the guards to bring me back here in time,” Mori replied, reaching out to move his first white piece. “I simply brought you where everyone else had been. Too many fires to put out to worry about secondary necessities.”

*Liar*, he thought. Dazai wasn’t secondary. “Did you find Sama’s corpse alright?”

“Missing an arm,” the man replied, not missing a beat. The picture of untouchability, from his gloves to the crinkles around his eyes. “One of the vans ran her over. I do hope her family won’t mind.”

“They fixed up the Hatrack’s friends,” Dazai shrugged, sneaking two black pieces in the sleeves of his coat. “I’m sure they can fix her up. You can mourn all you like.”

“*Mourn*,” Mori echoed, as if unfamiliar with the concept. Under the Chapel’s lights, he was marble and supposedly good intentions. “I doubt the Mafia will suffer from the loss of a single *Lizard*.”

“And you?”

A blink. “Same thing, is it not?”

Hilarity pressed against his lips. He bit them.

“So,” he started. “Are they already blaming you?”

“When are they not?” Mori sighed, eyes roaming over the beds of wounded subordinates whose names he didn’t know — and didn’t care to find out; and didn’t mind filling the street with blood in the name of. “Not joining the fight didn’t help, of course.”

“Where were you?”

He watched his black piece eat a white one of his. “Where were *you*, Dazai?”

“You know,” He motioned his questions off, listening to the vanishing numbness of drugs he had not access to anymore. “Solving your investigation. The one you refuse to inform your ranks about.”

“That’s what I suspected. Tell me about these undead soldiers, then.”

Dazai did.

Pointedly, and with an ease that seemed wanted from both sides, he refrained from mentioning the cross he doubted any surgery had helpfully picked up from Chuuya's insides.

"Traitors could be everywhere," he concluded, by the time nurses had begun to filter inside, checking on groaning and snoring and unbreathing bodies. "If that is how we are meant to call them. Their betrayal isn't quite willing. They were just desperate enough to fall into the *Poet's* trap."

"And once you nullify Dante's Ability, they will be dead in a matter of seconds," Mori mused, holding two pieces between his fingers. "Whether it's betrayal or death, we have lost a lot of men today."

"At least you don't have to bother with deciding whether they must be buried according to traitors' laws or not," he observed, helpfully.

"You've got something on your nose," the man told him.

"What?"

Mori leaned forward, slipping one of his white pieces in his pocket. His smile had a hint of mirth, something youthful. He was always in a good mood when the chance to fiddle with Dazai's flesh came — when he didn't have to fear Dazai striking right when he was at his least capable.

*A rat trap*, the man had described him as, once, after observing a line of mafiosi slip past Dazai with their shoulders almost brushing the wall.

"Lack of empathy," he winked.

"Boss, this is so unprofessional."

"More or less than hiding the threat we're currently facing from my men?"

His tone had emptied out again, echoing off the walls of the room. Dazai leaned his chin on his hand. "You can decide that on your own. But how are you going to explain what they fought?"

"The *Nine Rings* used to be known for their vast range of — *unusual* Ability users," Mori replied, knocking on the chessboard. "Their tattoo maker, for example. Would it be so hard to believe one of theirs deals with illusions as well?"

"No bodies to prove those declarations false," he admitted. "But we don't know how many more Dante took from our ranks. They could appear at any moment. You could just tell the truth, you know? Dante's threat is not enough to create chaos throughout an entire organization. At least we'll have more men searching for him."

Mori tapped a white piece on his chin.

"The *Nine Rings* are an enemy we know," he said, easily. "An enemy we've beaten once before, one the men bear resentment towards."

“You refuse to wager on their disbelief?”

“Illusion Abilities aren’t that uncommon. But an Ability that promises a lifelong dream, in exchange for betrayal of an organization most of them only joined not to be alone in the underworld fight?”

Dazai tried to imagine it.

“If other organizations were to find out there is something tempting *enough* to steal men from the Port Mafia,” Mori continued, “They might react. Ally, even. The underground is already growing restless, and it has been mere hours. They know someone managed to breach through our walls. If they believe it’s the *Nine Rings* — why wouldn’t they take advantage of a flag?”

“And then the common enemy will be even more familiar,” he concluded, “And the men will give their everything.”

“Which means,” Mori put down his white piece, completing his side of the board. “That while I prepare action against the apparent enemies, you need to deal with the real threat.”

“I thought I had been allowed to stop running around being your detective.”

“I had allowed you to stop hanging out with Chuuya, too,” the man made him notice. The gaze he offered his sleeping trick was honey and thorns, tracing scars stitching themselves up with an unusual buzz. He picked up his medical file; ran a chess piece down the lines. “For some reason, though, you didn’t,” Hilarity pulled his eyes; like one might have said that the sky was falling, he offered: “One might start thinking companionship has made you less obedient.”

“Companionship isn’t quite the word. And I don’t think that’s a fair judgement at all.”

“Don’t whine,” Mori tutted. His smile was a tad too pleasant; his eyes distracted by ink. “Not when poor Yumeno is still out there wandering these restless streets.”

He scoffed. “From the very beginning, I *told you* I wasn’t made for babysitting. I’m very smart, you know? You should have listened to me.”

“You are responsible for the things you tame.”

“Don’t start quoting books at me. You know I won’t read them.”

“That’s a lot of painkillers they’ve ordered for our Chuuya,” the doctor commented, unbothered by the cheating moves Dazai was putting in place over the edge of the medical file. “Unsurprising. But isn’t it just marvelous, just how *fragile* a body overflowing with strength can be?”

He pushed back and forth on the seat, listening to the screech of the legs. “That’s what happens when you stick a fake god in a garden gnome.”

“A *worthy* garden gnome.”

“Nothing worthy about a five years old.”

“My,” Mori tilted his head to the side. “How long has he been sleeping?”

“Enough for me to draw on his face,” Dazai sighed, longing, dangling his head over the edge of the seat. “Were you people to stop *interrupting* us.”

“Given the circumstances, I do believe it best if he’s on his feet as soon as possible. Somebody needs to deal with this mess — and to find Q as soon as possible, considering the thirst that’s about to swallow us up,” He shut the file, his medical opinion sealed. “You can let the nurses know they should halve the rations.”

Behind the wall of Mori’s candid coat, stained windows tickled Chuuya’s eyelashes, turning his face into a furrowed kaleidoscope.

*Can you trust that?*

“There is something that might keep Q in check,” It slipped through his teeth; a next breath his lungs wouldn’t let him decide to hold in. *Transactionality*. “Once we find them.”

A mere blink; he leaned his weight back, hand close to where Chuuya’s hand cast was abandoned. The medical file was still on his lap — still at reach. “In short?”

“It involves blades,” Dazai yawned, cheeks squished against his hand, making pieces dance on the chessboard. Elise had always involved him in her doll games — she had always protested how *unbloodied* his stories tended to be compared to her own. “A way for their Ability to be chained to circumstances, and not their choice. A leash, if you may.”

“I never asked you to control them.”

He raised his uncovered eye. Mori despised honesty — he wanted craftiness. “That’s what I’m for, though?”

A pause. An held gaze; an idea Dazai knew he wouldn’t be able to refuse. Mori tended to assume his ideas would inevitably be violent enough to work.

He hummed, abandoning the file on top of the heart monitor.

“You need to be careful,” he advised him, uselessly and tenderly and uninterested. Chuuya’s rations would stay. Mori would be less amused by it, in a bit of time. “Discontent is rising through the ranks. Especially after that little show you two put up.”

“It was to be expected, wasn’t it?” he replied. “Men don’t particularly enjoy kids being better at things than they are. How do we deal with them?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Surprise me, won’t you?”

Their game went on and on. Playing with him was both endlessly exhilarating and predictably boring; a reminder of old camaraderie and of its insufferable ephemerality. Mori wasn’t a match. He was just bright enough to give up on the race before it even started.

His victory came with no surprise. Mori offered him his usual glance — defeated; satisfied. Dazai's successes were always the cause of joyous grief. He knew Mori liked to believe he had created him from scratch. He knew a smarter man would have regretted it.

"Congratulations," Mori told him. "What will you have?"

Favors after a win were a tradition. Back in the clinic it had been easy — the right combination of medicines that would kill him; dials on the panel the TV would be set on; the right to decide which men put in that afternoon suicide squad. In the highest floor of the Headquarters the stakes grew, crawling up his skin and shining bright in his eyes.

In a Hospital room, he settled on something that would benefit the both of them.

"I want two things," he said.

Mori curled an eyebrow. "How unusual."

"If I'm keeping your secret, I want something in exchange," he replied. "Unless you prefer I explain the wonders of mind control to the Port Mafia."

Transactionalism was a language they were both fluent in. An inch from amused, the man nodded.

"First," He pushed the chessboard to the floor, ignoring the startled glances thrown in his direction. "As precisely as possible — How much control do we have on the city pharmacies? Drug stores and all?"

The question surprised him, evidently. He was quick to hide it behind intertwined hands. "We control the market. You already know that."

"And we could, theoretically, stop one specific type of medicine from entering the city?"

"With *important* economic consequences, yes."

"Good. It will be on your card. I'll write you down what I want *out* for the next few days."

Mori sighed. "I suppose. And the other thing?"

The Brutus between his ribs buzzed in fear.

It was nothing new. His carcass rejected him, day after day, against all that the mind that controlled it decided was law and was fair and was needed. *Would you listen, if I didn't despise you?* "Lessons."

The man twitched.

"You haven't needed lessons in almost a year."

"I'm getting compliant," Dazai sighed, laying back against the seat, lonely eye on the rise and fall of Chuuya's chest. "Losing my touch."



“Alright, then,” Mori gathered all their chess pieces, fixing them inside the box. His eyes moved frantically around. The curiosity of a scientist; the impatience of a doctor; the pain of a creator. “We’ll take care of it as soon as you can leave the hospital.”

“When can I?”

“Oh,” The ghost of a smile appeared on his face. A nurse would approach soon; the man would pat her shoulders, and tell her not to change a thing about their medical files. “When your doctor says so.”

## Chapter End Notes

mori, manipulator: would be a shame if i refused to give chuuya medicine

dazai, problematic: what if i put blades on a seven years old

you notice how q’s the real victim? hey there! i hope your month has been going nicely. i was vaguely worried about this chapter — fight scenes are a new thing to write, and my vocabulary is sort of limited on that matter. but the first scene of the chapter was actually one of the first scenes i’ve ever thought for this fan fiction; i’d been told a story by a friend of mine about how her parents met by having to share a shower at this one beach after they’d swam in a sea they hadn’t noticed was absolutely LITTERED in sewer remnants.

it was also important to me to show that dazai has a complicated relationship with skin in general, and that chuuya has his own way to be mindful about it — even with the little context that he has about it. it’s one of the side stories i’m more excited to share, so i hope you’ll like it!!

also... caught the shame and toad reference? ;)

see you soon, and thank you for reading :)

# ME

## Chapter Summary

*They were the first words they exchanged in a week. Neither seemed eager to add to them. He had a vague memory of Chuuya grabbing the side of his shirt to pull him down the crosswalk, before their teams went their separate ways for a mission; after that, radio silence.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter vii.*

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*Case number: 00087357*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. spontaneously committed the following insubordinations: property damage, [...]*

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The pipes on the ground floor of *Building Two* had been raining from leaking slots all morning.

Only lonely, shower-water drops had landed on the marble floors across the week following the attack; amongst the chaos of reconstructions and the mutters of men unused to any shape of defeat, most failed to notice the tears falling from the ceiling — until they turned into blown-out waterfalls.

“An underrated showdown,” Dazai — who had tampered with the piping system for seven days straight, until it had bowed to him — commented, huddled under his umbrella, watching buckets of rain bounce off his shoes. Yokohama had copied the HQs; or the other way around. “You know,” he added, eyes to the Church, much to the goon who had driven him there’s lack of interest. “Everybody is so focused on scrubbing off the stupid blood from the carpets, they’re not even paying attention to my work.”

A lie, of course. Mafiosi had been avoiding his gaze since the attack; their eyes were too heavily stuck on the floor to be sure, but Dazai was sure he would find the reflection of his makeshift explosion cage in their shivering pupils. Grief; perhaps — never rage. They all knew better.

All the same — at least, tall and busy as they all were, they made sure not to bump his shoulders. Not that they ever did.

*[In the quiet, was a certainty: Mori only ever raised weapons Dazai had put in his hands.*

*Books had been the start of it — pictures of bodies with no skin and bones with no walls; eyeballs staring right at him through a page; thin lines connecting never ending letters he couldn’t read, if he tried too hard. He had read all of them. Then, he had nudged the corpses on the floor with the shoes Mori had given him.*

“Now, now,” *the doctor had said.*

“Sorry,” *Dazai had replied, out of need. He hated pain. That curious doctor seemingly knew many ways of making it hurt. Their deal might not last, if he was found lacking in these aspects.*

Polite, *she used to hum.* At the very least.

*That night, once the blood had been scrubbed from the floor of the clinic and the stolen weapon supplements had been fixed in place — once the screams from the man’s gloves and*

*the victims' bones had echoed off into nothingness, and into the curve of Elise's smile — he had sat on the medical bed, stared down the tied up men begging with their eyes, and said —*

*“Show me where it hurts.”].*

Cursed by Port Mafia trademark efficiency, the never ending sea of coffins had been organized in rows through the pews, new wood shining under the stained glass windows. They would be brought to the *Under Port* by the end of the morning. Not yet, though.

*Minimal time to grieve, with no grave to cry to, Mori would say, even if he refused to change old traditions — seems a bit distasteful, yes?*

Through the tufts of grass in black clothing and tears-carved cheeks, Chuuya had blessedly — voluntarily, he imagined, studying the curve of his spine as he offered his condolences to every soul in that place — forgotten his hat at home.

*[“To hurt others,” Mori had asked, unblinking; a collector watching his ceramics shake under the kicks of playing children, “Or yourself?”*

*“I don't like pain,” An obvious conclusion, he assumed. Bullets were easy to find in any city; Yokohama, and the Port Mafia territory, might have begged him to put a revolver to his temple. “I assume nobody does. Their screams would be less loud if they did.”*

*“You want to make yourself useful, then?” he had joked. It had sounded like a joke. Dazai couldn't pinpoint when the doctor had decided there were uses to the corpse on his porch; perhaps immediately.*

I want to watch them beg for it, *he had thought about saying*. I want to watch their fingers cling to it. I want to watch them crawl towards the silence.

*Not out of any true cruelty; just to see how it felt. Just to feel a spark of familiarity; some bone in his skeleton that would pulse along and say, see, see, see, you too are —*

*“Hush,” Dazai had sighed. “I'm just bored”].*

Chuuya spent a good half an hour pretending not to acknowledge his presence. He had his rounds to do, after all — Dazai sat on the last pew with his console, and watched him help faceless mafiosi carry the coffins to the cars, in various states of disguise; counted tears on a painting of a *Madonna* as he talked tales of the dead to the grieving ones.

*Mourning should be of some use, he had spied him saying to Kouyou, months before.*

Because dogs tended to be stubborn, he kept the act up until every working mafioso was soaked to the bone, and some old woman screamed her heart out on top of one of the few coffins left.

When he dropped on the other end of the pew, he left no trace of water.

“You can manipulate the single raindrops?” he asked, not raising his voice over the shrieks and sobs — not raising his eyes from the aliens on his screen.

“Takes some concentration,” Chuuya said. His voice was rough at the edges — the bullet Dazai had fired into had hit him at the end of his vocal chords. “I mostly don’t bother. Worse things to be soaked in.”

A grave nod. Some younger men dragged the woman away from the coffin, building a wall of dark clothing and tissues to hide her from sight. Over the altar, no statue answered her prayers. “Blood.”

“Piss.”

“Soy sauce.”

“Shit,” A pause. “Sewers shit.”

“The pipes at the Headquarters,” Dazai had the grace of informing, “But *that* water is from the showers, at least.”

A glance. The lack of his hat shouldn’t have been as disconcerting as it was, considering the short time he had spent surgically attached to it. Dazai kept expecting the light not to bounce off his unmatching eyes so devastatingly intensely. “The *what?*”

He hummed. “You’ll see.”

They were the first words they exchanged in a week. Neither seemed eager to add to them. He had a vague memory of Chuuya grabbing the side of his shirt to pull him down the crosswalk, before their teams went their separate ways for a mission; after that, radio silence. Then again, Chuuya always grabbed people’s clothes before crossing the street — perhaps, a remnant from days of children’s sticky hands stuck to his, in a crater with no streets at all.

They sat, half a city and two matching casts between them, and watched the funerals end.

*[“If you don’t want to suffer,” Mori explained, sensibly, hovering right at the outskirts of his numbness — right by the bleeding flesh of a crying man — “Let yourself unlearn it.”*

*He wanted to ask:* when did we learn pain? Why would we do that?

*Childish laziness, ancient skeleton. He stared at the light, instead; the whitish ring that shone bright around Mori’s head, an unlikely halo for an unlikely person. Somewhere, muffled by the dirty windows of the clinic, the stars were watching. Mori never touched him; to demonstrate on Dazai’s own body, as he requested, he only used his voice to direct Dazai’s own fingers.*

*A dislocated arm. A clean cut down the nerves that would hold still where chains might not. Spots that tickled; spots that should have tickled, but didn’t.*

*Just you wait, they swore. Just you wait].*

“That guy from GSS,” Chuuya spoke up, once the *tap-tap* of raindrops had grown unignorable. It took him by surprise. “The one you were shooting.”

Dazai would forget, eventually. “Yes?”

“Was he the first person you killed?”

Some kid who did not understand grief was wandering through the Church; the sound of his small hands on the unguarded organ startled every chest but theirs. “In some ways.”

His next glance was dirtier.

“Pity doesn’t give any secret-giving points.”

“Don’t pity me,” Chuuya scoffed. “I’m not the one in a casket.”

*You’ve been ignoring me all week*, he could have whined. Everyone had. Dazai had woken up with his head on an empty bed and nurses whispering about *the kid who really didn’t like Hospitals, left in such a hurry*. Afterwards it had been papers and executions and the yellow tapes of reconstruction sites — and the curious sight of Chuuya pretending he hadn’t helped set men he knew on fire.

One had to start ignoring the blood under their nails, at some point.

“Do you consider Suribachi City your first?” he asked, instead, because it would sting.

A grunt. A smaller coffin being carried away; rain entering through the open doors, standing the frescoed marble. “Do you consider yourself?”

Dazai felt his smile stretch across his face.

He pocketed his console under the winning jingle; crossed his legs on the old wood, and informed him: “Mori said the picture came out nicely. He will hang it.”

The boy’s grimace was more funerary than any of the half-stolen flowers around the Church. “I still insist *you’re* the one who suggested the tradition.”

“You’ve never visited the Hall?” he replied, as obnoxious as he could. “It’s right by Mori’s office. All those nice pictures of relevant figures in the syndicate, all framed and on display for his power thirst. He just wanted to add his youngests. Shame Q isn’t around.”

“He’s not power thirsty,” Chuuya corrected him, because he occasionally dabbled in intuition. Then: “*Control* thirsty, at most. Isn’t it sort of stupid, putting every high position on display?”

“Only trusted ones and traitors reach Mori’s floor,” Dazai shrugged. “Only two ways to leave.”

The whole photograph-taking business had been sort of a farce, especially in the middle of a starting civil-underground war — both Chuuya and the photographer had sent looks to the windows every few seconds, watching gangs unionize under the sygyl of the blade *scratching* the Port Mafia’s throat.

Very much official, the rest of it — orders to smile, but not too much; requests that Elise stood straighter, *if she could, of course*; the sight of Chuuya's jaw tightening uncomfortably under that unorthodox procedure, shoes smelling of sheep.

The photographer had had the worst time of them all, evidently. Morality made men weird. Not reluctant; nothing money and pointed guns couldn't buy. Only — *realer*. Smart enough not to pity them; careful enough to fear.

“Boss still pissed off?”

*Are you?*, he could have said. It sounded nicer in his mind than, *what did Dante show you?* “His *maybe* most powerful Ability User was out of town during the Apocalypse. I ate all of his breakfast yogurt,” he listed off. “In all, we're not allowed to join today's *moving forward* meeting.”

“Wonder *why* said-User wasn't exactly around,” Chuuya muttered, uglily. “Piece of shit.”

“It's not like I dragged you to Rengoku.”

“It's not like you *told me* Rengoku was a trap, either, you absolute —“ A breath. Clearly not lined in his colors; perhaps one of those decorations Kouyou liked so much. “I still don't think it's a good idea.”

“What is?”

A pointed glare. “Not telling anyone that I'm,” He frowned; kicked the ground, disgusted. “You know. We can't risk them ending up in my possessed radar.”

Dazai studied the assortment of letters on the tip of his tongue; a name neither of them had dared to whisper that week. The secretary desk at *Building One* had been ghostly empty; Chuuya stubbornly quiet. He never met him in the Hospital halls; Tanaki never said a single word.

“We can't risk them locking you up, either,” he replied, eventually. “Mori's considering keeping every vaguely suspicious man away from the battlefield. You might make him hesitate, but I'm not going to rely on that doubt.”

“You could just *say* you need me to kick ass for you,” Chuuya let him know, unimpressed. “We all saw you fall on your face trying to judo flip Hirotsu.”

He gulped irritation down. “I was letting him win.”

“Sure you were.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Are you being a dumbass?”

“Underestimation,” he insisted, “Is an underrated advantage in any and all fights, and given so many people were *watching* —“

“Don’t uncover your darkest plans so soon, man,” Chuuya stood up, brushing invisible dust off from his jacket. His casted hand allowed no glove; the sight of his naked fingers was a complicated matter. If his body was hurting, as Dazai knew it must be, it didn’t show. “Well?”

He met his expectant glance. “Well?”

“I’m going to tear Dante’s jugular out of his throat with my teeth,” he explained, easy and unguilty, framed by the electrical lights forming a halo around the crucifix. He wondered if Arahaki was humming down his bones. “I’m assuming you want to help.”

“Office work,” Dazai replied. “So what. That’s a thing now?”

“What’s a thing?”

“Us,” A bad taste gathered under his tongue. He didn’t know what face he made; he imagined it was something classier than the retching lines of Chuuya’s sudden face. “You want to play fighting duo?”

“God, no.”

He stared. “But you want us to work on this together,” he echoed, needing him to see the point.

“Yes,” he confirmed, making his way to the doors, undeterred in his *face*. “Kinda. *Want* is a strong word. You’re occasionally useful. And I can’t exactly trust myself right now.”

Dazai had to run to catch up. “What makes you think you can trust *me*?”

“The hit I got to the head, probably,” Chuuya murmured, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Don’t get weird ideas. This is temporary. You get me out of mind control, I make sure your ass doesn’t die in the effort it will take.”

“That’s not in *my* interest —“

“And buy you a hangman knot afterwards,” he interrupted, stepping out in the rain — no umbrella to cover him; raindrops escaping him all the same. He turned to look at him, pointedly — determined. *Mourning should be of some use*. “So. What’s the plan?”

“I want something different —“

A huff. “Which is?”

Dazai thought about it. “What does *Corruption* feel like?”

A breath. Chuuya stared, not even angry, as if he hadn’t been expecting it. Perhaps he hadn’t. Perhaps he hadn’t quite talked about December out loud, outside of late reports. Perhaps the fever Dazai could feel in his throat had blurred his vision, only pretending the boy’s burned eye was sending off flares.



*Longing*, he thought. *Running*.

At last, frowning at the closest, least gleeful of the *Madonnas*, as petulant as a throat that had screamed under electricity could be, Chuuya offered: “Like they were all lying when they told me I could bleed.”

[“*There is no point in a wound,*” Mori liked to tell, *as he stitched him up — as he made sure it would scar; made sure it would be visible, every single time, to one or two eyes or none at all. “If you can’t learn from the blood.”*].

Dazai watched his back until he was a mere dot under the rain. He followed.

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The walk in the rain to *Building Two* was the last straw of Dazai’s already wavering immune system, cracked by the diving experience in Rengoku. By the time they crossed the doors — amongst mafiosi hurrying to a meeting they weren’t invited to; offering him petrified gazes and venomous whispers — he was sneezing at every breath, bent in a half over a cough.

The broken pipes didn’t help.

“He gets fevers *every week*,” Elise whined, at the very end of one of the long tables of the canteen.

She was miraculously untouched by the waterfalls falling from the ceiling — the umbrella Chuuya was floating over their heads and the house doll she had set between them to blame. “Rintarou used to make me play nurse for him,” she continued, kicking her feet in the most efficient way to bump against Dazai’s back. “I had to wet his *stupid* face, and change his *stupid* clothes, and make sure he didn’t eat too many of the *stupid* fever pills.”

“And I’ll never forgive you for that,” Dazai murmured, curling onto himself tighter. The floor under the table was soaked, but discomfortly familiar; he set his eyes on the metal straps of Chuuya’s boots and sneezed.

“Given that he looks like he was born with the Bubonic Plague up his nostrils, I’m unsurprised,” was Chuuya’s only judgement.

He sounded distracted — he wasn’t sure if his eyes were following the mafiosi coming and leaving from the ballroom, where Mori was supposedly giving out new instructions, or just

staring unamously at the storm-like texture of the falling water janitors were desperately trying to gather.

“Why are you mad at him?” Elise asked.

“I’m always mad at him.”

“He sucks,” Dazai answered, coughing.

“You’re *madder*,” she insisted. “Has he been silly? I approve. Crash him with gravity! He threw my dolls out of the window the other day.”

“You’d filled them with hornets,” he noted. “I was doing everyone a favor. Didn’t even put them in the Slug’s office or anything!”

“No, you just burned my fingertips off while I was in *medical coma* —“

“You *said* it was something you wanted to do —“

“— and you didn’t tell me about Rengoku, and you got me *poss* —“ He could *see* the glance he threw in Elise’s direction. “And you’re *you*. That’s more than enough reason to be mad at him, until he does something about it.”

Dazai plastered his face to the floor, groaning through the irritation and the fever. Everything was too cold and too warm and too sticky; strange visions of Mori’s doctor gloves and disapproving expression blinked behind his eyelids. “I’m not doing the song.”

“Oh, you *are*.”

“I’m *not*,” he hissed, through snot, “Doing the song. The song was made for *you*, and your inability to admit when I *win*. I don’t do the song.”

Chuuya stepped on his hand. “We’ll *see* if —“

A hellish screech echoed across the canteen, startling the stained glass windows. From one of the pipes closer to the buffet tables, a heavier rainfall came tumbling down.

“Lise,” Chuuya said — brave enough to interrupt the mumbling dialogue she had begun between two of her mauled dolls. “Tell me again. What’s this about the suicide pills?”

Her huff rattled her whole body. Dazai crawled forward through the cold water, using the edges of her gown as a blanket. “I *told* you, it was boring.”

“But you must have heard *something* —“

“Just that we can’t risk more men to end up under the influence of whatever the *Nine Rings* are doing, *blah, blah*,” Elise yawned, dolls bumping against the table. “Every man has to carry one of the pills, just to be sure. I assume Dazai doesn’t get one — I’m not babysitting him!”

He studied the crowds of suited legs and wet — but polished — shoes under the other table; gathering as close as possible to murmur about whatever Mori had come up with. His head was pounding, still; he settled a hand on Chuuya's leg and tapped.

It took a small sequence to make him bend over and curl an eyebrow to his face. "For the last time, I don't fucking *know* Morse code."

"Then learn it," he sniffed, annoyed.

"I don't get the point of staying here," the boy insisted, frowning. "We should be out, looking for one of the *Souls* — how else are we meant to find Dante?"

"Who's Dante?" Elise chirped.

"The Bad Man who steals kids' belly buttons," Dazai replied, unmoving. Under her gasp, he said: "We can't move in Mori's opposite direction without being sure of what he's ordering. This suicide pill method means we can't count on any new leads for *Souls*."

"Then let's sneak in," Chuuya insisted, as he had since their first *wet* step inside the *Building*. His entire body seemed to be pulsing with energy, uncaring of new scars or curved shoulders; perhaps rancor from being interrupted too soon. "Kouyou said you used to scare Boss by haunting the vents. We could —"

"That's just a story!" he whined, kicking his feet in the water until it splashed Chuuya's face. It startled a burning cough through his lungs; amidst coughs, he spat: "Why is my unblemished character constantly being slandered under the attacks of any forked tongue —"

"*Chuuya*," Elise whined, for the thousandth time. "Chuuya, Chuuya, come *on*, he's *boring*, you said you'd play with me, come on, come *on* —"

"Chuuya?"

A series of sounds followed — Dazai grabbing the naked portion of Chuuya's calf to hide the Ability influenced umbrella; Elise and Chuuya's consequential curses and shrieks; the gasp out of Officer Matsuda's throat as he watched Dazai's reddened nose and wet eyes peek from under the table.

"Oh, hey, Officer!" Dazai waved, started by the nasal texture of his tone. "What brings you in the devil lair of corporate weapon factoring?"

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Chuuya snapped, succinctly, standing up from his bench. "You couldn't pick a less rainy day to snoop around?"

Matsuda grimaced towards the small umbrella he held by the elbow, clearing his throat. "Not quite my decision, boys. We were called to fact check some violations after the attack," Thin, suspicious eyes laid on Chuuya. "You know. When the *Mori Corporations* base was stormed by a gang without a clear reason."

"We fabricate weapons," Dazai insisted. "I can think about one or two reasons."

“You look like a bowling ball,” Elise offered.

Laying his eyes on her for the first time, his skin seemed to gain some pallor. With a hint of nausea that fit right in with the glances he sometimes threw to the building he was walking through, he asked: “And you are —“

“Boss’ daughter,” Chuuya cut through. “Not that it’s any of your business. You may want to tell your men not to touch any of the rice.”

“Voices are that it’s actually made of small pieces of concrete,” Dazai said. “Or cocaine.”

“*Not* cocaine,” the boy jumped.

“No, I really do believe —”

A strangely sharp, distinctively *inhuman* sound came from inside the man’s coat.

“Oh, no,” Dazai shivered, eyes wide.

Chuuya had stilled so suddenly it might as well have been *rigor mortis* belatedly settling in. Eyes on the heart pocket, raindrops dripping down his utterly calm face, he dared: “Was that a —“

“*Puppy!*” Elise screeched, stepping on his hands to jump across the table, almost flinging herself onto the man in her efforts. “There’s a puppy!”

The small commotion had probably not been in Matsuda’s intent, given the complicated glances his colleagues offered next to blank-faced mafiosi — and the curious eyes settling on their table, distracted from the nightmarish meal in favor of staring at the ball of fur the detective settled near the dollhouse.

It was a small thing, fluffy ears and black fur, happily wiggling its tail and sniffing Elise’s immaterial hands with something akin to confusion. Stiffen and tight-lipped, seemingly petrified with repressed euphoria, Chuuya kept staring.

“Keep it up and you’ll explode as soon as you pet it,” Dazai scoffed, through a sneeze.

“Go fuck yourself,” Chuuya said, toneless. He reached out with a hand; when the dog growled at his cast, mistrustful, he almost expected to watch him pass out in *joy*. “Oh, *God*. ”

“You’re very red,” Elise noted.

“*Oh, God*. ”

“Not a fan of dogs?” Matsuda asked, from the outskirts of that circle of cooing, blinking at his curled up silhouette — at the very end of the table.

“Hellish beasts,” He sniffed. The redhead had taken off his jacket, shielding the dog from rain with it, despite the weak bark it was directing to him. “I’m unsurprised Chuuya appreciates it, as offspring. What’s a detective doing with a dog in his coat?”

“It’s a lead,” A conflicted glance. “We saw three dogs following a suspect around the city; though they were always gone when we got there. This is one of them. We’re hoping he might lead us to the others.”

Dazai did his best to appear innocent — rubbed his nose to make it redder, allowing the fever lingering around his bones to make him look tired. “Who’s the big shot committing crimes with a gang of puppies?”

“I don’t know if *big* is the right term.”

He leaned his chin on his hand.

Matsuda’s glance was unamused. “Come on.”

“I know, I know, you don’t trust us —“

“You’re victims of a system,” the man said. “It’s not a matter of choices.”

Near the doors, a small group of mafiosi kept their eyes on the officers walking away from them. It wasn’t quite *mean*, the glint in their eyes — just calm. Unworried; unhurried. Aware that the prey would have to slow down and find water, eventually.

“Let me guess,” Dazai said. “An Ability User who’s a bit younger than your usual gigs?”

A flash of surprise. “How do you —“

“You work with kids, old man,” Chuuya was the one to intervene, this time — speaking over the *shaking-with-rage* shoulder of the puppy. The evident dislike didn’t seem to surprise him; not to discourage him from adoring from afar. “It wasn’t hard. You think the dog can lead you to them?”

“Don’t worry about it, son,” Matsuda replied, clearly disgruntled. “You’ll know once it’s resolved.”

“You don’t know how right you are,” Dazai sighed, eyes squinting to the ceiling, through the rain — settling on a particular grate. “Chuuya, let go of the trashcan on paws. We have things to do.”

The dog attempted to bite his nose off. Lighting shone in his eyes. “Oh, *now* is when your ass wants to do things —“

“Chuuya.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” the boy cooed, uncaring about the fists Elise was raining on his shoulders, and the nearby foam between the animal’s fangs. “Aren’t you the coolest dog in the world. Aren’t you a kickass dog. Aren’t you *perfect*. ”

“His name is Keru,” Matsuda informed. “He’s peed all over my car three times just this morning.”

The dog growled some more. Chuuya cheered: “You’re so *good*.”

Dazai stared at the ceiling, unreligious and with snot on his lips. He removed his coat, cursing under his breath, and pushed it onto Matsuda’s hands. “Do you mind holding this for a moment? Yes? Thank you. Everyone, if you could!”

Every head in the canteen turned to watch him struggle to climb on top of the table, vision blurred and expression perfectly blank. Keru let out a questioning bark.

“Oh,” Chuuya’s grin grew mean. “*Oh*.”

He stared off into the nothingness.

Raised his arms.

“*I’m a sore idiot*,” he half-sang, blankly, among the utter silence, refusing to move. “*I’m a proper idiot. My uttermost apologies for the inevitable*,” He opened his arms. “*The inevitable is that I’m an idiot*.”

Back in November — when Dazai had forced Chuuya to perform that same scene in the meeting room, following his unofficial, much-discussed loss of the *Great Prank War* — the boy had finished it off with middle fingers. All he managed to do, between the fever and rain-wet clothes, was slip from the table.

Not a soul in the canteen dared to say a word.

Thankfully, he managed to tear Chuuya from the dog — it was dragging his roaring-with-laughter body out of the room, swiftly, that became the true mission.

“Come *on*,” His snorts of laughter were more than disgraceful, rolling down the stairs. Hanging off him, legs stumbling from hilarity, he *insisted*: “Come on, at least they weren’t looking at you like you’re the goddamn *devil* anymore, come *on* — “

*I didn’t know you had noticed*, Dazai could have said, had his laughter not muffled the idea.

Ugly and high pitched of a sound as it was, it stubbornly ricocheted against his skull and the soaked hallways of the building, startling questioning glances from the few mafiosi they bumped against. Stealing his hat and dashing away with it calmed the hilarity down considerably — pushing the boy up the secret entrance to the vents quietened it down completely.

“You said it wasn’t true,” Chuuya accused, as they crawled through the suffocating walls.

Dazai, who was still considering the advantages of turning around and leaving very quietly, only to nail the entrance door back in place, offered: “I said it was slander. Pay attention. *Cockroach!*”

The *thump!* of his head hitting the roof shook the entire structure.

An endless time of slithering forward later, the throat-thin space widened near a striped vent, allowing them to sit facing each other. A few pushes and winces from their matching injured hands settled their legs, calves intertwined and the smell of sweat clogging their noses.

The ballroom several feet underneath their point of view must have been vertiginously beautiful, in its better days; it had struggled to claw its way out of the darkness, even since the former Boss had turned it into another workplace. Bright red curtains had been watered down into the shade of fresh blood — the chandeliers were skeleton hands reaching up.

“ — good idea?” Ace was saying, pacing back and forth as elegantly as possible, eyes in some stash of documents that had his forehead wrinkled. “The pills were already a vow of faith. This might —”

“Circumstances have changed,” Mori replied. “Disliked issues require disliked solutions. We can’t lay our decisions in the hands of the masses.”

The two Executives, Mori and a trio of *Black Lizards* led by Hirotsu’s pensive frame were a too small crowd inside that endless meeting room. Light from the rainy sky reflected on floor-to-ceiling windows, painting composed caves on their faces.

“Our numbers have been dented already, and we can’t afford for the other organizations to witness what they believe is mass mutiny,” Kouyou intervened, twirling her umbrella on the carpet. “Launching close attacks, spreading voices, securing economic ports — *That* is the priority.”

“I am perfectly aware, Ozaki,” the Boss assured, not quite reprimanding. His hands were crossed on the desk; he laid his chin on them with the glee of a child. “I am merely suggesting giving control of these actions to an — unexpected factor.”

Dazai sneezed.

Chuuya offered a disgusted glare.

“The men will comply,” Hirotsu intervened, at last. As perhaps the closest thing that makeshift Council had to a spokesperson of the common rows of men, they all turned to listen. “It might take some time — There might be some resistance. Nothing they can’t take. Nothing that could ever truly overrun their respect for our Boss.”

He had watched the faces of every man leaving that ballroom — the glazed sort of absence in their eyes, something between fear and admiration. Mori had that effect on men, cowardly sadistic as he was — he pulled their strings until obedience seemed nothing more than the easiest road to survival.

After the former Boss’ reign, anything and all had seemed merciful. *Crush their bones and their spirit*, the man had echoed. *It should not be hard. My men are rarely incapable, are they not?*

“Don’t know how he got them by the throat,” Chuuya muttered, squinting through the grates. “The lower gangs in Suribachi were so damn convinced he was nothing but a puppet for the

true Boss.”

He shrugged. “No one wants a bullet in the head.”

“They would take one for him,” he insisted, with the unawareness of someone who had managed to temporarily drag Mori’s heart-wrenching interest from Dazai. “Loyalty is more complicated than survival.”

There was an understanding of sorts between them — one Dazai was only welcomed in under the guise of a clever mind. Two Bosses who would have done too much for their people. Rarely was any door shut in his face; but he’d watched Chuuya orbit around Mori’s venomous gravitational field from behind a glass. A car accident witnessed from a plane seat.

*Loyalty is flesh*, he thought. Mori never refused flesh.

He tapped his fingers on the cold metal. “Nobody wants their city destroyed,” he concluded.

“It’s a risk,” Ace insisted.

“Not any more than other decisions we have been forced to take,” Mori replied, easily. “We have had long conversations on the matter, have we not? You are all perfectly aware of my intentions for them.”

“Plasming the demonic is more than risky,” Kouyou muttered, squeezing water out of an edge of her kimono. “Relying our strengths on their unwilling alliance —“

“It might start voices, too,” Hirotsu added. He offered a small nod in the doctor’s direction. “Sir, you know what *some* of the men say in his regards —“

“He’s free to slit my throat and take my seat, and make our little god his second, if he so wishes,” Mori interrupted them. Dazai stiffened; from the other side of the tunnel, he felt Chuuya do the same. “I’m one to encourage success. Shall we take it as an occasion to verify its likeness?”

No one said a word.

“Is he,” Chuuya started, “Talking about —“

“Starting from this very moment, and until this little boring matter is solved,” the man concluded, “As we will inform our subordinates, every member of the Port Mafia is obliged to offer aid, temporarily obey the orders, and officially act under the command of Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuuya.”

*“What?”*

The unfortunate combination of vents with admirable acoustics and a room warped in pensive quiet birthed an echo strong enough to rattle spines.



Their reaction was lightning quick — Dazai almost missed the impact of Chuuya's gloved hand slapping itself onto his mouth, just as he was doing the same to the boy's own. Breathing was an abandoned chore; their eyes met, filled with blame.

*Shut the fuck up*, Chuuya threatened.

You *shut up*, what the —

Hirotsu's fingers massaged his temples with admirable efficiency. Executive Ace widened his arms in a giving-up gesture, dropping onto the nearest seat.

"Well," Mori said, cheerfully, eyes settled right where their vent resided. Dazai could see him look straight at him; could see his arms overflow in papers he would leave in his prodigious hands. *Give me a miracle, yes?* "What a shame. Clearly we need ask for a check-up in the vents as well."

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"Two questions," Hirotsu began, as Dazai did his very best to put the key into the ignition. "Were you to blame for the pipes?"

"Obviously," he confirmed, voice nasal, tongue between his teeth, impatiently knocking his fingers against the wheel of the man's Camaro. "Place needed a wash up. Plus, Mori wanted to introduce those environmental temperature sensors? The ones that match the outside? Done."

"That's not what that means."

"No, no, I'm rather sure. Second question?"

A single beat of hesitance. Then: "Given the circumstances, don't you believe you might have more important matters to care for than driving lessons?"

Over the windshield, on the other side of the underground parking lot of the Headquarters, Kouyou watched Chuuya shoot a quick sequence of bullets towards *Golden Demon's* unimpressed frame.

"*Fuck!*" the boy snapped, annoyed, when the ricochet bumped against his casted hand. He leaned down to pick up the fallen bullet; threw it with enough force to tear a hole through a parked car.

*Golden Demon* clapped.

“It’s not just driving lessons,” Dazai concluded, sneezing.

He didn’t particularly want to deal with one of Mori’s lectures on public property damage. They had been there since the beginning of the afternoon; the stone columns and most of the parked cars had learned the shape of the Camaro intimately — nonetheless.

“Hey!” he called, leaning through the window. “It’s my turn with *Golden Demon*! Stop being mean!”

“She’s not even corporeal,” Chuuya screamed back, raising the 629-44 mag to his nose. “She’s much more useful here with me, instead of getting ran over by your personality defects.”

“Driving is *not* a —“

Hirotsu’s head bumped against the headrest, violently enough to startle a cough. “The wall!”

The car screeched. A *thump!*

“You’re doing just wonderful, demon child,” Kouyou called, hurriedly fixing Chuuya’s grip on the gun, taking several steps back once she was done. “I can hardly wait to free you into the midday traffic.”

“Thank you, Ane-san!” he called, obnoxious.

“You only need to be gentler,” Hirotsu said, as pale as someone could be, patting every inch of the car he could reach. It was more than new; the explosion they had caused before meeting Beatrice had left the older one irreparable. “It’s a pedal. Not the head of a traitor on the curb.”

“How could I ever mistake them.”

“That’s what I’ve been asking myself,” the man sighed. “Didn’t I once see you fly a helicopter?”

“That’s what I said!” he lamented.

The car swerved at the last second, missing one of the columns. Hands clawing the seat, Hirotsu said: “You drive around just fine. Somewhat. You must relax your grip on the wheel, though. Pay attention to your surroundings.”

“I apologize, Gramps,” Dazai said. “Running Chuuya over has been a recurring dream of mine. I can hardly control myself.”

*“I heard that!”*

“He really takes pride in being a walking tennis ball shooting machine, doesn’t he?”

The Commander rubbed his temples.

He didn't speak again for the rest of the drive around that section of the parking lot, as his hands spasmed with the need to take the wheel away. Dazai was more and more cheerfully astonished by the discovery of a new natural enemy — by the time the car somehow began to do donuts, he was laughing.

"You know," a slightly nauseous Hirotsu said, as he watched the world around them spin, "I learned how to drive in an underground tunnel in Italy. I had a bullet in my left thigh, and my future life companion was trying to gouge my eyes out. It was more peaceful than this."

Dazai squinted, slowing down on the donuts to raise a cloud of smoke — messing up Chuuya's aim behind them. "You really dropped a bomb there."

"You must have heard stranger things."

"I didn't know you were married, old man."

"Could you refrain from —"

His car door was almost torn off its hinges. "Grandpa is *married*?" Chuuya echoed, speechless.

"Might as well be," Kouyou intervened, with a smile that tasted of strawberry where blood usually was. "He all but melts around his *adoratissima*. You boys should see him and Miranda together."

"Gross," the boy retched. "Mackerel, get out. It's my turn."

"I don't need shooting lessons," he reminded him. "Unlike you, I am a resourceful member of this syndicate. *And* an Executive candidate."

"Over my dead fucking —"

Hirotsu and Kouyou only withstood the wrestle match that followed — Chuuya's efforts to pull him out of the car; Dazai's nails leaving indents in the leather — for an endless instant, before they bodily intervened to separate them.

"Come with me," the woman ordered, fishing for something in the car. "Lessons are the weapon of the most capable warriors, did you know?" She raised her hand. "This will calm you two down, hopefully."

"Executive —" Hirotsu attempted to protest — to no avail; Dazai and Chuuya grabbed ahold of two of three cigarettes she was offering like starved children, bickering over the man's stolen lighter. "At least give them a few years and massacres before they lose their lungs for good."

"Beat it, I smoke," Chuuya grunted.

"Of course you do," Dazai replied, as obnoxiously as possible.

*Golden Demon* hovered closer. With a single slash of her blades, she brushed Kouyou's last cigarette with their edges, lighting it up with a hiss. "Why delay the inevitable?"

Dazai met Chuuya's eyes over the car window.

*Hell*, he mouthed.

*Hell*, he spelled out.

"Why am I not surprised that you smoke like a child?" Kouyou commented, several minutes later, as they settled near a column to watch Chuuya grasp the fundamentals of driving. He was, apparently, *excelling* — much to Dazai's dismay. "*Inhale*. Not *digest*."

"Unrequited commentary," Dazai coughed, his eyes teary, unsure of whether the sharp tone of it was a consequence of the fever he could still feel through his soaked clothes, or the smoke. "I'm an innovator. Not my fault if Chuuya grew up in a baby gang of ten years old alcoholics."

"Just how sick are you right now?"

He sneezed — holding eye contact, right on her umbrella.

The woman scrutinized him. With a sigh, long and deep, she removed a layer of her sash, and settled it around his shoulders like a scarf. Not quite *touch* — but almost. He huddled in it; sneezed *on* it.

It was quiet.

Cigarettes were interesting enough. He could not die from it, if not long-terminally — but there existed a category for all that could temporarily take the place of longing. "I didn't expect you to approve of Mori's new hierarchy," he said, eventually, to fight the sluggish fall of his eyelids. It wasn't quite sleep; Dazai rarely felt the need for it, if not its absence. "You must know it will start a revolution through the ranks."

"Horrible decisions tend to strengthen respect towards figures of power," Kouyou replied, composed. "If they think Boss insane, they might just be curious enough to see where it goes. You two, of course, will take the blunt of it. Expect assassination attempts."

"Cannot wait," he sighed, sliding down the column until he could sit on the floor. From the slowly accelerating car, gaining more and more confidence, Chuuya *whooped*. Dazai made a mental note to send an anonymous note about him to the police. "You can't be happy about our collaboration."

"I don't believe men like you are meant for collaboration," she said. "And I don't believe men like Chuuya are willing to be led all that easily."

He snapped his tongue. "That's where you're wrong."

A car appeared at the edge of the parking lot. It took one look at the scenario and backed away up the climbing ramp, finding the rain again.

“I asked him if he thought it was a good idea, back then. He told me only diamonds can polish other diamonds,” Kouyou lowered her gaze, studying him. “I did not understand. I still don’t.”

“I agree. Chuuya is more of a ruby.”

“He’s pushing you towards the spotlight in an attempt to put you where you *cannot fail*. He fears you might never achieve the greatness he predicts, if not forced to.”

“A sapphire, also,” he commented, pensive. “His eyes and all. Well. Eye. What’s a brownish stone? His Ability is pretty red, though. Maybe ruby is fine. What do you think I am?”

Kouyou kept her eyes on him. “In my short experience, neither one of you needs any encouragement to bounce back into the other. I’m not sure that is a good thing.”

“Maybe a bloodstone? I do like those.”

“If I didn’t know any better,” she concluded, her smile pleasant, “I would say you’re both desperate for this ferocious partnership you claim to despise.”

*Partnership.*

“If you’re reading Q’s Bible, these days,” Dazai offered, through a yawn, “You should definitely know better than to believe what your eyes tell you.”

A call on Mori’s mysterious battle teams called Hirotsu away from his Camaro; Dazai settled in the backseats with his console, humming too loudly and only vaguely listening to the gentle hums of Kouyou’s severe instructions to the shorter driver. Lacking the silvery undertone of respect Hirotsu’s voice never lost, she made for a good lesson.

“You two,” she said, some infinity later, as the little sun from the climbing ramp faded into darkness. “How do you take an organization down?”

Quietly, Dazai met Chuuya’s eyes in the rear view mirror.

“We let the bastard run them over?” the boy offered, halting the car to a stop. She didn’t smile. Mori would have asked it differently, he knew — *why would you take it down?* Or, *what would happen if you* —? A man of syllogism; who somehow found poetry in the act of knowing.

“Cut down what keeps them together,” Dazai said. “Who.”

“Their Boss,” Chuuya frowned. “Or the thing that makes them the Boss.”

“The *Nine Rings* seal,” Kouyou studied her pale hands, thin scars and freckles; nails blood red and sharp. “As long as it exists, they will simply keep rising from the ashes. Men don’t need much to have faith, and their latest Queen has all that is required.”

It made sense. And yet — “How do you know the *Nine Rings*’ Boss is a woman?”

Her reflection had golden outlines, stolen from the sun-fall. That mirror of herself, he thought, looked like *Golden Demon* — only younger. “Beatrice and I go a long way back.”

Chuuya’s head snapped to her. “You —“

“Of course,” Dazai’s mind was swimming; thread upon thread of things he had kept where they couldn’t quite form the right shape. “Your lover joined the Port Mafia from the *Nine Rings* for you. But you had no reason to detest them — It was our syndicate that killed him. Unless somebody from their rows had something to do with it.”

“Beatrice,” the other boy echoed. “Did she rat you out to the former Boss?”

Kouyou smiled. It was grievous, how beautiful it made her wrath seem — his statuary she was, in more pain than Dazai had ever felt for someone.

“Kanechi wasn’t my lover,” she concluded. It was a concession; the way she pulled onto her gowns was a nineteen years old facade. “Only a man I loved.”

His name was a pond; an ocean. He watched Chuuya stiffen from the heaviness of it; watched his eyes soften imperceptibly, only at the edges — a recognition he had spent months denying to a woman who he still didn’t fully trust.

Dazai wondered how much of it had been planned.

“I never had an *adoratissima* ” she added — somewhat superior; somewhat jealous. “A personal light of sorts. I was born in these shadows we live to defend, and if I wasn’t, I do not remember it. Kanechi was a blind man,” With a breath, Kouyou conceded: “Beatrice wasn’t.”

He attempted to imagine her younger than she was now, less secure — a girl in an overgrown kimono, waving her Ability like a flag until it got her out of the *Pomegranate*. A younger Beatrice, who was as ageless as she always seemed.

“He wanted to save her too. He thought we could be a — trio, of sorts. We both despised the idea,” She shrugged. “Until I didn’t. My mistake was believing she had changed her mind as well.”

“But why would she betray you both?” Dazai asked. Chuuya, pointedly, didn’t speak.

“Oh, she loved Kanechi more than existence,” Kouyou corrected him. “I’m sure she believed only I would be punished. I suppose I thought...”

She trailed off. Her smile took a cruel tilt. “Who knows, truly. We used to walk all over each other in an effort to have Kanechi all for ourselves. We both failed to understand his love wasn’t weak enough to die out on a single person — we were both too starved to see it. But slowly, in time — I used to bring her jewels stolen from men at the *Pomegranate*. She used to make me little doodles of *Golden Demon*, all horrid,” Her head tilted to the side, almost curious. “It took us both some time to realize Kanechi’s idea had some truth to itself. I just wanted her to look at me.”

His console flashed a *GAME OVER* sign on his display. He stared at it, head tilted.

“You stay where you begin your existence,” the woman said, “And you die there. The ground soils you in a way that is foolish to escape. I loved Kanechi for all his light, and I got him killed for believing otherwise.”

*They made her do it*, the voices said. She never put an end to them. Guilt, Dazai thought — a trial she would never be granted. *Made her stand and watch him be tortured until she put him out of his misery.*

“And now she’s *back*,” Kouyou spat. Vicious enough to sizzle with the air around them. “Believing she can take something else from me, like God justifies it. And I will destroy her for it, if I have to die as my sword falls on her neck.”

She turned to look at them so suddenly it was startling; the red around her eyes utterly maniacal. “Do you understand? This is a real threat. You cannot waste time with theories. Mori has bestowed you with power, and you need to *use it* as it *should be used*.”

“Ane-san,” Chuuya started. “Listen —“

The high thrill of her cellphone cut through the tension; Dazai did nothing more than stare as she straightened, face devoid of any semblance of reaction, and brought the phone to her ear, leaving the car.

“I’ll arrive shortly,” she promised. “If any of you allows them to bleed out before I can burn the skin off their bodies —

He kept his eyes on her disappearing silhouette even as Chuuya moved onto the passenger seat, settling his feet on the dashboard with a sigh. Dazai kicked more than necessary to settle on the driver spot, dropping Kouyou’s scarf somewhere in the middle — that the boy barely retorted, said enough.

Hirotsu was still digging the concrete with his steps. Dazai could only imagine the reports *he* would have to deal with.

“I’m killing him,” Chuuya stated, eventually, unnecessarily. The car seats seemed strangely wide compared to their shoulders. He had a gunpowder stain on his cheek. “Whether you help me or not.”

He settled his knees against the will. “I know.”

“She’s fighting the wrong enemy, but —“ His jaw set. Dazai wondered what it felt like — to crawl through the borders of what Nakahara Chuuya deigned worthy of protection, and finally being allowed in. “It takes some — bravery. To be willing to kill a friend for the sake of something greater.”

*I couldn’t*, he didn’t say. The Port Mafia air wouldn’t quite allow it. *I never could*.

Dazai hummed. “You think Shirase is brave?”

“I think Shirase is a child,” he answered, some petrified seconds later, the curve of his jaw hard.

“Alright. You think Verlaine was brave?”

His fingers clenched around the edges of his pants. His knuckles turned white.

Right when he was sure he was going to be hit — whether by his combat boots or the implosive liquid inside him he called blood — all Chuuya did was deflate, eyes forward. “I can’t give her the truth, but I can give her what she wants. Seal or not, I’m sure Beatrice can bleed.”

“Worry about Dante, first,” he suggested. “As long as he’s around, you’re a walking bomb.”

A scoff. “I’m always a walking bomb.”

“Don’t sound so dejected. You hate it, don’t you?”

“Myself?” Chuuya threw him a glance, clearly riled up. “I’m not you.”

Their matching casts rested near the gear shift. He had made good of his promise to Kouyou; doodled nicely all over the surface, loudly remarking about how distasteful the singular *MACKEREL* on his own was. Chuuya had been quiet through it.

Chuuya had been quiet since December.

“Are you going to tell me what Dante showed you in your *Limbo*, or do I have to find out on my own?”

“Fuck off.”

“On my own, then,” he said. “That’s fine. Only so many Hells one can have. Was it that time I filled your office with actual sheep to count because you said I was making you sleep deprived?”

“That was two weeks ago. And I’m surprised the joke wasn’t something else,” he replied, clearly unimpressed. The gentle emergency light of the car had turned on; with no hat to rely on, his face was too naked, and the unruly way his hair was growing far too evident. He wondered if the amber eye ever hurt, like his own did. “Listen.”

“Listening.”

A dirty glance. “You can’t nullify Dante’s shit Ability. Whatever. I’ll kill him. But until then — you can still nullify *Tainted*. Keep the side effects low.”

“Your side effects stopped the attack last week,” Dazai noted. “Look me in the eyes and tell me there was a better plan.”

Chuuya gritted his teeth.



*Balance*, Mori would have said.

Hirotsu threw his cigarette on the ground. He stepped on it with vigor; hissed in his phone. He briefly wondered how many of the men in the pit had been his.

“He smokes the same cigarettes Iceman liked,” Chuuya commented, unprovoked. His own had been tossed out long ago; he hadn’t coughed once. He glanced his way; rattled two naked knuckles on Dazai’s forehead, snapping his tongue against the temperature. “That fancy ass smell is unmistakable.”

“That’s interesting,” he said, uninterested.

“He’s the one who made me smoke. Not the Sheep.”

“How,” Dazai spelled out, head lolling back, “*Interesting.*”

Chuuya’s fingers tightened around the seatbelt, pulling it like guitar strings. No sound came out — only his stuttered breathing; one nostril permanently stuck from whatever cloud he’d inhaled over the field where Verlaine’s demise had taken place.

“Fucker would have smoked sixty a day, if no one stopped him,” Inconsequently, he added: “He had three cigarettes left in his pack when he died.”

The headlights painted a circle on the wall; Kouyou walked right past it, the edges of her kimono catching that fake light to tinge it in rose shades. Dazai attempted to conjure up an image — a room soaked deeply and utterly in blood; the squelch of a boy’s shoes amongst abandoned limbs. Bending down. Stealing from the dead. Inhaling three cigarettes, one after the other. Coughing on burst-open chests.

His lips quivered.

*Not quite*, he told himself. Dazai didn’t fear showing sincerity; Dazai rarely still hung onto the hope that *instinct* did not mean *lost cause*.

Still: “That’s interesting.”

“I’m not saying it for you.”

“Are you having hallucinations?”

Stubbornly, he kept quiet. Dazai suffocated a wave of contempt.

Abruptly, he knew.

“Pathetic,” he sighed, exasperated, sinking the key in the ignition — this time, at a first attempt. “You know, with the things I do for you — you could stand being *so* much nicer to me.”

Horror had widened Chuuya’s eyes, settling him straighter in his seat. The car lights turning on called Hirotsu’s attention; the man dropped his phone. “Oi,” Chuuya called. “Oi, don’t

you *dare* —“

The engine roared like a dying deity. *Run from the handler*, he considered, as the car crawled along to the wall of the climb, birthing sparkles, *couldn't be all that different on four wheels*.

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“Life is, occasionally, rather wonderful,” Dazai said in a single sneeze, hand so tight around the steering wheel it was pulsing. “Makes the pursuit of its end even more special. Don’t you agree?”

Chuuya, who had managed to piece the leather of his seat with his fingers in an effort to hold on, only stared forward, petrified with horror, as he parked in the least conventional way possible.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a thread. “Peachy.”

Then, very pointedly, moving as stiffly as wood, he slammed his elbow between his legs.

*[Truly an exaggerated reaction, he considered — the drive hadn't even been that bad, once they had managed to escape Hirotsu's calls and purple lightning attacks. Laws of precedence and crossing escaped his mind, but Dazai honestly believed he had done a good job, nonetheless — only one traffic light had fallen in the middle of the street, destroying three or four cars; and only seven pedestrians had been calling ambulances as they slithered away from their collision.*

*“Didn't your ass say he didn't want to die with me?” Chuuya had shrieked, amongst the curses, when a turn near the highway had opened his car door and left him dangling against the concrete.*

*“Live a little,” Dazai had screamed back. He had considered helping him in again. The construction ramp he hadn't meant to drive up — until that very last second — had distracted him].*

“Oh,” Chuuya cursed, as Dazai bent in a half between whines, studying the missing piece of the side mirror, tortured by raindrops. “Oh, this is actually gonna make him resign —“

He fell silent.

The insistent orchestra of the storm took the place of his voice, as realization spread across his traits like a contained virus. His borders fought him, pushing swimming reactions over the edge — the curve of his jaw becoming *painful*, as his eyes ran up and down the neon sign of the Yokohama Hospital.

“They’ve closed the Chapel,” Dazai noted, as if it was inconsequential, studying the maze of recently renovated white buildings — Mafia money. “We’re down to an acceptable number of wounded.”

Chuuya was still staring.

“You’re letting me drive,” he spelled out, some endless time later, somberly. “We’re abandoning this car somewhere far enough that Gramps won’t have time to murder us, tonight. And then we’re going to forget this idiotic idea of yours. Yes?”

“No can do,” Dazai shrugged. “Between the rain and the pipes, I’m already soaked. The bandages get so uncomfortable.”

“I’m being serious.”

“You know, you spend all that time of your life building graves in every non-doctrinal way,” he mused, as if irrelevant, studying the chase of raindrops down the windshield. “Your Flags don’t get tombstones, so you steal strangers’. Your Flags don’t get flowers, so you put yourself under the servitude of some megalomaniac fool, just to rebuild a bar they will never drink in again.”

Something flashed in Chuuya’s eyes. Pointless — they both knew Dazai knew the brink like the back of his palm. They both knew he wasn’t stupid enough to jump — not in this specific void.

*Not cruel enough*, something whispered, in the back of his spine.

*Something*. A tad too merciful. A tad too stuck on how distantly Chuuya had stared at it all in the aftermath — one eye burned; one strand of hair incinerated; one lifetime older and twice angrier. A tad too unfamiliar. Dazai never paid it much attention. Dazai had never had something gentle enough to be lost.

“Be *so very* fucking careful right now,” he spelled out.

“All of that effort for those who you blame yourself for,” Dazai continued, undeterred, “But you can’t even face Tanaki, who is not even in a coffin?”

Chuuya kicked his car door open to storm out, cracking the concrete.

Because Dazai *stuck* — like a leech; like ivy on a building so ancient it only survived out of fondness and stubbornness and some crueller thing; like the hand he had clasped around his wrist the first time he had watched him implode in an alley — he wrapped Kouyou’s makeshift scarf tighter, and followed him.

“You’re being an idiot,” he informed over the drumming rain, his shadow chasing the other boy’s one to the exit gates, skipping on puddles. The storm was so thick he could barely see him.

“This isn’t any of your business,” Chuuya was quick to bite. “And I fucking missed the instance where I asked you to make it so.”

“We’re meant to work together.”

“This isn’t *work*, ” He turned around, at last, the cracked ground under his feet threatening — the curling lines halting by Dazai’s shoes. “I agreed to *work* with you. If you think this is a goddamn slumber party, you’ve got it wrong. Mind your business about the things *I’ve* done, and this will go just great.”

“I’ve visited her,” Dazai insisted, petulantly. “She’s barely even conscious. What can she have said to turn you into such a coward?”

“You don’t even know if I —“

“It’s *you*, ” he scoffed, easily. Encompassing truths; no matter how pathetic. “Bet you were yipping like a dog by her door the moment they got her out of surgery.”

Chuuya worked his jaw. His attempt to clench both of his fists was stopped by his cast; Dazai watched his naked fingers spasm under the raindrops, and had the brief thought of wondering if he ever wished to use *Corruption* again.

“I killed her child,” he spat, sticking the hands in his pockets as if to tear them. “That’s what she said.”

“Did you?” Dazai asked.

“*You* were fucking — *I* don’t *remember*. Just — The name on the wall. The pregnant woman we killed — That was his husband,” He breathed out. “It was for me. She was just *there*. They’re always —“

He shut his lips.

*They’re always just there*, Dazai concluded, *and I’m always the point*.

“The traumatized, *barely conscious* woman accuses you of murdering her baby while you were under mind control,” he recounted. “And you decide that’s it?”

“I’ve got better ways to make it up to her than staying in a Hospital room she doesn’t want me in,” he insisted, waving the matter away — an assortment of carelessness and devastating *care*, punching their way through his blankest face. “I can get rid of Dante and of his stupid zombie army. I can make them pay.”

“I don’t think she wants revenge,” Dazai said. “I think she wants her child.”

Chuuya staggered back.

Watching the squares of lit windows illuminate the complicated expression on his face, Dazai opened his mouth and said: “Why aren’t you wearing that stupid hat?”

He snapped. “Why are you pretending you give a damn about people who don’t bother being soulless pieces of shit like you?”

He was soaked to the very bone — so cold he couldn’t even feel it; eyes burning with sickness so steadily it had become a background noise. Mori had no problems with illness at all — it hardly meant Dazai got days off out of it. Complaining, though — Mori had never denied him that.

A crisp on the water. A pebble down the well. In the grand scheme of things, no touch could drown a river. Dazai bit, Chuuya bit back. That was all there would ever be to it.

“You’re being an idiot,” he echoed, tilting his head to the side. “Stop being an idiot.”

The ground cracked a bit deeper.

“You’ve been weird since you came back from your grieving border trip, or whatever you want to call it,” Dazai insisted, taking a step forward. He felt the water fill the cracks under his soles, eyes tickled by the lights of the parked car flickering under the moonlight.

Chuuya stared, unimpressed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you *do*, ” Dazai’s mind was reeling. There were only so many pieces one could change in the view by the window, before he started to notice. Something about his corners felt sharp in a *different* way. “The hat assures no one but you can activate *Corruption*. You wouldn’t go out without it.”

“You’re grasping at the straws,” the boy replied. “Not even sure *why*. We’ve got more important things to do than worry about —“

“You?” he concluded. “Give me a break. Your martyr complex is the least interesting part of you.”

His eyes hardened. “What is *that* supposed to mean? We’re in the middle of a war —“

“You sound just like Kouyou. What’s with the newfound obsession with destroying the *Nine Rings*?”

“Fucking *forgive me*, ” Chuuya snapped, teeth gritted, stalking forward until he could push him right in the middle of his chest, “If I want to make sure I don’t turn into a mindless psychopath because *you* couldn’t bother to inform me of your plans —“

“You were supposed to *get it*, ” He squinted. “You always get it. It’s as aggravating as you are.”

“Cut it off.”

“Make me,” he dared. “Stop pretending to be angry as soon as your small brain comes up with a different emotion. You’re allowed not to be angry, did anyone ever tell you?”

Chuuya’s lips parted. Thunder flared behind him, lighting up the never ending buildings of the Hospital; under the porch, a woman dragged her baby away from the smiling nurse by the doors. Dazai’s eyes fell on a raindrop near his nose; caging a freckle.

It fell to the ground when his teeth clenched — so vicious it was *felt*. “I,” he spelled out, slow, as if it was being pulled out of his chest, “I can’t tell you.”

Dazai followed the frustrated line of his shoulders. “Can’t tell me,” he echoed.

Painfully, lips held together by invisible blood, he hissed: “*Can’t.*”

“Can’t.”

“For fuck’s sake, shitty Dazai —“

Thunder flared again. As it trailed off, a new, familiar sound shattered the rumble of rain.

They paused.

“Is that —” Dazai started, dread crawling up his spine — he had no time to finish, watching Chuuya make a beeline for the closest of the parked ambulances on the other side of the parking lot, where the insistent barking kept echoing against the cracked ground. “Oh, there’s no way.”

Chuuya stuck his hands under the vehicle. In less than a blink, and with some curses from their owner, they reappeared — holding onto an unmistakable, drenched puppy, wiggling desperately out of his grasp.

“Keru,” the boy exclaimed, doing his very best to pretend his confusion was more overwhelming than his enthusiasm, immediately shielding the growling dog under his jacket. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t beasts communicate in barks?” Dazai replied, blankly. “Go on. Speak your mother tongue.”

“Matsuda wouldn’t have let him go. He’s the only trail they have to Q,” Chuuya mused, ignoring him. He raised the puppy under the paws, meeting his eyes. The puppy tried to tear a strand of his hair off. “Did you run away from his bald ass? I get it.”

Keru barked cheerfully. Dazai retched.

“What do you even have against dogs?”

“What’s there not to have against them?” He almost spat. The dog had begun convulsing in the boy’s arms, as if unable to maintain all his horror into a single stretch of muscles — when he set his small eyes on Dazai, he took a step back, reaching for his gun.

“Don’t you *fucking dare*,” Chuuya warned, his eyes widening. “Are you out of your — *Hey!*”

With an admirable jump, Keru finally managed to free himself from his grasp, landing right onto a puddle with unfiltered enthusiasm. He shook the water off of himself, uselessly, draining Dazai’s pants, and set to trotting towards the exit at maximum speed.

Before Chuuya could say a word about it, the dog turned to stare at them, tongue panting.

“Well?” Dazai crossed his arms. “Go.”

Keru did a spin. Waited in place.

They exchanged a glance.

“It’s a dog,” he begged.

Chuuya raised his eyebrows. “Tell me it doesn’t look like he wants us to follow him.”

“It’s a *dog*. It doesn’t *want* anything.”

“Do you think he escaped Matsuda to look for us?” the boy mumbled, under his breath, eyes lighting up with energy. “Maybe Q is sending for us.”

“I think Q must have started to smell enough like street to gather a gang of puppies who are waiting to feast on their corpse,” Dazai replied. “And I think *you* want an excuse to go on an adventure with a dog. Which is insane, because that dog *despises you*.”

Chuuya waved the matter away. “All dogs despise me. We should check it out. Just in case.”

He blinked. “What do you mean, *all dogs*?”

“Current theory in work is that animals react badly to whatever sensation Abilities send off,” the boy explained, shrugging, almost succeeding in looking significantly less hurt by it than he was. “Given I’ve got a *Singularity* down my throat, I assume it’s worse. I’ve been forcing white noises or nightmarish pheromones on the poor creatures since Suribachi City.”

“So they hate you?”

“Only less than you do.”

“Your own *family*?”

Keru barked. Chuuya kicked his shins.

“You said we had bigger issues,” Dazai accused. “We were having a *conversation*. I didn’t bring you here to follow a stupid beast —“

Chuuya wrapped his drenched, gloved fingers around his hand, and pulled.

As it turned out, Keru had exchanged youth with efficiency, or any reliable sense of direction — while the path his small paws traced down the soaked concrete was too intentional to be casual, the dog had no issue getting distracted at every interesting spot; be it an hydrant, be it a particularly deep puddle, be it a seemingly irrelevant spot of street that left the two of them to get targeted by the bullet-like raindrops.

Accepting that his fever would probably never leave, Dazai made sure to pointedly sneeze as often as possible, tightening his grip around Chuuya's fingers each time he attempted to escape the impact.

It took the change of the alleys caging them in, growing more and more familiar the more lanterns that dangled over their heads, for the bitten-down grin to vanish from Chuuya's face.

"You don't think..." He trailed off.

The soaked marathon ended by indigo neon lights, hidden in the under-bridge every homeless man had long since claimed as theirs. Keru paws twirled inside drying puddles — shaking off all rain now that he was hidden from it — trotting to the broken down the stairs of *The Alley*.

"Well," Dazai commented, getting water out of his hair. "I'm assuming Q isn't here."

Keru was barking, excited. Chuuya lowered to pick him up, wet hair sticking to his frowning face; he studied the under-bridge area, the suspicion painted along his spine too similar to that of a fight. "But how would he know about —" His eyes widened.

"What?" Dazai followed his gaze to the other hand of the street, where an unoccupied bundle of blankets and boxes created a makeshift nest. Given the darkness and the flickering neon, it took him an instant to recognize the bleeding-out body laying face down against the concrete, blooming crimson on the blankets.

Chuuya left Keru on the ground. A blink, and he was kneeling by *The Owner's* lifeless side.

"What the fuck?" he snapped, turning the man around. He stared at the gashes down his chest, thin lines beginning where his jugular had once been; cuts of a bloodthirsty blade that had left his eyes open and terrified. Dazai extracted his gun, watching Keru bark. "I saw him *yesterday*. He was —"

"Any particular enemies?" he asked.

"He's made deals with every syndicate he could get his hands on," Chuuya shook his head. Giving up on restarting a long-gone heart, his hands landed on his lap, fingers curling to reach nothing at all. Through his soaked shirt, Dazai saw the scar of the bullet he had put between his clavicles. "And this doesn't look like any particular group's signature killing. It's almost —"

Whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a high pitched round of barking. It took them a moment, and the gleeful wave of Keru's tail, to realize it wasn't coming from him.



Chuuya stood up, frame lighting up red.

“There,” he nodded, voice low, calling his eyes to the warehouse right outside the nearest end of the under bridge. A car passed by, paying no mind to their cautious steps towards the entrance. The barking continued; Keru almost slipped in his hurry to follow them, bumping his paws against the doors.

“Remember the toad?” Dazai whispered.

A glance. Understanding, slow, at the corner of his eyes. “It was a frog.” Nonetheless, he moved to stand behind him, careful to curve his shoulders to disappear behind the thin line of his back.

Keru barked some more. Chuuya reached with one hand, destroying the lock. Dazai pushed the doors open with his foot, gun raised.

“Q?” he called.

The horrifying smell was the first thing to slam upon them. A mixture of decaying viscera, pipe water, and rain long-since turned into mud assaulted his sick nostrils, making his head swam and Chuuya curse out.

The roof of the warehouse had been destroyed — apart from the undeterred rain filtering through the borders of splintered wood, a clouded moonlight fell in, lighting up the drenched devastation left on the ground. Corpses upon corpses — their number never ending on the muddy floor, their eyes stubbornly set to the ceiling, unbothered by the relentless attack of the storm.

Hidden through bloodied flesh and shredded clothes, the once-bright handprint that signaled *Dogra Magra’s* touch masked every single body.

“Fuck,” Chuuya summed it up.

At their ankles, a pair of small dogs attempted to climb up their legs with their small, identical paws — the moment they noticed Keru at the entrance, they ran towards him, yipping in a bundle of affection, fangs pulling at their three-colored collars.

Dazai kneeled, squinting at the golden tags, his mouth curled in disgust. “*Keru*,” he read. “*Bero*, and *Su*. I’m assuming it wasn’t the brat who named them.”

“Where did they even find all these people? It makes no sense,” Chuuya insisted, studying the dark corners of the warehouse. The corpses covered almost every inch of walkable ground; the sound his boots made as they separated from the dried blood made him cringe. “How come nobody’s found them yet?”

He watched the dogs tumble, uncaring of the dirty ground. Through a half broken window, the *tick tick tick* of stubborn rain blurred the empty street.

Dazai froze. “Get away from the corpses.”

Halfway through analyzing the handprint on a woman's hand, Chuuya attempted to say: "What —"

"*Move!*"

At once, as if a switch had been turned on, all the lifeless eyes in the room blinked. They sat up with unexplainable coordination — the woman Chuuya had been studying's arm darted out faster than any eye could follow, closing in a death grip around his throat.

He didn't watch what happened; the sound of her brain imploding under the boy's fist was part of a background of eerie silence and the hush of moving clothes — Dazai threw himself onto the doors, closing them before any of the *Souls* could reach them, and he almost tripped through the crying whines and agitated paws of the three dogs.

His fingers closed around Chuuya's bloodied wrist. "Come on," he urged, as the *Souls* began to turn their stiffen bodies in their direction, circling them with ease, wounds no longer even bleeding from their state of decay. "Upstairs."

Unstable emergency stairs led to half destroyed second floor, mostly trustable near the walls, opening up into another chasm at its center — the *Souls* did their best to follow them up the stairs, their steps mechanical and undeterred, even as Chuuya directed entire pieces of debris straight into their bodies.

"If they only have a torso left they will crawl," the boy cursed, looking around. "They're gonna get out by the windows. We need to get rid of them — they can't get in the city."

A fireplace of sorts rested on the other end of the broken floor, flaming fresh wood peeking over behind ivy-shaped grates. Dazai frowned. "Someone was here, recently."

"Is Q working with Dante, now?" Chuuya leaned over the makeshift railing, eyes running across the ocean of blank-faced soldiers calmly making their way up to them. "Think if I crash the building on them they will crawl out?"

"They don't care about broken bones," he replied, distractedly. "I think we can —"

A wartime laughter of sorts left Chuuya's lips, challenging; the line of fighting enthusiasm that never seemed to abandon his lips. Dazai watched him throw himself over the railing, scarlet edges painting shadows amongst the rain — until all that remained was the sound of his kicks breaking bones, and the dogs barking.

"Show off," he muttered, hurrying to kneel in front of the fireplace. The flames refused to hush under the fractured waterfalls of rain; half hidden behind the stone structure, a dozen plastic bottles filled with fuel had been uncapped — and left untouched.

He squinted.

A horrifying rumble came from downstairs; Dazai recognized the telltale wet crunch of *Tainted* pressing bodies to the ground, squashing bones and tearing viscera until they became

one with the concrete. Given Chuuya's curses, he assumed it wasn't working as successfully as usual.

Rain tapped against the shattered windows.

He picked up one of the bottles, and drenched the ripped curtains in fuel.

Steps hurried up the walls. "They're digging themselves out like they're fucking moles," Chuuya panted, disgusted, holding onto his casted hand with a grimace. "I've blown up as many brains as I can, but the bodies keep — *What the fuck are you doing?*"

"You're a *Soul*," Dazai replied, hurriedly, as he sprayed a new bottle down the unstable floor. "Empty the other ones on the ground floor," He picked his gun up from the floor, shooting bullets towards the grates as Chuuya obliged. They bounced back around his face, tearing a scratch under his eye; eventually, the makeshift fence fell. "New strategy: start acting like one."

Chuuya, still stuck to the railing, had no time to rebuke; finally free to filter over their border, the flames immediately slipped down the gasoline-soaked floor, rising with no care for the falling rain.

Running across slowly falling tiles wasn't the most athleticism life in the Port Mafia had requested from him; nonetheless, Dazai spent the entire *slip and climb* down decaying woods and hanging metal bars whining, tasting the rain sticking to his lips, his heart jumping a bit more each time the flames came too close to tickling his heels.

*This*, his body told him, almost hysterical in its drunken joy, *this, this, this is exactly what* —

A body came slamming into his side, sending him flying down the emergency stairs.

For endless, breath-quick seconds, Dazai felt nothing at all. The echo of the rusty metal bumping against his ribs was too violent to be immediately tasted; the heat of the flames climbing closer and closer to where his skull had bumped the ground too distant.

Hands closed around his throat; the man upon him had no expression to interpret and nothing but a familiar set of wounds down his body. Dazai kicked; he tightened his grip.

"That's," he squeaked, annoyed, "Too. *Painful* —"

A cast, red with blood and viscera and doodles, emerged right from the middle of George Kingstain's chest, naked fingers emerging from fractured plaster to hold onto an unbeating heart.

Surprise, more than any actual sensation, had the hands around his neck hesitate. Chuuya pulled his arm back from the crater he had created through his back; Dazai kicked him into the flames over the stairs, breathing heavily as he watched his skin burn.

"*Ouch*," Chuuya lamented, ripping what was left of his cast off with his teeth — throwing it into the flames with the spare heart. His hand was slightly purple around the thumb; the whitish scar around it, he could only guess, would match his own. "This is on *you*."

“Sure,” Dazai climbed to his feet, eyes on the flames slowly devouring the stairs. The *Souls* on the ground floor seemed to be slowly realizing climbing up wouldn’t be a good idea; nonetheless, their eyes were set on the few steps separating them from their targets with faceless consideration. “When they reach the ground floor, throw me in the flames.”

Chuuya paused. “What, really?”

“Did you not hear me?”

“Some variation of *burn me alive* is always in the background when you speak,” he replied. “How is that going to solve the issue?”

“They’ll think you’re one of them,” Dazai jumped over the railing, landing shoes first over some almost-decapitated woman attempting to crawl through the grates of the stairs. “They will leave you alone. You’ll get them into the flames. We’ll go home with no *civilians casualties* complains on the reports.”

His eyes ran up and down the approaching tongues of fire — lit in a glow that reminded him of mouthed calculations right before using *Tainted*.

He had no time to communicate his approval — a group of *Souls* attacked him from behind, crashing him against a frail column holding up the last of the first floor. Flames finally touched the ground, swirling at the ankles of slowly blinking *Souls*.

“All according to plan,” Dazai considered, as he watched Chuuya curse his way out of the mageries.

Then, he started running.

He didn’t make it far, through the maze of fire he had to dodge and the reaching hands half absent in the darkness — the sight of Chuuya’s best attempt at a devoid face was a stark contrast to the familiar grip of his hand on his hair, dragging him towards the flames as antagonistically as possible.

The *Souls* followed — aided by Chuuya’s occasional, awkward, “*Soul* life, ah?” and “Praise Dante’s bitch ass, yes?” — bracketing the sides of his path like unlikely guards, allowing the flames to devour their clothes and their skin in an effort to get it as close to him as possible.

They didn’t seem to care about their melting flesh; Dazai kept his eyes on an arm rolling near his feet and hissed: “Quit enjoying this.”

“*Uh-uh*,” Chuuya said, between teeth.

A bonfire of sorts had risen near the center of the ground floor, bursting brightly against the rain, untouched by the scared whines of the puppies pressed against the doors. Dazai allowed Chuuya to pull him by both arms, keeping his eyes on its swirling flames — he licked his tongue, and tasted fuel.

“Closer,” he whispered.

The ground burned in puddles of black liquid, closer and closer to the shiny tips of his shoes. Trapped in that embrace of bleeding flesh and suffocating heat, the embrace of the infernal landscapes in the frescoes of Kouyou's villa, he breathed: "Closer."

Right as the edge of his pants glowed yellow, Chuuya let go of him, and sank his gloved hand into the fire.

*[“Stronger gravity supplies oxygen faster and more forcefully to any flame,” the boy would explain, days later, trapped in Mori's backroom clinic. He would hold a glass over a flame with his newly bandaged hand, the traces of burned skin slowly vanishing — courtesy of an Ability Dazai couldn't claim. “And gravity touches everything, you know? Nothing you can't control.”]*

The ejection of flames towards the sky was as sudden as an explosion, filling his visual field in golden and red so vivid they were blinding. The warehouse came falling with a hellish screech, as the *Souls* were caught in the fire quicker than they could breathe.

Dazai rolled down the soaked path, bones creaking and the smell of burning flesh making his eyes water, unsure of what was water and what was gasoline — until he found Chuuya's gaze; a lonely silhouette surrounded by columns of fire and falling corpses, disappearing between them before he could watch his lips part in a warning.

The ceiling was the sky and the sky was falling — framed by the sharp edges of the fallen roof; littered in pieces of the first floor raining down, fire engulfing them like a blanket.

Reality was a slow motion blink. Flames were curling across the floor, closer and closer to the black stains of gasoline soaking his clothes. *This*, it whispered, a comfort he had begged not to feel, *this is exactly* —

A body crashed against his.

It was a blur of motion — glass from one of the shattered windows breaking, sticking into the sides of their clothes and piercing through their hands; the heat of fire brushing just close enough for him to breathe it in, stolen away from the wind as they landed inside a puddle; the unmatching touch of glove and naked skin behind his skull, muffling the impact.

They rolled until they landed against the side of the bridge covering *The Alley*, the world spinning so fast his lungs were scratched by his ribs. The roar of the explosion snapped against his ears so violently he heard nothing but white noises, tasting rust — by the time he managed to breathe out, rain was striking his face.

“Shit,” A voice spoke through the buzz, as if underwater. Hands grasped at his face, turning it to settle his eyes on a less starry sight. “Shit, *shit*, shit, Dazai, *shit*, are you fucking *stupid* —“

The world focused into two moons — blue and amber. The nearby puddles reflected the sky; the flames refusing to venture further. Freckles and rage and a single pimple on his chin. The grip around him was suffocatingly *stubborn*. Real.

“Nice of my dog to be worried,” Dazai heard his lips shape, distantly.

A pause. Heartbeat inside two naked fingers; their strangely cold touch kissing the side of his face.

The hands let go of him, landing his head on the ground a tad violently. “Who the fuck is *worried?*” Chuuya snapped, climbing to his feet, stepping onto his calf efficiently. “You try to explain to Boss that the bag of ashes is his shitty protégée, waste of bandages!”

“*Boys?*”

They stilled.

Muffled by the sounds of the warehouse falling and the buzzing in their ears, the roar of sirens appeared at the edge of their vision — too late.

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“There was an explosion near the Yokohama Hospital,” Officer Matsuda explained, scribbling some kind of report in a small notebook, *right* in hitting distance of their dangling legs. “Some old Camaro had a grenade inside it. We were called to verify, and then they told us the warehouse had been set on fire.”

“A Camaro,” Chuuya echoed, fighting the blanket one of the nurses on the ambulance was still trying to put around his shoulders.

They had parked by *Building Two*, right where the unrelenting waterfall of the pipes could be seen, shouldered by the man’s police car and his sighs to their repeated promises of bearing no wounds — Dazai’s hallucination-levels fever, and Chuuya’s ruined hand hardly helped their case.

“Yeah,” Matsuda frowned. “Why?”

Dazai offered a smile. “No reason. A shame such a pretty car would go to waste! Wonder who’s stupid enough to store grenades in the fuel box.”

The frown deepened. “How did you know it was in the fuel box?”

“The dogs,” Chuuya interrupted, sticking his fingers into his side, *viciously*. The blanket was a bright, obnoxious yellow; surrounded as they were by red and blue lights, the gasoline

stains Dazai had passed onto him seemed to shine. “Did you manage to get them?”

A complicated expression marred his face. “It was too sudden. We recovered their bodies. I’m sorry.”

His shoulders curved down. His fingers held onto the metallic edge of the ambulance until they turned white.

“At least *one* good ending,” Dazai sighed.

Once the exasperated Officer managed to tear Chuuya’s fists out of his body, he glanced around the crowded era — curious bystanders by the yellow tape, workers still fixing the Entrance Hall of the building, and the inconspicuous black cars caging his police vehicle in — and said: “What is happening, exactly?”

They offered him matching empty looks.

“Yes, *yes*, alright — you’re not Port Mafia, you don’t know anything about that, whatever,” he huffed, stepping a bit closer. “Boys, I have a warehouse filled to the brim in human ashes, and only you two as the witnesses. You must understand what it looks like.”

“Arrest us, then,” Dazai said, bored.

“To get you out of there in less than an hour?”

“The order of things. Bugs and chameleons.”

“What is it that you want?” Chuuya cut in.

“The few faces we’ve been able to scan all fit with the profile of men and women assumed dead,” he explained, voice low. “As far as I’m concerned, not even Ability Users are guilty of killing dead men. And look at you — It was clearly a fight *against* you.”

Chuuya blinked. “We’re not Ability Users.”

“Yes, *Chuuya*, alright,” Matsuda snapped. “Is this an issue the non-underground part of the city should be made aware of? All the disappearances, the attack on the Headquarters — I’m here to protect this city. I have reason to believe the Port Mafia wants the same,” He glanced down at their wounded hands; the burned skin peeling from their clothes. A bit meaner, he added. “With wildly different methods.”

“Heroism towards imaginary lambs to the slaughter?” Dazai echoed. He nudged Chuuya’s shoulder. “You were right when you said he was a weirdo.”

“You two did a good job surviving that.”

“Surviving what?” they chorused.

A deep breath. “You’re *fifteen*.”

“Now don’t get cheesy,” Chuuya retched, mouth curled uglily. “You leave that rainbow stuff for the encouragement papers to the Orphanage.”

“I’m glad you have each other, at least,” He directed a glance towards *Building One*, blind to the instinctual flinch of revulsion moving them away from each other. “This place doesn’t really seem —“

He trailed off.

“Is there anything,” he insisted, eventually. “At *all*. That you can tell me, that will help keep the people who are not part of this safe?”

He met Chuuya’s gaze, an eyebrow curled.

The boy munched on his cheek. He studied the detective’s frame — ran over his light beard, the coffee stain on his dress shirt. He had ran towards their bodies on the ground with a concern that had almost seemed honest; had clasped Chuuya’s shoulder and almost — *almost* — put a hand on his cheek.

“If I was Port Mafia,” he huffed, eventually. “I’d tell you to avoid known people that seem to be acting differently than usual, and to not mind any talks about a so-called *Poet*.”

Matsuda lit up like a Christmas tree.

He was still mumbling under his breath and scribbling *who-knows-what* on his notebook as he made his way to the congestion of police cars coming back from the warehouse — the skip in his step was almost offensive, in the face of the officers’ grimaces.

“Is he one of those fools who believes in justice a tad too much, or is he just giddy you seem to show vaguely anti-mafioso traits?” Dazai questioned, as he raised his blanket all the way to his chin.

“Yes,” Chuuya said.

He hummed.

They watched the unconventional nightlife dance under the flickering light poles, bathed in crimson and cobalt and the illuminated cubicles of the Headquarters’ windows. Their team would come up with some story for the warehouse; Mori would sit him down and wonder how his prodigy hadn’t been able to bring him Q with three dogs and an order.

He leaned his head against the metal, and he thought about the racing flames.

“Listen,” Chuuya said, for the second time, his eyes stubbornly settling on every inch of the scenario but him. The frustrated texture of his tone was a, *I can’t tell you*. “I don’t want to end up like them.”

*Dead?*, Dazai wondered. *Burned without the right to scream?* He knew that wasn’t it. He knew if they killed Dante and Chuuya found his body on the verge of collapse — he would do nothing but put his hands in pockets and bless the Port Mafia. *Inhuman?*



“A somewhat selfish request at the hands of the only canine survivor,” he said. “But I’ll work on it.”

A huff. In another world, maybe — a hiss of laughter.

Some careful planning — pretending a stomach ache with a Oscar-worthy performance — got them out of the ambulance, slaloming between vehicles with their spines curved and hands hooked, climbing the stairs of *Building Two* with the promise to come back and return the blankets soon.

Dazai expected Chuuya to drop his the moment they entered the empty, pipe-rain soaked Entrance Hall; all he did, though, was watch the corner where Tanaki’s desk would have been, in *Building One*, watching fake rain land on his open palm.

He studied his new, un-doodled cast; too clean. He recalled a heart that wouldn’t beat, caged between fingers that were never uncovered and that Dazai kept imagining touching the sky. Black wings and red clouds; the possibility of an *end* — at last.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Chuuya said.

For a moment, he considered the possibility of having spoken out loud. “Excuse me?”

“Not yet, at least,” the boy clarified, following a train of thought he had clearly decided not to offer. “It would make no sense. It’s exactly what you want. I’m not about to serve you victory on a silver plate.”

Using his hands to clean his eyes from the fake-rain like a windshield, he asked: “Did you hit your head?”

The boy raised his eyebrows. “You do realize you keep putting me in situations where the best course of action would be *Corruption*, yes?”

Dazai blinked, very slow.

“It’s absolutely disgusting,” he continued, his tone *too* casual. “If I had any time to waste, and if the circumstances weren’t what they are, I would put you under a train for it. But I thought you should know,” He kicked the ground; dirtied the carpet until there was no fuel left on his shoe. “You’re my assurance.”

*You’re my*, Dazai thought about saying — a sentence made for open endings. Made to trail off. *He would know. He shouldn’t.*

The occupied seat on the other side of an Arcade station. The most annoying person he knew. A flickering ant stuck to the ceiling — made to be pinched until it fell. Dazai made touches repellant; Dazai repelled all touches. Dazai had wanted to touch him since he had had Arcade lights bleed down his face — had had Arcade lights make him younger, make him hunched on rust-covered baby bones, make him just like him.

*I could do so much more with you*, he’d sworn, studying Sheep-stained bracelets — longing for a claustrophobic place in his skeptical ribcage. To wound from the inside.

*See?*, he would have said, from that carcass. *You bleed too.*

He watched water rain from the pipes behind the glass doors, slithering under them to drool down the stairs, and said: “Go talk to Tanaki. I’ll distract Officer Dad here.”

Chuuya squinted at the glass doors. *Maybe he needs glasses*, he mused, itching all over. His hair was still plastered to his face; it could have been blood. *Maybe it was*. Dripping dirty water and cheap fuel on the ground — and then matching casts and matching ages, knuckles purple and red and black, Port Mafia black, *all for our organization*, Kouyou had said, *until our blood runs black*.

*Maybe*, he considered, pained. Mori’s hands on his shoulders; Mori’s plans in his eyes; Mori’s diamonds scratching his scarred skin. *Maybe* —

“Can you quit staring?” the boy concluded, with a grimace. “Seriously. It’s suspicious as fuck. It’s freaking me out.”

“I’m just hoping she kills you, this time,” Dazai snapped, disgusted.

His eyes flared up. “Fuck you.”

“No, *you*.”

“No, fuck —” Chuuya set his jaw. “Whatever. I should have left you to burn.” He fixed his blanket in place; stalked to the entrance with the wet squelch of his shoes and of his muttered curses, his shadow growing longer and longer on the puddle-like ground.

“Chuuya,” he called.

He turned like a snap, biting: “What.”

*You didn’t, though*, Dazai accused. Betrayal was sealed with ivy, and he trusted no one at all. *You didn’t leave me to burn*.

He wondered if he could see it in his eyes — if he could read rage where he had worn amusement, ever since Mori had first laughed in front of him. *Is there any sound we did not invent in fear of the quiet?*, she used to say. *Is there anything we don’t fear?*

“If we’re doing this *partners* thing,” he said, at last, like a concession, “You’re going to have to ditch the hat permanently.”

Chuuya never feared anything at all, so he didn’t speak. Didn’t move, either — let the *word* settle there, daring and soaked, asking nothing more than to be allowed to exist. He stalked towards him until the water was tinted red from his guilty soles — haloed by the police lights behind him; nothing more than the picture of reluctant acceptance — nothing more than the silent hiss of a *this, this is it*, ancient and newborn, scratching his bandages like a dog begging to be let in.

He pressed two fingers to the creases on his forehead.

Hey, Dazai thought. *We match.*

Raising his unwounded fingers by the wrist, he shook his hand in the thin space between their bodies, refusing to lower his gaze. Dazai gripped it tight; tried to tell himself this wasn't furniture to an empty home — not something to leave behind; not something to let in from the rain.

“Not a fucking chance,” Chuuya swore.

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The pharmacy near the port wasn't out of social anxiety pills.

*Unlike* all the other pharmacies and drugstores in Yokohama and surroundings — if his research had been as precise as his exhausted feet declared. The sudden disappearance couldn't be natural; an entire city wouldn't simply run out of one of the most requested medicines in the market.

When the enemy *controlled* the market, though —

He entered and bought what he needed. Even in that unlikely oasis, the amount was pitiful. It wasn't that much of a problem, he supposed — the pills were *V's* fixation, not his. He had never been foolish enough to develop additions — although, under some points of view, running up and down an entire city just to soothe a friend could be considered just as foolish.

The boy was waiting for him.

Obviously.

He was leaning on the railing, as he had the first time he and V had met. Perhaps he lived close — perhaps that place just sold the best kind of bandages. They were weird, the bandages.

A weird addiction of its own league.

He noticed his presence immediately. Still, he didn't turn to face him; didn't even allow him an inch of his attention. When he stepped close enough to see what was keeping him so busy, he found a ruined old photograph held by pianist, scarred fingers.

The picture wasn't much. A man and a child, holding hands and posing just composedly enough to appear vicious; framed by the all-but-unique landscape of a beach. Their kimonos were evidently reused; nonetheless; they were kept with the attention of people who respected objects more than people.

The two didn't share a single feature.

"He was ugly as a child, too," the boy sighed, after an eternity. Hiding the picture in his pocket, he offered him a blank smile. "Do me a favor and don't tell him I have that? I stole it from his apartment. I have no energy to listen to him scream about it."

In the grand scheme of things, lying was a sin. But he had bigger things to worry about. "I won't tell. Why did you bring me here?"

"Me?" He widened his only visible eye. "You're the one who invited me. *Justice incited my divine Creator*, you said, correct?"

Coordinated in two different intentions, they raised their heads to study the name of the drugstore.

"The owners are foreigners," the boy sighed. "Americans and their weird surnames, am I right?"

"I was well aware you would want to meet," he admitted, smiling. "I just didn't think you would set a temptation for me as well."

The boy shrugged. "Underestimating me is a bad idea. But now you know, so it's all forgiven."

He considered him, silently. Getting his hands on him would have been the work of a lifetime — creating a limbo for him, the masterpiece of this world. *What*, he considered, defeated before he could start, *could be hellish enough for a demon?*

"What do you want?" he asked. "To taunt me for my failed capture at Rengoku? The attack on your Headquarters should have erased my shame. I find balance as divine as few other things."

"You and others."

"I assume you brought me here to kill me. To save that friend of yours."

"Ah, yes," He blinked, as if the idea hadn't even crossed his mind. "That would be stupid, wouldn't it?"

He leaned forward. All mirth had disappeared from his eyes; abruptly, he was older than time — a bit meaner than the crueller of the devils to haunt the soiled ground. *How foolish*, he thought, maybe to V — maybe to himself. Faith wasn't made for men who would laugh if God embraced them and apologized.

“Say, Dante,” Dazai Osamu tilted his head to the side. “Why don’t you tell me everything you know about the Book?”

## Chapter End Notes

matsuda: i’ve only had chuuya and dazai for two days but if anything happened to them i would kill the mafia and then myself

hey guys!! a bit of a shorter chapter, but again, life is sort of beating my ass right now. but i was very excited about this chapter, and all my wips kept having something i disliked, so i decided to just go for it. that scene of chuuya in the pipe rain being called dazai’s partner for the first time is actually the first scene i’ve ever come up with for this fic i think? or maybe the second? i just have this vivid memory of it; i hope i managed to do it justice.

fun fact! the three adorable dogs (who i personally headcanon absolutely DETEST chuuya, as all dogs, because why not make him suffer a bit more — thought do be patient on that) are named after the romanized japanese translation of “cerberus.” even funnier fact — in the divine comedy, cerberus was a guard in one of the circles, and he was meant to symbolize god’s punishment. as far as i’m concerned a puppy is a puppy.

MOST IMPORTANTLY: kouyou’s girlhood trauma makes an appearance. that part of her backstory, apart from kanechi (whose name i took from one of irl kouyou’s works), is obviously made up — but tell me everything about kouyou doesn’t scream “traumatized by a girl best friend at 14”. can’t wait to elaborate on that.

you might also be surprised that i decided to frame kanechi as not a lover, but someone who simply cared about kouyou — i did this out of habit, since the translation i first read for bsd never truly framed them as lovers. actually, i always interpreted it a lot as kouyou’s own odasaku (can’t wait to elaborate on that too)

i’m gonna shut up now. oh, also BOOK MENTION EVERYBODY!!!

i hope you have a great day if you read all the way here. see you next chapter!

# LAUGHING

## Chapter Summary

*Chuuya's corpse smelled like rotten peaches, old milk, and the unavoidable stench of run-over dog.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter viii.*

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*Case number: 98300357*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi. A*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. reported the death of Nakahara C.. Following the  
[...]*

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“Here’s the deal,” he offered. “At least give me a glass of bleach, if not the whiskey.”

Dazai couldn’t have named the part of the job that required him to sit in a corner of a nightclub with a fruit-juice — *Boss’ orders, kid*, the barman would usually tell him, when he caught him sneaking under the counter — watching Mori charm and threaten his way through wasted aristocrats — *the one time they can’t be blamed for their stupidity*, Mori would sigh.

He did know Mori enjoyed it infinitely.

The *Libelula* was what a hole-in-the-wall bar in their territory could only inspire to be — a triumph of neon lights and pricey curtains raining down three levels of open balconies, towered by a flying platform with a DJ station. All the people who danced there were very careful to be out of their senses in a *classy* way.

“You know, this place wouldn’t have been established without me,” he lamented, as he watched the barman back away with a gulp. “*I’m* the one who forged the police-proof permits for vaguely suspicious outer border activity — I’m the one who came up with the name!”

“I thought that was *Papa’s* idea,” the dancer on the stool next to him blinked.

“That’s because it was,” Dazai admitted. “But I gave the thumbs up! Mori doesn’t like things that don’t have my thumb up. What if it ended up being called *The Trashcan*? I could have given my thumb up to *that!*”

She hummed, barely audible over the unrelenting thunder of the music. “I think *Trashcan* has a certain charm.” With astonishingly long green hair and a fluffy pair of cat ears, her almost completely naked body was cursed to be the most eye-catching part of her appearance. “Oximorous and all.”

The hand she was missing was another part of it.

Dazai sucked on his straw, tapping his fingers on the childish cartoon drawn on the juice box, and sighed — loud and deep. On the other side of the bar, sunk in uncomfortable cushions and surrounded by more goons than he could count — plus the trio of fools he was smilingly scamming — Mori didn’t offer him a single glance.

“So your father just got up and left you here all alone?” she cooed, tucking a strand of his hair behind his ear. He blinked at her over the juice, eyes falling on the ivy tattoo connecting her breasts. “Suit-busy type, or is he hoping you experience some wildness while he isn’t looking?”

He sucked louder, pensive. The other dancers — from the countless occasions Mori had dragged him along to meetings that had devolved into a, *don't quite need you anymore*; only bored, suicidal Dazai didn't *quite* have anything else to do, and alcohol overdose was classified as painless in several books — were usually nicer.

For one, they always bought him drinks — and they had a tendency to know who he was, which meant they played along with the *double suicide* bit until Mori got too close. A few of them liked to whisper things in his ears; others to press too close.

Sometimes, — neon lights uncovering eyebags their make-up had masterfully covered; slightly shaking hands accepting the coat he would offer them for a few minutes — and only if Mori was too far to see, they would look at him with a *sour-sweet* type of pity.

“Oh, Mori is always busy,” he offered, at last. A few dancers were walking on their tiptoes on the closest platform, twirling around a pole sweaty hands were trying to grab. “This time around, I’m pretty sure he’s trying to get the shops on our borders to not let the *Nine Rings* take advantage of their facade.” A pause. “Either that, or he wants to kill them. All depends on their usefulness! Mori refuses to put a hand on useful people.”

“Aren’t you a funny guy,” Tamashiro Miki — that was what the wall in Chuuya’s apartment said, at the very least — considered. “Very imaginative.”

“I wasn’t kidding about the double suicide,” he clarified, because he always had to. “If I’m allowed, you are rather beautiful. Fits just fine in my plans for my somewhat premature demise.”

A pout. “Young and pretty as you are?”

“You flatter me,” he said, victorious. “My stupid partner says I look like, *if a mackerel got mauled by a cookiecutter shark*. It was sort of surprising finding out he knows what a cookiecutter shark is.”

A flash of confusion passed by her face. “What is that?”

“A partner?” Dazai blinked. “Being absolutely honest with you, I can’t say I’m sure. But I already committed to bit — Spoke too soon. Seemed right in the moment! It was raining and all —“

“No, I meant the — *Cookiecutter* shark?”

“That’s a shark.”

“Yes,” she echoed, a bit exasperated. “But —“

Dazai sucked on his straw, noisy.

“I don’t have a folder of shark pictures in my phone,” he offered, apologetic. “I do have one of grasshoppers, though. It’s terribly informative. Want to see it?”



All the way to the couches, Mori leaned over the drink-filled table, offering a hand. The trio of men in black exchanged a glance; the former doctor's smile didn't falter for a single second.

It spoke for his ability that none of the men and women pressing against their bubble of dealing seemed afraid — spoke for his *one-day-it'll-be-his-end* penchant for comparison. The *Libelula* and every single night and day activity of their territory had dealt with the *Crimson Rains*; to most of them, Mori Ougai had been a blessing in disguise.

*I hardly need scared tools*, the man had once told him, stitching up a wound he had given himself by crashing his head against a glass shelf. In and out; Dazai had giggled and asked if he was sewing his brain. *I just need them in good condition.*

*Are you talking about me?*, he hadn't asked.

One of the men shook his hand.

Dazai sighed, abandoning his juice box on the counter. "Listen," he said, spinning his stool faster and faster. Tamashiro Miko appeared in blinks, all glittery skin and hungry eyes and marks of dubious origin. "I have a curfew. I'm simply going to ask."

"Ask away, handsome," she grinned, leaning a bit forward.

"Yes, thank you. How do we find Dante?"

Her smile froze in place.

"We have a new strategy going on, you see," he explained, staring at the neon light dangling from the ceiling until his eyes pulsed. "Well. Plenty of them. I'm trying to get the Hatrack to let me name them, because the names he's coming up with are *atrocious*. What in God's good name is a *Lie of the Fake Flowers*? At the very least, *Shame and Toad* had a point."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the woman snapped, her eyes steel.

"I know, I know, I'm getting to it. See, theory in place is that we can't find Dante unless one of his *Souls* leads us to him," He offered a courteous nod in her direction. "That's when you come in. So, could you please do me the favor of —"

It came in snapshots — her knuckles clenching around the edge of the counter; the tip of her left foot touching the ground in an aborted run; the life in her eyes leaving, hissing and unreachably, encompassed in a curtain of vaguely sour smoke.

She reached for the nearest bottle, smashed it against the counter, and sunk the sharp makeshift blade right in the middle of her chest.

"Oh, okay," Dazai offered, under the startled shriek coming out of the bartender's mouth. Eyes were turning, called by the sound and the *thump!* of her body landing on the floor, blood spreading under her limbs like a particularly thick drink.

He slipped away from the stool, watching as a small crowd gathered around the corpse, scream over scream slowly challenging the music and *winning* — gasps leaving the people's mouths as they realized her body was covered in much different wounds than the simple chasm of the bottle.

“So that's what he meant when he said I would make for a good *Soul*,” Dazai considered, under his breath, crawling on all fours between the dancing legs of unaware drunks.

Some blood had landed on his cheek; he tried to reach it with his tongue — but all the distraction did was make him bump against a pair of legs.

“Dear,” Mori shook his head, looking down at him with a half smile. His scarf had been carefully tucked under his coat; his lips were shiny with a drink he was sure he hadn't dared to gulp down. “Causing troubles already?”

“You gave me commanding role,” he muttered. “I get to do what I want with it. Are you *done*?”

He helped him up; rubbed the blood from his cheek, uncaring of the stain that lingered on his gloves. Dazai wondered if he wore them because he was still a doctor, in soul; if he wore them to touch him; if not everything in the world was meant to be about him.

“Yes, I'm done,” the man tutted. He squinted over the congestion of horrified people. “Tamaguchi is only pretending to have agreed, though — Killing him for it seemed slightly rude. You will find me a better way to make him learn his lesson.”

“Surely.”

“Have *you* learned something new? I saw you slip some manuals from the backroom.”

“Oh, yes,” He nodded. “You know cicadas?”

Mori blinked. “Certainly.”

“They're *very* fast. Especially in small places.”

“So are you.”

“So am I,” He beamed, barely regaining his balance after some hurried observer pushed past his shoulder. “And they often mistake humans for trees. It often causes their doom. Humans have significantly more reason to kill innocents than trees do,” Dazai blinked at the floor, uncertain if it was blood or vodka sticking to his soles. “I wouldn't make that mistake.”

Mori studied his grin — the refusal from his eyes to move elsewhere than down the planes of his face. Sometimes he got that *look* — undeniably worried. Irredeemably curious. The moth dashing towards the flame; looking at the stars and *fearing*, just out of shared brightness.

*Count for me*, the man would say, as he stitched him up. Sometimes, he considered, he thought Mori just wanted his mouth to do *something* — if he just wouldn't cry.

Dazai got bored.

“Anyway,” He yawned. “I prefer grasshoppers.”

The doctor’s shoulders fell, purposeful. In a tone that allowed his hand to lay on his shoulder and be *worth it*, he tutted: “I thought you loved all women.”

“I do,” he assured. All women that haunted the places Mori dragged him to loved him back, too, most times — with their pearls and horrible husbands and power-thirsty eyes. “She would have been perfect! If she hadn’t moved so soon, I could have joined her in an eternal rest from this cursed world.”

“Maybe let us rest later,” Mori encouraged. He put his hands on his shoulders; nodded to the wall of conspicuous *Black Lizards*, beginning their suffocating march to the exit. Through the black-glass doors, the nearing lights of an ambulance shone. “We have much to do in the morning, do we not?”

“Eight deals of no intervention to the shootout we’re planning,” Dazai recounted, efficiently.

“And?”

“The attack on then *Nine Rings*’ freight —“

“*And?*”

He blinked. “Oh, yes,” They crossed the doors; a breathless paramedic almost ran them over, in her hurry to make her way inside. “Chuuya’s funeral, too.”

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Chuuya’s corpse smelled like rotten peaches, old milk, and the unavoidable stench of run-over dog.

*[“Here’s the plan,” Dazai explained, over the splutters coming from under the old blanket he had thrown over his and Chuuya’s backs, launching himself to the furniture-less ground of his apartment face first. He pinched it under his chin, wearing it like a veil, and proclaimed: “You’re dead.”*

*The art of sending dirty looks wearing a dogs-patterned blanket was one Chuuya had mastered. “I dare you to say that again, mummy.”*

*His apartment complex, as most living quarters of the Mafia, fell into a deadly silence the moment the clock struck midnight — either because its inhabitants were all at work, or because they knew better than to dare disturb the night. His living room's light flickered; it made the lines and pictures on his wall seem strangely greye.*

*Dazai had been sneaking in for weeks. Chuuya had been taking measures against it for double the time. All of them futile; he was now studying a way to get his own coffee cup in the cupboard, purely for a chance to manipulate Chuuya into letting it prepare it for them both and poisoning the boy's own.*

*“To everyone who's not Port Mafia, you're dead,” he insisted. He pointed a chopstick to the ceiling — a reminder of a dinner he had mostly pretended to much, and that Chuuya had obsessively, mutteringly, saved for later — tracing one name. “Except for one person in particular.”]*

The smell shouldn't have been so overwhelming, he thought. Then again, Dazai had hardly ever been to any funerals Mori hadn't dragged him too — *show some respect to our dead, Dazai*. And then, petulant, *you're the one not giving them graves*.

The former Boss had had a funeral, of course. A big deal, and yet not at all. Mori had offered a more than glorious eulogy; Kouyou had spat near his coffin when no one was watching. Then, he had been dealt with the way every other *Night Warden* was — the waves of *Under Port*.

*That* funeral, he hadn't witnessed. He could still imagine the grief Mori had worn throughout the whole day.

*[“Look how magnanimous I am,” he said, scribbling down ideas on a piece of paper he had ripped from one of his French textbooks. “You can even choose who gets to write and read out your eulogy. Personally, I have been preparing for this day since the first time I made the mistake of laying my eyes on you —“*

*“Yeah, no, fuck that,” Chuuya interrupted him, slapping his nape. “You're not opening your shitty mouth. Ane-san can do it.”*

*“Your bias is so unprofessional. What's with that thing she does, anyway?”*

*“Thing?”*

*Dazai tapped two fingers under his chin.*

*“Ah,” Chuuya made a face. “It's a reminder,” He kicked his calf. “Can you go on?” ]*

“...young life,” Kouyou was saying, composed. She wore grief like a particularly expensive kimono; since she *liked* Chuuya, she had conceded to something that *looked* like tears in the corner of her eyes. “A loyal young boy, as promising as few, whose loss we will feel until the end of our days.”

“Boo,” Dazai echoed, a tad too loud.

An awkward silence took over the Chapel. An unfairly exaggerated number of people had shown up to the function — unaware of the pretense, and *honest to God* grieving the boy in the casket. Dazai couldn't say he got the enthusiasm, but the first rows had yet to stop sobbing their eyes out.

Or staring at him.

“Dazai,” Kouyou hissed, behind a tissue, in the deadly silence. *Was he really friends with all these people? Where did he find the time?* “Could you get out?”

“No,” he answered, courteous, sitting down a bit more comfortably on the corpse's legs. He licked the tip of his marker; added a few details to the dog doodle on Chuuya's forehead. “I'm grieving.”

*Would Mori show up to his funeral, at last?* He probably would; to gloat, at the very least. He would look as he did in that moment, pristine and quiet in the first row. Nothing about him spoke of *grief*, certainly — but the Boss of the Port Mafia didn't just show up to anyone's funeral.

Hirotsu would feel obliged to come, gentleman as he was. Ace and Kouyou, too, as a sign of respect to the Boss. Chuuya would probably pass by, spitting in his coffin and carving his least favorite Hirose Fumiko's song on the wood.

And Tanaki —

A gently wrinkled hand closed around his wrist.

“Dazai, dear,” Madame Tanaki whispered. She had rolled her wheelchair forward from the edge of the second row; the caves under her eyes were barely deeper than the abyss the *thread* of her words hung over. “I know. Come on.”

Dazai opened his mouth, and closed it again.

“You got —” *discharged*, he almost said — then he took notice of the crowd staring at them, and of Kouyou's death-lined glances. He studied the black satin of Tanaki's clothes; the abnormal absence of the bump of her abdomen. Unfamiliar. Complicated.

He got out of the coffin.

*[“What's the point of this materialism?” Dazai lamented, dangling his legs from where he had stuck himself in the sink. Chuuya's intelligible handwriting was a torture on his stubborn eyes; he stretched his foot until it touched the boy on the floor. “You don't seem the type to want flowers.”*

*“Fake flowers,” Chuuya specified, with that sniffing superiority he often wondered if he knew he had stolen from Kouyou. “Inside joke. The flowers are fake and so it's my corpse.”*

*“We're not calling it Lie of the —”*

*“My last funeral was shit,” the boy replied, stubbornly, because he liked to dangle the stories he refused to tell him right in front of his nose. “If I go along with this, I want the cool stuff. Also, you’re wearing a suit. With a jacket.” ]*

The three layers of clothing upon his bandages were more restricting than any bandages — than the weird feeling on his chest, as he dragged Tanaki’s chair to a darker corner of the Chapel, lulled by the melody of Kouyou’s eulogy.

“I thought they wouldn’t let you out for a few weeks more,” Dazai hushed, crouching down in front of her chair. A crying *Madonna* offered some shade from the stained glass windows in their alcove; he wasn’t sure if the Port Mafia lingered in Churches out of faith or shared interiors. “You silly woman.”

Her smile was a distant thing, refusing to walk the path to her eyes. “There are things to do,” she said. Her vocal chords sounded ruined; her hands closed on the armrests of her chair every few seconds. The space she had occupied had been halved, and she dragged that newly found emptiness with tired fingers. A bit quieter: “There are always things to do.”

*A glass cage*, he thought, studying the swarm of curved shoulders. Little rats who knew they were being studied, and still refused to knock against the wall. The finish line was only a slightly colder Hell; and yet they ran, and they ran, and they *ran*.

*I was wrong*, he had told Verlaine.

“It’s like,” she started. Her fingers kept pulling at the silver strand of hair under her ear; the edges were ashy, uneven in the shakingly ritual he could envision her feeding them to. She cleared her throat — stared at the ground as if it would do her the favor of digging out its dead. “Ah. Uhm — It’s like it will never stop being quiet, ever again.”

Her jaw set; unclenched again, along to a weak exhale. She pulled so hard her scalp had to *burn* with it; pulled so devotedly Dazai almost expected the absent bump under her sternum to reappear. “I don’t know if I’m quite here.”

Behind the stained windows, some passing kids in a bicycle laughed with their entire chests. It echoed against the marble; some younger girl, one of either of Kouyou’s ranks, stared at the ceiling, praying.

“I’m sorry,” Dazai offered.

“I don’t need you to be,” She tightened her lips into a deadly white line. She only seemed tired; her hands wouldn’t quit *searching*. “There’s hardly any time for it. I cried my tears over a sink of hair and Ryoru’s lighter. And it wasn’t your fault,” A tremor. “It wasn’t Chuuya’s, either.”

Men slowly gathered closer to the coffin, their last greetings trapped between gritted teeth. Chuuya didn’t often receive subordinates; voices were that he preferred working alone, or that he simply did it better, or that none of them were the Flags. He had a tendency to be everywhere that was needed, nonetheless — their shaking fingers proved it.

“He came looking for me,” Tanaki whispered. Every vowel was contained in a snowflake; her eyes were so wide her whole face trembled with them. “Stayed all night, but I wouldn’t wake up. And before that —“

“You were so high on painkillers and loss you blamed him for it all, because your memory was too foggy?” Dazai met Mori’s eyes, as he made his way to the coffin. He put his gloved hand where Chuuya’s head would have been; curled an eyebrow. “I should rather think he was never mad about that.”

A *sound* came out of her throat. “Oh .”

“Tanaki,” He cleared his throat. “Listen.”

“I was unfair to him —“

“This is *your* pain, not his. He understands.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, Dazai, *dear* —“

“No, no — You misunderstand. Listen to —“

“Forgive the interruption.”

Hokama Shigeo was a sick man. Describing him in any other way wouldn’t have done him justice; his complexion was paler than the marble under their feet, his eyes and nose redder than the fake flowers. His hands spasmed at his sides, caging legs who seemed not to care about standing — addiction wasn’t his best look.

“Forgive the interruption,” he echoed, eyes moving frantically from his interlocutors to the casket, as if expecting it to disappear. “I — I work under Executive Kouyou. Nakahara and I, we — we knew each other. Not that well, but — A hard loss, isn’t he?”

*[“I told you about him,” Dazai nodded towards the ceiling. “The one who joined to repay his father’s debts. Dante didn’t use him for the attack at the HQs, so he must be hidden in the ranks to spy.”*

*“He can be the one to inform Dante I’m not as useful as I used to be,” Chuuya concluded, grimacing. “Are we betting on him not feeling my death?”*

*“I doubt he’s keeping track.”*

*He squinted. “How do I know you’re not doing all of this to be the only one in command?”*

*“It’s a temporary measure,” he complained. “A great number of men will know you’re alive, anyway. Most of them. Some of them. Stop being dramatic. This funeral is purely a cut down your credit card.”*

*“You mean our credit cards.”*

*“Not what I meant with partners.”*

*"I told you," Chuuya spelled out, "Not to call me that.""].*

"Certainly a pricey loss, alright," Dazai sighed. "How am I meant to successfully publicize the *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter if everyone is busy grieving for him?"

Hokama seemed slightly confused. He bowed his head, nonetheless, doing his best to focus his eyes on him. "I didn't know the two of you were close. My — My deepest condolences, sir."

"It's alright," he reassured. "I'm probably in shock, right now. What do you think, Tanaki? Am I? Oh, I hope not to disturb your grief when I throw myself into his grave. Again. Tearing my hair out."

Madame Tanaki stared at him.

Clearly, though, the drugs made Hokama rather tolerant. "Don't worry about it."

"Since you asked," Dazai started, again. "It was a terrible accident. Ever since the Boss asked us two to direct the counter attack, we've been so busy. A month of successful hits, and the upper hand of the conflict finally in our field... Poor Hatrack," He sighed. "To think the men were just starting to respect us."

*Respect*, he echoed.

No one had dared to voice their complaints, after Mori had officially directed every kneeling man of his organization towards their frames. It hardly meant those complaints weren't flooding the pipes — hardly meant they could bring themselves to remember just how *creeped out* they tended to be by Dazai's presence, and just how much they appreciated Chuuya's Ability.

Mafiosi liked power, and they liked trustworthy people even more. They tended to dislike when the two came too close into contact.

They had obeyed their orders — had stood straight and quiet as two boys, not even sixteen of age, walked back and forth, climbing ranks *they* wouldn't even *touch*, in thirty years. They had fought by their side, celebrated with them — and they had waited for them in the darkest alleys, knife in hand.

*[“It needs to be realistic,” Chuuya insisted. “And just organized enough — just reasonable enough — that it could actually bring me down. They’ve been planning to eat us alive for a month, now.”*

*“So what,” Dazai asked. “Could they do it?”*

*A strange glance. “It’s me. No, they couldn’t.”].*

"He was betrayed by someone in his squad," he explained. "We sent a battalion to follow a weapon train *GSS* was sending to the *Nine Rings*, to blow it up. The mission went well, but someone unknowingly put a bomb in Chuuya's compartment. He wasn't quick enough to escape. And his corpse shows it, doesn't it? They spent *five hours* putting it together."



A sound like *retching* came from Tanaki's seat, shattered in the middle and stuck in her throat. Dazai cringed. "Tanaki, about that —"

"How could they do that?" Hokama said, forgetting to look particularly upset.

Dazai shrugged. "Men have done worse things in the name of envy. We're currently looking for the culprit. Worry not, though! Your friend will be avenged."

He paled some more. "Traitors should get what they deserve, I suppose."

"They should," He nodded. Looking right into his eyes, he added: "And evil people should receive the right punishment, shouldn't they?"

Chuuya's funeral lasted two hours and fifteen minutes in total. Kouyou's sob-tearing eulogy was widely appreciated — even Mori pretended to bow his head, grievous. Tanaki stared at nothing at all, holding his hand too tightly. On the other side of the room, Hirotsu smoked four cigarettes in total.

When it was Dazai's turn to tearfully murmur something into the casket — only pushed forward by Madame Tanaki's hands and her whisper of, *give him sincerity, at the very least* — he skipped his way down the aisle of horrified mafiosi, crossing his arms on the edge of the wood.

*Finding a redhead hadn't been heard*, Dazai considered, tapping the unfinished dog doodle on his forehead. Finding something *short enough*, on the other hand — he had hoped some of his feet would vanish, after he had thrown the corpse in a secured room and blown it up.

"Hey, there," he chirped, chin on knuckles. He could feel Mori's facial muscles quiver. "Slug. Hatrack. Chibi. *Petit Mafia*. Thing-that-got-stuck-under-a-tacky-hat. Bane of my existence. I must thank you for your sacrifice."

"Thanks to you," he continued, ignoring the way the entire room was holding its breath, "My very own torment — my greatest fear — has no reason to exist any longer. Through my researches for a painless suicide method, I couldn't help but worry — What if you constant yipping around me ended up involving you in my death? A fearsome possibility. Luckily, I shall not fret about it any longer."

With a kick and a bounce of energy, Dazai pushed his body up, framed by the gasps of the crowd. He balanced himself on the edge of the casket; opened his arms in an empty embrace, pointedly ignoring Kouyou's manicured fingers massaging her temples.

"Chuuya once told me the universe we perceive is less than 5% of its true total," he declared. Hirotsu had picked up a fifth cigarette. "He liked Physics facts. He was a nerd like that. It was as useless as every other *Physics-For-Dummies*' fact he ever dumped on my poor self — And the reason why I threw all of his books out of the window."

"I do believe," he insisted, "Now that you are gone, that humanity might flourish. In your name, we shall learn to perceive 6%! Amen."

An hesitant wave of murmurs appeared.

“Amen,” some voices questioned.

He had a hard time climbing down; hushed the crowd with reassuring motions when his foot ended in the corpse’s face, and fixed his hand so that the left one would show the middle finger only. *Appreciate it*, he sent over, mentally.

It took another half an hour for the room to be emptied out. Dazai watched them cry over the wooden box some more — waved cheerfully behind Kouyou’s back, arm intertwined with hers, as she reassured guests about the young boy’s trauma. She received most of the condolences; no one else quite fit the criteria.

Eventually, it was only him and Tanaki left.

He met her expression, and didn’t quite find it in himself to be mean. Instead, he extracted his console, curled on the bench next to her seat, and waited.

Curled under the altar, a Peruvian cat blinked.

“I wish,” Tanaki said, very quietly, after some old clock had ticked — not differently than before. Her eyes were set on the invisible; she kept tracing her tattoos, comforting centuries old ink. “I wish that life could be respected even where light cannot touch.”

*Life*, Dazai thought. Useless to linger on it; better to watch it float through the currents of his mind, one fish too small and too big to bring home. A mixture of breathing and suffocating; an eclipse between wanting and never having. *Death*, he mused, while being fundamentally the same — *was much* simpler.

“You don’t *respect* life,” Dazai offered. “You just learn to share space, I think.”

“If you’re done with bullshit,” replied a new voice, emerging from the unreachable balcony on the other end of the Chapel, walking down the columns with his hands in his pockets, “We’re going to be late.”

Tanaki stilled.

In an effort to maintain secrecy for the eyes they would meet, Chuuya had picked, as it fit him, the worst wardrobe possible. The scarlet under jacket was a light in the night; the hat had simply been switched, so that the chain dangled on the other side of his face — he had, though, worn a face mask of the same material as the *Black Lizards*’ onyx bulletproof vests.

A bit too elegant for a Sheep, given the custom shoes; a bit too ragged to fit a hardened mafioso. Just pathetic enough to fit him, though.

“So while I was standing here watching people cry over you, you got to go shopping?” he lamented, uselessly. Chuuya had eyes for one person only. “I didn’t even get to read my full eulogy. It was twenty eight pages long!”

“Chuuya,” Tanaki exhaled, hands trembling. Her eyes followed his every step down the aisle — the reluctant taste of them, which Dazai bet she wouldn’t notice; the stubbornness to advance forward. “Chuuya, how — You were —“

He closed the distance between them with his fists clenched so tight Dazai could see them through the pockets. When he came to a halt in front of Tanaki’s wheelchair, he paused — the time it would take for a breath to get stuck — and he kneeled.

She flinched.

*Oh-oh*, Dazai thought — watching the line of Chuuya’s shoulders stiffen; watching Tanaki regret it in the time it took for the spasm to reach her nails, bitter and involuntary and never to be erased again.

“I will not ask for your forgiveness,” Chuuya said, forehead to the floor. His voice was a blank canva; Dazai, enamoured with clouds and hanging hooks, had never seen him touch the ground, since they had met.

“Chuuya, it wasn’t —“

“But I will,” he insisted, *intent*, as if she had not been a bleeding bird — emptied of its song long before his eyes could grow nimbly vacant, “Make up for it. Save the salvageable. I promise you.”

Tanaki’s eyes filled with tears. “Chuuya,” she whispered, reaching forward. Her skin seemed thinner than usual; he could see bones push through, breaking flesh to sink into his face and *force* him to look at her. “Chuuya, dear, listen to me —“

Dazai left them, quietly.

The cat had the good grace of following, steps always a bit quicker than his good soles could follow. He studied their matching shadows on the concrete; sat on the edge of the sidewalk and watched traffic pass by, pretending there was nothing out of the ordinary in the feline keeping guard.

“Or am *I* the guard, here?” he questioned, a bit amused. The cat blinked. He huffed. “Yes, yes. I know. I’ll tell him to hurry soon. If I don’t set this thing between them into a path of *resolution*, do you know how annoying he’s going to be? Guilt tends to weigh people down. He is hardly more interesting.”

A purr. He shrugged. “*I* know better.”

Plump clouds made their way through the sky. Gingerly, he pulled at the leather of his shoes; pocketed the console and settled back on his elbows.

“It’s a long story,” Dazai told the cat, sighing.

### Three weeks prior to the funeral.

“So,” Akamine Mizuki, head of the *Nine Rings*’ overseas drug deals, started. “Why did Boss let two brats in, again?”

An irrelevant detail most of the Port Mafia would probably not be privy about — given their *eyes low gun high* morale and the resident gravity manipulator’s distaste for technological devices — was that Chuuya’s destroyed phone was, in short of better words, absolutely engulfed in phone charms.

*Albatross’ idea*, he had commented, only once, flippantly, after Dazai had lamented the unusual weight to hit his face. *The guys’ thought it fucking hilarious.*

Observation with a cause: if Chuuya hadn’t found it hilarious as well, the phone wouldn’t have been so overwhelmingly adorned. Deeper observation with a deeper cause: he rarely kept his phone in hand, lest he started playing with charms, and allowed his eyes to get lost *somewhere*.

“She’s smart,” he offered, eventually, under the roar of the crowd, eyes on the anonymous police report he was sending from that particular phone.

Bodies pushed him back and forth through the circular storm of the underground room; the eye of it was almost too far away to find through the sweaty, cheering skeletons — red hair flashed through the neon lights, regardless.

“The Port Mafia has a tendency to take in all rejects — the younger, the better. A magnanimous vein, perhaps — Or an understanding that subtlety is at the base of success. Two kids would go unnoticed, if they infiltrated,” He shrugged. “Plus, I heard their Boss is a creep.”

“And you’re supposed to fuck the weirdo?” Akamine made a face. “Can’t say I see your little friend being successful. Men don’t like it when they bite.”

A wet *crunch!* filled the room, followed by the crack of a snapped bone and a groan of agony. The crowd went crazy, victory and defeat alike, throwing money lost and gained towards the makeshift ring. A man grabbed Chuuya’s wrist, raising his arm with a roar.

He pointedly lacked the sea of bruises, scratches and bleeding wounds the man gasping on the ground was covered in — and his unnaturally bent leg. Lowering his head to toss his hair back, Chuuya offered a slightly confused grin to the crowd, sweaty shirt barely hiding the Port Mafia tattoo on his chest.

“I suppose not,” he agreed, tipping the hat that had been abandoned on his head.

“*You* could work something out, though,” She had entire portions of her skin littered in tattoos — snakes and thorns and flowers, and a spider right under her eyes. A cross, somewhere inside her. “Heard their Boss was a doctor. Maybe he’s got a sickly child fetish. Have you ever *slept*, kid?”

“Last time I tried to kill myself,” he offered. Another competitor jogged to the ring; Chuuya licked his teeth. Dazai tapped his coat, where he had pocketed the money from the evening.

*At least the dog has a use*, he considered.

“Anyway, we’ll probably infiltrate the side that deals with trading,” he continued. “Ace, I think the Executive’s name is?”

“GSS is already taking care of interrupting the trades, though,” Akamine considered, unaware of his silent memorization. “They could take the Mafia’s place in the oversea market, with a little push. And taking it from GSS will be plenty easier.”

“Always found them a bit pathetic,” Chuuya flipped his opponent to the ground. “Didn’t they join forces with that ridiculous kid street gang?”

“The *Sheep*?” She snorted. “The lost boys went their separate ways months ago. A weird move from GSS, yeah, but they did hold control over Suribachi. And when their King was with them, I could understand the appeal.”

“A King?”

“A devil,” Akamine leaned closer, lowering her voice to say: “You know, there are voices the little shit joined the Port Mafia.”

She was rather pretty. The dip of her hips was covered in ink — she had that calculating look women usually wore when faced with Dazai. A mixture of assessment and discomfort; eyes tracing the bow of his lip and his bony wrists, fingers searching for sharpness.

“Say,” he mused. “How would you feel about a double suicide?”

Chuuya slammed his opponent against one of the rock pillars inside the fighting circle; it should have been impossible, but it still shook the entire room.

Distractedly — annoyed by the way his head had been snapped away from his question — Dazai wondered if the bitter-faced legions of suited men Mori had offered them had felt the impact too.

If his plans were being followed — which was a guarantee only in the name of commutative fear, given the sneering his involuntary voice crack had caused — they should have currently been massacrating guards from the *Nine Rings* with *Black Hounds* weapons. An excuse to start a fire somewhere the Mafia wasn’t.

It would take a while. Thus, he and Chuuya could take care of their side gig.

“Double *suicide*?” Akamine was frowning, still, as if sure the rumble of the ecstatic crowd had created a misunderstanding. Her expert eyes ran down the pills Dazai was shaking into his palm. “Don’t recognize those.”

Dazai shook the pill bottle, instead of clapping, as Chuuya snapped his opponent’s arm. “Kids need their vitamins.”

“Even kids who want to kill themselves?”

“Especially!”

She pressed a little closer. “How did she find the two of you? The *Nine Rings* are mostly old fanatics and vengeful widows.”

“You’re not either, though.”

“I’m not, no. Thank you for noticing.”

He paused, given that every wasted second made the possibility of Chuuya being punched more realistic. “How did *you* end up here?”

Akamine made a face. “Got kidnapped when I was little,” she said, around the mouth of a beer. “Sold around. Found out people worshipped whatever fool got ahold of a *sigil*. Ended up here, because it sounded fucking cool.”

“What did?” Dazai curled an eyebrow. “The pseudo-cultism of it all?”

“You tell me. Or were you just looking for a place where your friend would get to kick as many idiots to the face as he wanted?”

“Something like that.”

Amusement curled her lips up. “And what were you two brats doing before coming here?”

Dazai watched a spat teeth roll between shoes and throwing-up drunks on all fours, until it was mercilessly crushed under a heel. Green neon lights shone down the side of Chuuya’s curved frame — the bullet scar he had given him glistened like ivy.

“Ah, we’ve been very busy,” he offered.

*[“How come you didn’t feel that coming?” Chuuya frowned, dragging Okano Goro’s — ex member of the Port Mafia Intelligence; eight fingers cut off for his wrongdoings; just vigil enough to steal Dazai’s gun from his hands and shoot himself in the forehead before they could get their hands on him — away.]*

*“Oh, I’m sorry,” Dazai muttered, pulling the corpse to their stolen car by the legs. “Because I’m the one who went to check the wines in the cupboard.”*

*Okano barely fit in the hood. Trying to push his legs inside and keep his head still took several tries and most of their patience; when he slammed the hood shut, he almost snapped*

*Chuuya's hand in two with it. Would have been a shame, given their matching scars.*

*Dazai had officially been banned from touching a wheel; Chuuya drove instead. They took the body to the nearest dumping site that wasn't his, and they sat on the ground with cigarettes stolen from the corpse's pockets, watching him burn from the flame of Hirotsu's stolen lighter.*

*"Nice work, partner," he concluded, just to be annoying.*

*"Don't call me that," Chuuya snapped. "Who's next?"]*

*[Kitagawa Usagi was a low rank drug dealer — a fifty years old woman who lived in a makeshift tent in an alley near Yamashita Park. While their squad took care of the Knights, they had sneaked away — only to have the woman impale herself on a loose piece of the metal fence as soon as she had seen them.*

*Dazai scribbled her picture out of Chuuya's wall, using red sauce from the take-out kebab they had ordered.*

*"That seems a bit," Chuuya started saying. The smell of food distracted him soon enough.*

*The missions had led to more and more time spent in the hole-in-the-wall the boy called his home. The sight of empty floors, green thread, and the ripped pages from astrophysics books that Chuuya had, for some reason, the tendency to hang on his ceiling had slowly become more and more familiar.*

*It had led to unusual discoveries.*

*Chuuya slept on his stomach, at all and any times, unless he had to keep an eye on Dazai — relegated to the floor on the other side of his futon-occupied room. Sleep, of course, was a rough definition for both of them — whereas Dazai had a tendency to turn on every home appliance and spray water at him the moment he heard him snore, Chuuya had gone through the issue of connecting speakers to the bike in his garage, making it roar as soon as Dazai's head touched the pillow.*

*For good measure, he bought his own speakers, assembled with disco neon lights.*

*Chuuya woke up as soon as the sun appeared in the sky, no matter if the curtains were shut. He scrubbed the letter N off any and all romaji written text he encountered. Sometimes he got stuck in a series of short, involuntary blinks, that he apparently calmed down by pinching a specific spot near his fourth rib. He only ate half of any meal he was given, and would allow Dazai to steal off his plate after seven-point-five slaps.*

*He had a lot of scars. Whenever a mission was miraculously treacherous enough to scratch them, some shade of chronic pain would settle his legs on the floor and grit his teeth to destruction — refusing to let him move. Refusing to be helped, too.*

*Dazai would whine until he got to lay down with him with reports he would force him to do. For good measure, they cracked the screen of his console, going back and forth.*

*“Celebrating the dead means disrespecting them, sometimes,” Dazai reminded him. They were eating on the floor. Chuuya had spent the entire evening insisting he left. Dazai left pieces of food under the few actual pieces of furniture in the house; Chuuya caused him an mild allergic reaction by adding too much spice in his food in secret.*

*“In fact, I think she’d be happy for us.”].*

*[The highlight of Horiuchi Shigeru’s failure was the ruined deck of cards Dazai found in the Hall of his apartment complex, waiting for him to come home.*

*“Chuuya wasn’t particularly impressed with my magic tricks,” he sighed, later that day, to some of their subordinates, knuckles white around their rifles. They did all hate when he got jovial; it was usually followed by an execution “But I did see him attempt to change an Eight of Hearts into a King of Flowers, at one point. So he just sucks.”*

*It took the CEO five hours to make his way into the building, three women in his arms and a face that seemed to have met Death and bargained more times than it was comfortable.*

*He was the closest call — Chuuya managed to sink his fist in a non-vital portion of his body before he could smash his head against the desk; Dazai had spent two days sneaking into the apartment to get rid of any and all possibly lethal substances and weapons.*

*It didn’t stop Horiuchi from pulling the golden collar on one of his terrified women’s throats, and offering no expression when an entire portion of the skyscraper blew up.*

*They landed inside the private pool of whichever tycoon lived downstairs, floating inside the unsalted water for infinite seconds. Jumping out of a window was pretty high on the list of suicide methods Dazai kept — it seemed a good way to go. The idea of flying was an enchanting one — in his mind, though, the sound his bones would make against the concrete seemed painful.*

*They climbed out, sighing and shivering, praying that the useful documents on trades Horiuchi had been helping the Nine Rings with would survive. The sky was flames.*

*In a rather unusual show of tact, Chuuya did not ask about the smile he had seen appear on Dazai’s face as they fell].*

*[Konya Maki; prostitute, snapped her own neck. Uyemura Tadashi; an untalented serial killer who’d jumped out of the window and then ripped himself out of Chuuya’s grip when he’d followed him. Tsutsumi Akira; thirteen years old and prey to the monsters of the Yokohama’s train station where he slept — whose stolen Nintendo DS had disappeared with him when he’d gotten himself run over by a train.*

*“Hey,” Chuuya called. “What did you mean?”*

*Without interrupting his Hopscotch on top of the abandoned train compartments, attempting his best to reach the electrical wires with his fingers, he said: “You’ll need to be more specific. I don’t speak dog.”*



*He dangled his legs over the edge of the train, studying the two rats running across the blood stain on the tracks. “When you said the Sheep asked you to join. You were bullshitting me, right?”*

*“Not at all,” He twirled Chuuya’s stolen hat in a finger, hopping on one leg. “Is it so hard to believe your Sheep might have hidden something from you?”*

*Chuuya made a face. Yes. “Whatever. Tell me.”*

*He jumped forward, barely managing not to lose his balance. Transactional in nature, Mori liked to say. “If you tell me what you saw in Dante’s limbo.”*

*Unmatching eyes stared him down. Sunrise made the amber one seem too strangely bright; a glass cage someone was always knocking behind. He wondered if there was a difference between a real god and one made of codes; if it was all in a name, and the way Chuuya sometimes reacted when their skins came into contact.*

*Chuuya was weird with touch.*

*He was weird with everything, to be fair — he refused to buy pricey shampoo, and hoarded food like winter was coming, and got half of his pay removed for property damages in advance. But he always left space between them when they sat; and he pulled at his gloves, whenever Dazai was near — as if to calm down an itch. An itch to reach out.*

*Perhaps that was Dante’s limbo, he considered. An infinite landscape; an underground lab. All of it — the space itself; the gravity he ruled; his brother’s hands — touching him, and refusing to let go.*

*“Race you home,” he concluded.*

*They crossed out three more pictures on the wall. Chuuya, last he heard, did not go to any of the funerals.]*

“Hey, why the bandages, anyway?” Akamine asked, with the tone of someone who had had to repeat herself a few times. Dazai blinked. “Did you get *that* fucked up?”

“I got my eye ripped out,” Chuuya was a black and red dot, shirt covered in dust and strangers’ blood. The other man had managed to land at least a hit, it seemed; his lower lip was broken, liquid ruby dripping down his chin and onto the floor.

Dazai met his eyes right as he sunk his elbow in the man’s nose; he put a finger under his visible eye and pulled the skin down, mocking. “Say, sweetheart, you don’t happen to have heard anything about a supposed *Poet*?”

She offered him a curled eyebrow at the name; but her stiffened shoulders were impossible to mistake. “You may want to lower your voice,” she said, glancing around. “Some people are *really* into that street myth. Gullible enough to believe any of us could ever be sent to Heaven.”

“So that’s what the whispers say?”

A huff. “*Promised help to any and all desperate souls*, or something. It’s probably drugs, if you wanna hear my opinions. But *I’ve* got some stuff that could actually bring you to Heaven.”

Dazai blinked. “You think it’s a prank?”

“Of course it’s a prank,” Akamine made a face. “Listen, kid, the *Nine Rings* are a nice enough bunch. Alright? You seem smart, and your little boyfriend is surely strong enough to get you by. Don’t get tempted by shady shit. Life fucking sucks, but you can make it work.”

He wondered if she was lying to herself, or to him. Could Dante change one’s personality? Arise a wave of unexpected optimism? Perhaps she had been a hypocrite even before the brink of death.

“Of course,” he conceded. “Don’t worry. Hold my drink for a moment?”

A sweat-matted Chuuya had officially defeated his sixth opponent of the night. Pushing through the enthusiastic bodies forcing money in his palms was an experience of its own right; luckily, Dazai could see the advantages in being just another body in the crowd.

He found him crunched on the ground, ignoring the hands patting his shoulders, as some men carried the bloodied victim away. “Good game!” Dazai explained, with his fakest smile. “I knew you could do it.”

Chuuya had to do a double take, frozen with his mouth around a water bottle. They had offered him alcohol, but ever since the *Beatrice Accident*, he had been spending too much time looking at wine catalogues. “Yeah,” he said, slowly. “Thanks, man.”

Still smiling, he kneeled in front of him. “That last hook you did was something,” He wouldn’t say *what*. “Are your knuckles broken? You should get rid of the gloves.”

Keeping up the small talk for the sake of the curious eyes, he pledged his hand to the sacrifice of touching Chuuya’s damp skin — brushing the cut on his lip. “That’s nasty,” he taunted. “I thought you were supposed to be untouchable.”

With his thumb, he tapped, *lose the next one*.

His eyes widened a fraction. He wrapped his fingers around his wrist. “I *am*, asshole. You’d be dead meat after the first hit.”

*What? Why?*

*Bet money on your loss*, he tapped. *Ruin. Not. My winning streak.*

“I heard they’re bringing out a guy called *the Demolisher*,” Somebody behind them whistled. *Pretend to get hurt, I don’t care. We need to get her out.* “Feeling up for the challenge, Slug?”

“Obviously.” *I hope you die.*

*Get me my money.* He stood up, patting his head, and got a punch in the knee for his trouble. *I'll pay for dinner.*

"You're a filthy fucking *liar*," Chuuya snapped, as they dragged him towards the ring again. "You've never paid for goddamn dinner *once* —"

*[It was, fundamentally, a lie. Dazai had paid for dinner exactly once, obliged by the circumstances. As it went, only he knew where the phone in Mori's office backroom — a clinic of sorts, with a single Hospital bed and strange butterfly stickers taped to the wall — rested.*

*"You should be thankful," Dazai made sure to say, curled where he was with his console at the foot of the bed. Chuuya had gotten the pillow, because Mori clearly had a favorite — despite the both of them being littered in the aftermath of a badly disarmed bomb. "The older one is supposed to pay for everything."*

*"I don't even know when your birthday is," the other boy replied — like he didn't really care, but had needed a rebuttal.*

*"Guess."*

*"I'm not gonna fucking guess —"*

*"Then pay!"*

*The console was the least bloodied thing they had seen in weeks. The half-eaten chicken between their legs would not be finished. His foot attempted to grab his nose. Dazai retched, pushing it away, grabbing his other ankle to pull him down the bed, choking on the kick he received between his own legs.*

*Chuuya pulled onto a bird-shaped charm from his phone and said: "The Flags never let me pay for shit. Unfortunately for you, I'm not them."*

*Nothing said in such circumstances — their mud-dirty socks attempting to get stuck in each other's mouths, spicy sauce on the sheets Mori would make them wash by hand, and the intoxicating smell of blood from the wound the doctor had burned as Dazai watched Chuuya's pupils grow — should have sounded quite so grievous.*

*Chuuya didn't even know his birthday, he thought.*

*"You owe me seven tickets at the Arcade," Dazai warned, like it was a favor. Chuuya punched him.].*

The slight difference between watching Chuuya *lose* and watching him do his best *not to win* was a thorny road, boring in nature. Dazai accepted Akamine's newest beer, and enjoyed it all the same.

If the woman found his enthusiasm at the sight of the boy going down bizarre, she didn't do much more than offer him sidelong glances. Soon enough — though longer than it had taken

any of Chuuya's opponents, given that he was a petty child — the crowd roared their disappointment, watching their champion dramatically land to the ground.

They carried Chuuya to the stairs, one arm around each of their necks. Dazai got his money; Chuuya got to not move a finger.

*See? We all win*, he tapped on his wrist.

Subtly, the boy raised a middle finger.

The heavy stone walls of the stairs muffled the chaos from the fighting ring, dragging the upcoming Spring wind down their sweat-matted skin. The chains in Akamine's clothes dangled melodically along.

"Thank you for the help," Dazai told her, once the door had been kicked open, and the end road of abandoned warehouses welcomed them in. "Bit of a lightweight, this one. In all senses. Right, partner?"

Chuuya stepped on his foot. The lower half of his face was covered in blood from the broken nose he had allowed his opponent to give him.

Chuckling, Akamine moved closer to the one light pole in sight, as if trying to finally get a good look at both of them. "You're younger than I thought."

"What's with age and criminals?" he lamented, tapping his thumb on Chuuya's waist. "Since you're so worried about darling little us, though, you're more than welcome to call us a taxi."

It was a cheap trick; he assumed that was why it worked. *Make it quick*, he always underlined Mori's strategies with. *Don't let them remember. A figured out trick is a trick you can't use anymore*. Akamine huffed, grasping her phone from her pocket. The well oiled machine of Dazai's latest toy was brought to life, erupting with a vicious spark.

Chuuya's hand dashed under his coat, fingers closing around his gun.

Akamine's parting lips and widening eyes followed the motion as he threw it into the air, too busy dealing with the immediate follow-up of the boy's body onto hers to focus on the landing.

Gloved fingers sunk in her throat, lighting both of their bodies up in red. Their feet dug a new road in the concrete, gravity sinking the woman down until the bones of her legs snapped. Dazai reached his hand out, waiting until the gun landed on his palm.

"Your timing was off," he commented, jabbing the mouth of the weapon into the back of her skull. "I'll give your throw a seven, also."

"Your distraction was stupid," Chuuya replied, sinking his fingers into her carotid. "And you need to be quicker with the damn gun."

"How come?"

“They need to feel threatened *immediately*, or instinctual fear will have them kicking. That’s the whole point of *Lie of the Fake Flowers*. ”

Dazai almost dropped the gun, exasperated. “For the last time,” he spelled out. “*Lie of the Fake Flowers* is *fake-death under the eyes of sobbing fools*. This is *Rain Behind the Window*. ”

“No, it *isn’t*, ” Chuuya snapped. “*Rain Behind the Window* is *pretend to be the enemy but don’t shoot above the waist, unless forced, and prepare to be punished for it*. ”

“That’s so *prolific* — *And that’s Shame and* — “

“*Shame and Toad* is *height disadvantage but don’t call it being short* — Are you actually *obtuse?* ”

“What’s with the big words?” Dazai widened his eyes. “Should we thank Dante? Kouyou will *cry*. ”

“*You* — “ Chuuya inhaled through his nose. He massaged the bridge of his nose with the gun. “Can we get on with it?”

“Sure, if you’re a coward,” He tapped the gun on her neck. “Do you reckon she could escape, at the moment?”

The line of Akamine’s spine was rigid. Her fingers had sunk into the chasm of the concrete, out of desperation; when Chuuya tapped two fingers on the side of her neck, and snapped his head to the side — her throat-caged bones followed.

“No,” the boy cursed. “I reckon she’s already dead.”

With practice ease, he stared up. “What?”

With a *tsk!*, Chuuya slammed his foot on the woman’s chest, releasing her from the puppeteer strings of his Ability. Her body dropped all crookedly, pupils-blown eyes staring up at the sky. Something sandy and fetid dropped from her mouth, sticking to her lip ring.

Dazai pocketed his gun, sighing. “Overdose.”

”Out of *nowhere?* ” Chuuya kicked her side; then, courteously, he extracted her from the concrete. “You didn’t notice anything in her mouth while you charmed your way into a shared grave?”

“She was clearly high,” he replied, sniffing, crossing his arms to focus on a non-mortified part of his body. “Given she spent the night talking about her job, I expected her to be used to the daze.”

Embarrassingly obvious. Each death they had witnessed had been somewhat in character for the subject. The same old problem resurfaced, still — how did the *Souls* always seem to know when they would come, and prepared accordingly?

“The suicidal maniac can’t stop people from killing themselves,” Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “This must be a slap on the face, *ah?*”

“I’m maturely taking this adventure as a learning experience,” Dazai waved the matter away. “Even the *Suicide Guide*, despite its merits, will grow obsolete, eventually.”

He stared. “The *what* to *what?*”

Delighted by the opportunity to rant about his latest expense to someone who had somehow missed the memo, Dazai refused to shut up all the way to their extraction point with the squad.

A mixture of Dazai’s *Secret Force Unit* and the side of Kouyou’s men that was most familiar with working with Chuuya was waiting for them, carrying badly covered corpses to the SUVs at the entrance — the least antagonistic group they had managed to form through the bitter-eyed rows of the syndicate.

Sticking out like odd flowers, a few men that had never fought with either of them were muttering between themselves. The sea of black and Kevlar jackets didn’t even bend at the knees; they did exchange *heavy* glances when they stopped in front of them.

“Report,” Chuuya ordered, going straight for business.

“Did you and the Demon fight?” a voice snickered, somewhere near the cars. Most of the men hadn’t even stopped what they were doing. Yawning, Dazai twirled around the string of Chuuya’s deteriorating patience, playing Hopscotch. “Can’t believe the psycho actually got a mean punch.”

“The day Dazai lands a punch on me is the day I’m dead,” the boy corrected him. “I’m sure he would do a wonderful job with some of you spineless jerks, though. Now, if you will — report.”

“Everything went smoothly,” a woman replied, flippantly, holding a piece of fabric to her bleeding temple. “As our *commanders* would have known, had they been there.”

“The Boss did appoint *us*, ” Dazai confirmed, mid-jump. “Which means we get to know all the little secrets cattle don’t know.”

“Don’t call them cattle,” Chuuya warned. Then: “Maybe next time presume we’re busy with something a bit more relevant than shooting a few bastards down. Unless that was difficult?”

A few murmurs. “Sanitation and wide scale shootouts are the easiest Port Mafia protocol,” he continued, almost losing his balance. “But I will be happy to let Mori know his men need *two brats* to vigil over their jobs,” Under the thunder-texture of their glares, Dazai clasped his hands. “Now, something a bit more detailed? Don’t be shy.”

Someone cleared their throat.

“*H-Half* of the cargoes were blown up, as you requested,” Koda Katsumi stuttered, cleaning the neck of his rifle with a bloodstained cloth. “Part of the squad is currently driving the

remaining ones to section 37 of the Port. The boat should leave by morning.”

His name had unwillingly gotten stuck in the back of Dazai’s head — he was one of the few mafiosi who weren’t actively, and not even subtly, organizing an assassination behind their backs. Even worse — he was a friend of Chuuya’s.

“So the deal with *Le Directour* is fine,” Chuuya muttered. “Let’s hope they don’t do a background check on the weapons.”

“It’s the black market, Slug,” Dazai reminded him. “*No one* does background checks.”

“Well, *I* do. And that’s why our weapons are always the *good ones*. ”

“Weren’t you on the jewelry team?”

“The *j-jewelry* team takes care of the chemical weapon market too, sir. Since last year,” Koda spoke up. When he turned to look at him, he added: “Sir.”

He was a short man, which was a reasonable explanation for his friendship with Chuuya. Dazai vaguely remembered his pale, freckled features and blond hair from the first days of Mori’s reign; someone who had survived the *shift*, no matter his whole — *deal*.

Koda, for the little Dazai had seen of him, seemed perpetually on the verge of a panic attack. Eyes plastered on people’s chins; hands wrapped so tightly around his weapons they *shook* with effort. For some reason, Chuuya seemed to find it entertaining

“Yes, thank you, Koda,” the boy said, pointedly. “The numbers?”

Dazai spent the time of the full report meeting every stubbornly skeptical gaze thrown his way. Most eyes lowered; some pretended to look around. *Still*, he considered — and subtly, so not hiding a thing, since those people wouldn’t care if he started doing cartwheels, he put a hand on Chuuya’s back.

Stiffened shoulders motioned understanding.

“Tomorrow, then. You already know where,” the boy declared, muffling conversations. Without a blink, he added: “Noguchi, you might want to know that we aren’t leaving in the car we came with.”

Utter, breathless silence fell.

A buzzed head appeared through the parting crowd — being not even the seventh time the man was called out, Dazai suspected they had all started expecting at least one reprimand *per* mission.

“*Ah?*” he spat out, munching on a cigarette. He had dropped his extravagantly muscled body on the nearest wooden box, hands fiddling with a taser. When he turned it on, bluish sparks illuminated golden teeth and a fish-bone tattoo down his left eye, covering a scar. “The fuck do *I* care?”

“Just thought you might be interested,” Dazai intervened. “The fireteam is using the SUV.”

“You know,” Chuuya concluded. “In case you didn’t want to blow *their* asses up.”

Murmurs spread like a wildfire, followed by the most awkward exchange of glances he’d yet seen through their unwilling squads. Koda blushed to the root of his hair.

Noguchi threw his cigarette to the ground, looking as unbothered as possible. For a newbie — according to his research, he had been recruited in October, and passed from squad to squad until some accident involving his latest commander — he seemed to wildly disapprove of the concept of authority.

The first time they had showed up, he had walked up to them — plastered so close to their faces Dazai could see the scar lines underneath his tattoo.

“My most sincere apologies,” Noguchi said. “I really don’t know what you mean.”

“That’s a shame,” Dazai matched his golden smile with a wide one of his own. A bit louder: “Everybody, please, offer your deepest condolences to our fire team. It is, after all, the last time we see them.”

The glances of the crowd sharpened.

Chuuya’s sigh interrupted the staring match. “Whatever,” he muttered. “Tomorrow. Don’t be late. Be sure to pass by the Infirmary, and *stay there*.”

On their way out, Dazai made sure to brush one palm down the hood of the vehicle he was sure no one would ride. He met Noguchi’s eyes over the roof; waved, cheerful.

“You’ve got to work on your spelling,” Chuuya hissed to him. “You wrote *atomic bomb*. Why the *fuck* would Noguchi put an *atomic bomb* under our car?”

“Have you seen how he looks at us?” Dazai justified. The man still had his eyes on them; unsubtle, Chuuya coughed in his fist, raising a middle finger. “It was a sensible mistake.”

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**Two weeks prior to the funeral.**

In a more human shape, Dazai detested dogs.



The sound of their claws against the ground curled and echoed in hollow bones, as irritating as an itch his arms couldn't quite reach. Fear had never truly been an option — as a child, watching a muzzle peek from the dining table, he had gone for despise.

Strays always pooled wherever the Port Mafia brought its deals, begging for food they didn't have and growling rather impolitely when unsatisfied. Most of all, dogs detested Dazai back.

"Ugly mutt," he hissed, glaring at the beast a few inches from his face, over the shaking metal fence, rattled by his paws with all their might. The crowd around the ring was roaring their approval. "Can't wait to watch them put you down."

Pressed against him in the sweaty darkness of flickering alley lights, painting a distinctively hostile canva, Chuuya slapped his nape.

"What do you even have against them?" he challenged, one hand still barely keeping itself from reaching through the bars to *pet*. "Want to take their place, asshole? I'd gladly watch *you* get put down."

"So would I," Dazai blinked. "That's the whole point. I don't understand how you keep forgetting it."

"They treat the poor creatures like *shit*," Chuuya insisted, undeterred, eyes digging flames into the men in black directing clearly drugged dogs inside the ring. The one he stared at the most would have been taller than the boy making heart eyes at him, if standing. "Shirase was obsessed with dog fights. He knew a guy. Did you know they stop feeding them for days at a time if they refuse to attack their pups?"

It was astonishing, he considered — just how easily a five foot tall creature could make his blood boil.

"We kill people," he reminded him, because few beings were as unapologetically destructive as Nakahara Chuuya. "You just smashed a guy's skull in with a pipe, ten minutes ago. Yesterday, you set fire to a makeshift clinic at the underground border. But *making dogs fight* is where you draw the line?"

"People can be blamed," Chuuya replied, too blank to be joking. "Retaliation is necessary."

"That wasn't *retaliation*. That was an *attack first* strategy. We are no *Sheep*," And his morale, his old sheep song — *kill only if hurt first* — had no place in the Port Mafia. For some reason, Chuuya had accepted to bend it for Mori's sake.

"Dogs have never done shit to anybody," he said.

"Mutt lover," he concluded. "Of course. You're one of them, after all."

And how *unfair* it was, he didn't say — that Dazai lacked the *something* to truly despise them; that his bones felt too distant from it all; and if he didn't have a favorite, how was he going to have a *least* one? How *unfair* it was, that Chuuya had floated in a mad scientist's fist, only so different from Mori's own, and yet he still had space in that stolen ribcage to —

Their in-ears buzzed.

*“All in position,”* a woman announced. The metal fence shook with such violence that the entire first row had to take a step back; the jaws of a dog filled his vision, as the beast struggled uselessly against the chain stuck to the ground. *“S-Sirs,”* Koda added.

“Adorable,” Dazai murmured, watching the beasts foam at the mouth as they looked at each other.

“Yes, thank you, Koda,” Chuuya made sure to say. “Stay put until we say so. We need to check on one of them personally.”

“Who?” another voice asked. “It wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dazai replied. One of the managers — a member of the *Hounds*, judging by the tattoo behind his ear — threw a piece of meat right at the center of the ring, too far to reach. Four *Nine Rings* men pushed against the crowd, nailing the chains holding the dogs tighter. “You better have eyes on the other dog’s cages.”

“Dazai is a scaredy cat,” Chuuya explained.

“And Chuuya is about to get devoured by his favorite pets — who don’t even like him,” he replied, blankly. The chains were removed. “How entertaining it will be.”

The lighting-fast bundle of moving fur was a void to stare into, but Dazai couldn’t keep his eyes away. The dogs jumped to the sole piece of meat the moment they were released; their eyes frantic and their muzzles desperate, sinking their teeth in whatever was at reach — air, food, other dogs, *themselves*.

The crowd appeared on the verge of a similar madness, pushing and crawling and dragging the fence closer, cursing out lost bets and falling for blood. The glance Chuuya pierced them with spoke clearly — he would have enjoyed exchanging them with the dogs much more.

*Men, at least, he considered, didn’t hesitate before biting down.*

*“Seven’s gonna win,”* he whispered, keeping his eyes on the devastated stage. “Youngest and hungriest.”

Said dog clenched his fangs around *Three’s* neck, pulling and pulling, unbothered by *Eleven’s* nails in his side. *Fourteen* laid on the ground, exhausted, until the managers slipped a taser between the bars.

Grimace tightening his fists until the gloves creaked, Chuuya snapped: “This proves what I said about you needing a few combat lessons.”

“You’re still on that?”

“You hate pain,” he insisted. “I don’t believe you when you say *you got beat up on purpose* — “

“*Black Widow* is filled with gossipers,” Dazai brushed the matter away. “It was *useful*. No need for you to cry over my ouchies.”

“Who the fuck is crying?” A disgusted glance. “I’m just scared of what people will say if I’m seen fighting with a walking scarecrow.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, no one in the syndicate has enough guts *or* sanity to give me a karate belt,” A pause. Mori had been angry enough over that unplanned detour to the *Black Widow*; he had locked the cabinet with the exotic poisons. So — “In any case, I broke into your apartment for painkillers.”

*Eleven* threw *Three* against the fence, rattling it over the roars. Chuuya squinted, stuck in a glare for that last sentence. Something passed by his eyes, too quick to pause — something he didn’t say.

“Well,” he muttered. “*Fourteen*. ”

“Of course you’d bet on the underdog,” Dazai groaned, annoyed. “You’re so predictable, it’s not even amusing. And *amusement* is the main and sole reason why I accepted to be your partner —“

“We’re not partners,” Chuuya replied. “This is a temporary collaboration. You should look for old ass Mochizuki.”

“He’s not going to turn up until *Seven* rips the other apart. He bet on it, remember? We spent three hours spying on his Hotel room.”

Chuuya clicked his tongue. “You think *Seven*’s too young to accept to die?”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

“Aren’t you being hypocritical?”

“That’s a dog,” Dazai said, slow and helpful, as if talking to an idiot. Kicking one of his combat boots to direct his gaze down, Dazai twirled his fingers in the air, signing: *I’m a real boy, now, father*.

Unmatching eyes traced every motion, rapt, one only brighter than the other in purpose. As bored as he pretended to be about Dazai’s response to his lack of understanding of traditional codes, — learning an offensive amount of them — the root of their every interaction was a challenge, and Chuuya would never back away from those.

Perhaps he hoped not to repeat Rengoku. Perhaps he was glad not to have to admit his lacks in ink strokes. Perhaps he just hated losing.

Since coded messages weren’t new — and Chuuya had a repertoire of mostly useless skills from his year in the streets; while Dazai had endless knowledge on things that were only alive in a bored child’s game — they had decided to take a dip into originality

*[“Russian?” Chuuya echoed, peeking under his kitchen table, where Dazai was training his hands in a mixture of French, Japanese and Russian sign language — not easily detectable, he had explained, to a very skeptical Chuuya, who had eventually picked it up like a native. “Why Russian?”*

*“My nanny taught me Russian,” he replied. “Did you find the book?”*

*His head bumped against the wood. “You had a nanny?”*

*“And an unicorn named Cindy, yes.”*

*Chuuya huffed. “Figures, asshole. You expect me to believe you didn’t, like — spawn from the shivering hellfire or something? I can see you as the pissy rich little prince, though.”*

*The question made his lips quiver. The curiosity on his traits was more open than it had ever been; Dazai fumbled for a way to use it, and yawned behind the cover of the French textbook.*

*“I’m not an orphan,” he said, finally.*

*Skepticism made him squint. “Yeah, right.”*

*“No, seriously.”*

*“Yeah, right. How would someone with a family end up in the Port Mafia?”*

*“How does an eight years old get a funeral first thing after he joins the Sheep?”*

*Chuuya’s mouth opened, then fell shut again. He concluded: “Bad luck, I guess.”*

*Balance, he told himself.*

*“What’s ‘blood’, in Japanese?” he asked.]*

Morse code had been somewhat touchy. Dazai had refused to teach the standard on principle; instead, they had personalized knocks and light sequences.

They had spent an entire night memorizing it, playing with the only two lampshades in his apartment or kicking their shoes on the broken pipes of *The Alley*. They had barely managed a full conversation as the sun rose behind the floor-to-ceiling windows — for some karmic reason, it was the trick they were having the most trouble picking up.

*[Was it really necessary?” Dazai questioned, as they watched the piece of paper burn on the stove. Chuuya had no pans to put it in.*

*“No point in breaking our heads over it, if anyone can find it and figure it out,” he replied, as if obvious. Perhaps it was. Dazai hadn’t slept in three days.*

*They watched the flames.*

*Chuuya's apartment hummed. It was a constant buzz; a mixture of electrical wires and the faucets Dazai always turned on when the boy was distracted. He had never lingered in a place that wasn't metal and vacancy; those walls were just as naked, but the sharp tone of the boy's barks filled the corners.*

*And he hadn't even noticed the DOG #1 print he had stuck to his coffee cup yet.*

*The boy moved to grab one of the lamps they had dragged into the living room, scoring the walls for a free outlet. The skin under his eyes was blue, and tiredness got in the way of his desire to bash Dazai with it. "You up for one more try, before I kick you out?"*

*Not quite a lie, just a fool's valiant attempt. There was a spot on his bedroom floor with a curled up blanket and a pillow with little fish drawn on it — a joke by Albatross' hands, Chuuya had scoffed. Fits you just fine. Dazai only walked back home when he started picking at his bandages — or when the disco-lights speakers got thrown out of the window.*

*Dazai ended up under the table, holding his lamp like a guitar; Chuuya floated in the air with a smaller one, connected to the outlet on the ceiling. They shut the curtains; one used the lamp, the other knocked on the floor — then, switch.*

*Pettiness made the process slow.*

*"Favorite. School. Trip?"*

*"Is. That. Reason. You. Learned. That. Word?"*

*"Not. Answer."*

*"What. See. D-A-N-T-E. Limbo?"*

*He went home that night, because despite his best attempts, the slide of Chuuya's eyes down his spine — a bit calculating, but in a sort of innocent way; sharp like a pocket knife, dirtier than his streets — wasn't worth the damage. He collapsed in his bed, unable to sleep.*

*In the stillness of his refuge, where no one would understand and the one person who could wasn't around, he tapped his fingers on the boy's stolen photograph.]*

Tracing *kanji* on reachable skin, because Kouyou was still insisting on the calligraphy, and they didn't speak about the way Dazai would nudge him towards the correct reading of a word; blinking codes they had made up stuck in a SUV to the *Nine Rings'* ships, because mistrusting squads were listening; titles of their least favorite Hirose Fumiko's songs, because they lacked originality in some things.

"Fourteen," Chuuya insisted, grimacing at the blood-splattered floor inside the ring.

"That's a stupid bet," he insisted, over the low barks and whines. "Seven is —"

"What do I get if I win?"

*Transactional*ity, he thought. As familiar as the hat Chuuya had stubbornly picked up again. “What do you want?”

“What would you give me?”

“What would you take?” he insisted.

A pause. “A favor.”

*Oh-oh*, Dazai thought, suddenly interested. His eyes surveyed the cage with newfound illumination; he came to a different conclusion. *And now?*

*Curiosity or pride?*, Mori questioned, with that tilt that meant he was smiling. Always amused by what he was willing to give up in the name of a quicker heartbeat.

“Fine,” Dazai concluded, loss in his pockets. He pressed two fingers on his in-ear, eyes on a man making his way through the crowd. “Get ready.”

They had studied that one specific dance down to the detail. Dazai felt no need to check around; as disliked as the two of them were, Mori never offered men who could not do their job.

It was born quietly — barely a whisper in his ear, tickling the skin of his neck. Through goosebumps, his eyes studied the dogs on the other side of the fence — the ones caged behind it, dozens, waiting for their turn. His fingers twitched around a gun that wasn’t there. The world felt taller.

Devastation came in two shapes: bullets from a rifle, and the lockets landing on the ground.

*Tainted* painted bright blood traces on the walls, gifting a terrifying background to the running shadows of the dogs and the falling jaws of the crowd. He ducked, hands in pockets, and took a flight to the buildings caging them in.

Dazai didn’t move.

The escaping crowd almost tore him off his feet, pushing at his shoulders over the sound of their own shrieks, the beasts salivating at their calves. It was all a house of cards, and the wind had woken up with vengeance in its lungs. Dazai didn’t move, and bullets began falling from the hidden men in black through the windows, never touching him.

He met the eyes of one of the dogs.

A hand was grabbing his calf, crazed eyes and scratches, begging for something he couldn’t hear. The dog was missing its right eye; it growled so viciously its entire body was shaking along with it, steps strangely controlled through the storm of its brothers in arms devouring the men who hadn’t been fast enough to escape.

The smell was intolerable. Dazai didn’t move.

*What a painful way to die*, he considered, with a bit of a whine. The dog was always under the table, no matter the polished tiles, begging for food. He would kick it with no mercy; it would smile, almost. *What a* —

“*Dazai!*”

The pain didn’t register, at first; since Mori and his lessons weren’t to be wasted, it didn’t register when he lowered his eyes to the rope whipping his wrist — an attempt to *drag* — either.

He stared at it, watching it dangle uselessly — petty in its impossibility; aiming to hurt where it could not give results. Kick, if not keep out. Dazai stepped on the man’s wrist, ran to the trash bins, and he jumped, hands around the window seals, teeth snapping at his ankles.

Natural agility did what his lacking strength couldn’t offer. By the time both his feet had landed on a protruding corner of the framing buildings, the dogs only had a defeated look to offer him — before going back to the hell under their soles, ripped off flesh and wandering viscera, wet noises over the screams.

*Nine Rings* corpses, on the ground.

A hand wrapped around his collar, pulling him forward. “Where the fuck is your gun?” Chuuya demanded, over the rumble of the massacre. Behind him, *see-not-see* silhouettes of their men studied the agonizing mess, mumbling about escape plans in his in-ear.

Dazai shrugged. One of the escaping fools had dragged their fingers down his cheek; blood was soaking his bandaid. “Left it at the Headquarters.”

“Did you *intend* to get trampled to death?”

Another shrug. He swung his legs back and forth, because he knew childishness tended to make something in Chuuya’s shoulders stiffen. “Absolutely. Where’s Mochizuki?”

Chuuya clenched his jaw. He nodded down.

It was hard to identify anyone in the maze of white, red and black — by the third round, his eyes found a familiar face, spied for hours from a balcony of the *Pearl Hotel*. Part of his jaw had been bitten off, the wrecked skin climbing all the way to his temple; the eyeball had been torn from the nerves, dangling down his cheek.

More than one dog was feasting on his ribcage — enough limbs ripped off that he couldn’t move.

He blinked. *Seven* was curled in one corner of the cage, sleeping.

“Threw himself onto the dog before I could temporarily bash his skull in,” Chuuya cursed. “Must have noticed us, somehow.”

“Impossible,” Dazai replied, distractedly. “I always know when someone is watching.”

“It has to *be* — “

He shook his head. “Something’s wrong. They can slip through our fingers once, twice — But this is a pattern. He *knows*. ”

Discomfort pulled his traits. There had been no *Soul* moments from his own hands after the first attack; he knew his muscles were tense in *wait*, still. “We’ve got a mole for sure, then?”

“Dante’s entire army is a mole,” Dazai said. He raised his fingers to his in-ear. “But, yes. *Hey, there?* All done here. Put the dogs to sleep and get the bodies to the *Under Port*. ”

No grunts or complaints appeared outwardly in his ear — but it didn’t matter much, when he could hear them in real life, even over the macabre sounds. Koda, a lonely voice, muttered a *yes, sirs*. Noguchi, drenched in red and perched like a hawk over their heads, muttered.

“Hey,” Chuuya called him, emptily. “You smell like a sack of blood. Walk along the perimeter; better if they don’t smell you from too close.”

The man blinked, taken back. “Whatever.”

One of Ace’s highest ranked women, now one of theirs — as for everyone in the organization, much to the Executives’ ticking eyelids — had taken care of bringing sedatives along. She was a green-haired thirty years old colossus, who hadn’t even blinked at the order for enough morphine to put an elephant to sleep.

Drugs in general were not Port Mafia business — Mori had refused deals that would have turned every lower rank mafioso into a billionaire. *I dislike weapons that travel too easily*, he liked to say. *Wouldn’t want our men to fall for it. Do kill them, if it happens*.

“Not so quick,” Chuuya called, as soon as he moved to slip down. “You owe me a favor.”

He curled one eyebrow. “Do I?”

With contained amusement, the boy nodded down again. His eyes found the target easily, this time around — *Fourteen* was happily munching on a wide eyed body; a few steps behind, the sleeping *Seven* had stopped moving completely.

*Nuisance*, he thought, his fingers spasming with the first electric shocks of the evening that tasted of *normality*. Vexation, annoyance, *irritation*, every similar word in the dictionary. Chuuya’s smile was the most horrid sight in this world.

“Fine,” he breathed out. *You brought this on yourself, didn’t you?* “What do you want, Slug?”

They made their way down, walking through the too distracted beasts and their meals with little fear — animals, Dazai knew very well, weren’t selfish. Still — Chuuya was entirely too confident for someone who made dogs want to tear his jugular out on sight.

His eyes followed the scene. *That would be childish*, he mused, through the already settled motions. He lowered, grabbing a fallen revolver. *This will be unbearably childish of you* —



He shot a bullet straight to *Fourteen's* head.

Chuuya, busy ordering some of their men to the SUVs, didn't even flinch. His eyes watched the pool of blood under the beast widen, as it fell forward on the corpse it was devouring; then, he looked at him.

"You know, it was easier than that," Chuuya let him know, vacantly.

"Was it?" He scratched his head with the gun.

"It wasn't about betting on the underdog. He got tased seven times in five minutes. He *would* win. He had to," He shrugged. "It wouldn't stop, otherwise."

*Childish*, the voice insisted.

"Well," Dazai concluded, making his way out of the alley. "It should thank me, then."

The woman who had gathered the sedatives was called Tsuchiya Yukio and, unsurprisingly, Chuuya knew her. She introduced herself with a half-assed bow and aggressive eyes, helping them carry the sleeping dogs inside the van that had been used to bring them.

Whoever had taken care of it, certainly didn't care about numbers. Eventually, they started stacking the bodies on top of each other.

"They'll sleep for a few hours — probably won't even be up by the time they're found," Tsuchiya warned them. "Make sure to get there fast, and leave information on the doors of the van, or the surprise is going to be — *entertaining*."

The SUVs had long since left them behind, barely offering a nod — apart from an uncomfortable Koda, who had admitted to having owned not one, but *four* dogs, before running away.

"Am I better off at the one near the HQs or the shop near the port?" Chuuya asked. *He*, of course, wasn't dirtying his hands at all, floating the dogs inside. He felt the urge to shoot another bullet. "Who's less likely to call the police?"

"The Hinata should be fine," she said. "They should do their best to get them back to a less — *murderous* state of mind."

"How do you know so much about the devils?" Dazai asked, squinting. Her features were vaguely familiar; she looked like she knew how to kill — less common than one would have believed, even in the Mafia.

"I'm a vet," she responded, refusing to meet his eye — but speaking with a stiffened ease that said she didn't quite respect him, as much as wondered what the whole *Demon Prodigy* thing was about. "My Ability gives me a certain degree of influence over the lifespan of animals — It helps control them."

Chuuya whistled. "I don't remember that from the Archives."

“My sister steals all the spotlight, I fear,” Tsuchiya slammed the doors of the van close.  
“Tsuchiya Mi. You should be familiar; she works at the Hospital.”

Dazai newly-freed from cast hand pulsed. Not meeting Tsuchiya Mi even once would have been nearly impossible — she was the most skilled doctor in the organization, thanks to her Ability-influenced tools, acquired — according to the archives — through a protector who had been an actual User.

It was an interesting story. Abilities were a mystery society accepted as normal; stories that got more complicated than a simple, *I exist and I burn for it* — they tended to grab his attention.

*If I cut off my finger, he had once mused to Mori, and stick it somewhere Chuuya won't notice, do you think he'll go crazy trying to understand why his Ability isn't working?*

“A doctor and a vet?” Dazai echoed. “Mommy and Daddy must be proud. Chibi, hurry, or I’m leaving you here.”

Tsuchiya didn’t speak again until the two of them were settled in the booth of the van, Chuuya’s foot pressing the accelerator. Dazai wanted to question if his sporadic driving lessons meant he could drive a van around; he was still deciding if putting the seat belt on was wise or not, when the woman knocked on his window.

“Was the mission successful?” she asked.

Refusing to meet Chuuya’s eyes, he replied: “No mission is successful until the war is over. This is the Port Mafia.”

“And you think you can end the war?”

“I enjoy war quite a lot. Ending it would be a pity.”

“If you want another speech, you’ll have to wait for tomorrow,” Chuuya intervened, slightly annoyed. “Not that they seem to work much. Say, how many from Ace’s side are thinking of putting another a bomb under our car?”

“We have an ongoing bet,” Dazai explained.

Tsuchiya munched on her lips, hesitating. With a sigh, she offered: “You’re young. You’ve got a position that’s never even been a *thing*, before. They will never accept you.”

“See, that’s a common mistake,” Dazai settled his legs on the dashboard, searching inside the box. He lit up one cigarette, attempting to keep the coughs in. “We don’t really care about your acceptance. You’ll just learn to do as we say.”

Chuuya scoffed, but didn’t comment.

The *Hinata Veterinary Hospital* was predictably closed; the neon lights depicting a stylized dog and cat, surrounded by happy kids, were still on though — intermittently raining on the sidewalk.

He didn't move a finger as he watched the boy hurry to scribble down a note on a flier, and stick it between the doors of the van. "I still think it would be funnier to leave it here with no explanation," he huffed, playing Hopscotch on the sidewalk.

"Shut up."

"Just imagine," he insisted. "You see a van. You think, *oh*, what could it be? You go and open it and — *surprise!* A furious herd of devil-sent beasts jumps you. You're covered in blood. You're dying. Your intestine is on the floor. Everyone is happy."

Pausing, the boy glanced his way. Tentatively: "Are you absolutely *sure* you haven't watched *101 Dalmatians*?"

"You do know they'll put them down, yes?"

"Not necessarily," Chuuya replied. "Some of them are young, and a good breed. They could retrain them, if the blood doesn't turn them into cowards."

Dazai leaned on the doors, batting his eyelashes. "Truly a puppy-oriented Charon, partner."

"I don't care if they put them down. Better than a bullet. They've met enough assholes for four lifetimes," He glared. "And don't call me partner."

"I sincerely don't get your complex. We *agreed* on collaborating. I lowered myself to your level!"

"*Partner* sucks. There are so many options."

"Like *what*?"

Chuuya seemed sort of lost. "*Uh*. Colleague. Comrade. Brother in arms."

"The Mafia is not a corporation," Dazai listed off, "Very communist-sounding. And if you were my brother, I would snap my own neck."

"What do you have against communism?"

"Nothing. Of course the street kid would say that."

"*Excuse me?*"

"I'm not discussing geopolitical matters with you," Dazai hushed him, waving. "You learned to write eight months ago, or something. I'm *not* doing that. And *partners* it is, get used to it."

"You want adoption papers, along with that rainbow scenario in your mind?"

"I'm relieved you finally seem to understand your lost bet made you my dog for life, but —"

“I’m too tired to walk home, so I’m stealing that car,” Chuuya announced, the two fingers he stuck to his forehead as effective as if they had pinched his lips. “And then I’m running you over with it.”

Dazai fired a bullet into the surveillance camera upon the *Clinic*. He didn’t stay to watch it break — he skipped his way to the red car whose window Chuuya had already unapologetically shattered, kicking the side of his shoes to get him to hurry.

They paused.

Swiftly, Dazai moved to the other side of the car, holding the boy’s seemingly uncaring gaze over the hood. He laid his chin on his hand over it; tapped, as he said: “I still don’t get the hype around a movie with that many dogs. *Hundreds*, seriously?”

Chuuya hummed. “That’s because you’ve got some serious case of loose boots in the head.”

“Who told you that?”

“You don’t look very stable.”

Gloved fingers knocked on the hood — thrice. Dazai put his fingers on the trigger of the gun.

They appeared from nowhere — arguably, the worst hiding place. By the time one of the men had jumped on Chuuya’s shoulders, slamming a hand on his mouth, Dazai had already shot him in the shoulder.

The shadows behind him solidified — he stood still, forcing his heels to perceive the goosebumps down his spine as a non-reactors factor. The ground shook and lit up, embracing his pursuer body — Chuuya’s hand crashed onto the car hood, sending him flying to the other end of the street — digging a hole in the wall right next to the *Clinic*.

The sound of bones echoed through the silence of the night — Dazai studied their faces, recognizing them from the rows that were supposed to be at the *Under Port*, feeding their enemies to the oblivion.

He slid over the roof, landing on Chuuya’s side, right as the man he had shot gasped under the viciousness of the redhead’s shoe sinking in the wound. “Seriously? Just *two men*?”

“We’re doing something wrong,” Chuuya said, disappointed. He dug deeper; the man screamed. Dazai slammed his shoe in his open mouth. “Noguchi thinks he can take us down with just two sons of a bitch. We are *definitely* doing something wrong.”

“Not even a bomb,” he whined.

“Not even a good *fight*,” he sighed. “And we’re at the seventeenth attempt.”

“I *told you* we should kill him.”

“Killing them won’t get them to obey,” he replied — same old argument. “We will just have less men. And we’ve already lost enough.”

“It worked just fine with the *Secret Force*. ”

“Did it?” His attacker had left a scratch down his cheek, trying to hold on after being shot. *Matching*, Dazai thought, feeling his hand tickle. Was Arahabaki there — in the few drops down his skin? *I’m not going to kill you*. “Has your dear squad done anything to get the others to listen to you? Or have they just gotten braver, now that more are contesting you?”

Dazai sunk a finger in Chuuya’s cheek, where a drop of blood was. “Look at you, all strategic. I could sob from the second hand embarrassment.”

His hand was snapped away with a sharply canine growl.

“The Port Mafia protocol is *don’t get found*, ” Dazai reminded the man under his shoe, as Chuuya boredly climbed into the car. “You’re alive, so you *are* Port Mafia, still. You can either pick up you and your friend and fix this mess, or you can stay here and die. If we get notified by our policemen, I will kill you. Yes?”

The man didn’t answer. After a kick to the side, he whimpered a *yes*.

“And tell Noguchi to try harder,” he added, slipping into the car. “If we have to witness his slow descent into madness and betrayal, I would *at least* like for it to be entertaining. He could have stolen some morphine and put us to sleep; Tsuchiya would have hardly noticed. We could be knocked out on the brink of death, right now,” Dazai sighed.

Chuuya’s hand pressed on the horn, making him jump. “If you could *stop* giving the enemy ideas, fucking moron?”

“We’re all Port Mafia,” he muttered, closing his door. “There are no enemies. Just bad children. Go to the left.”

“The HQs are in the opposite direction.”

“Well. I’m hungry.”

A glare. “I’m not buying your lazy ass dinner.”

“I’m sure you will reconsider,” Dazai reassured him, encouraging, patting his hand. “For now, let’s go *exploring*. ”

“Depends,” Suspicion bloomed all over his face. “Are you going to purposefully get us lost?”

“The plan is more to drive myself off a cliff, but you’re here, so,” He shrugged, sliding down the seat. “I know every corner of this city. I know you do, too.”

“I won the damn bet,” he mumbled — pulling the skin under his chin, for good measure.

By the time they managed to reach a diner, the sun had turned the sky into a golden fleece, curling orange at the seams and blinding their tired eyes. They had growled through every alley and climbed every undrivable street, though, arguing over video games and destroying

two corners of the car. They barely managed to sit down and exchange their plates when ordered — when Dazai made one dog comment too much, Chuuya clenched his hands around the edge of the table too hard; and some drunken man in the further table called for a fight.

They were kicked out — between broken windows shards, a crying College-age waiter, and leaving soy stains on the tiles — and banned from ever coming back to *Momo's Diner*.

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### **One week and six days prior to the funeral.**

There was blood on his hands. He scratched away another name from Chuuya's wall.

Ace had refused to ask them for help, which wasn't *weird*, on its own. Still, one of his men was the next suspect on their list, so they quietly followed that large portion of *volunteers* from their ranks. It was simple enough: protect the cargoes making their way to the port until they actually boarded — make sure the *Nine Rings* wouldn't try to sabotage one of the most important deals of the year.

There was an issue that was — in Dazai's opinion — at the root of most complications his and Chuuya's partnership had. In the end, it was easy enough: Dazai found the — short lived, *yes*, but *real* — demise of the Port Mafia terribly entertaining to watch.

"They have to learn that they need us," he explained, sinking his nails in Chuuya's wrist to keep him from joining the brawl on the street. One of the cargoes had already been blown up; *GSS* and the *Nine Rings* were on their way to the others. "They have to learn to *ask* us to win this for them."

"This trade is important," Chuuya hissed. He could have freed himself from his grasp, though, if he really wanted to — that was how Dazai knew he understood. Perhaps, one simply didn't want to fail at ruling twice in a lifetime. "We're going to lose a good chunk of payment."

"And Ace's going to *beg* us for aid," he replied. "And every *volunteer* who went with him will be under our command, once again. Think of the irony."

Dazai was fairly good at his job — his predictions came true. A hit was planned on trains transporting *GSS* weapons, for a few days later; the mission was left in their hands.

From behind closed doors, they listened. Mori asked Ace: “Say, why not recruit them?”

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### **One week and four days prior to the funeral.**

There was blood on his hands. He scratched away another name from Chuuya’s wall.

“This *Dante* you talk about — He is playing with you,” Mori concluded, hands behind his back, walking gentle steps up and down the red carpet of his office. “I’m surprised you would let him.”

“Respectfully, sir,” Chuuya intervened, the two of them still kneeling. “Neither party is enjoying the game.”

“Then you must have a solution, I presume?”

Dazai knew what was going to leave his lips, so he pinched his side. The chances that Mori hadn’t noticed were low, but he kept his eyes on the ground and his weight on one leg, and pretended not to see Chuuya’s gaze on him. They were making their stumbling way through several more languages, but none would ever be clearer than *that*.

“You didn’t *tell him either?*” was the boy’s question, as soon as they left. “Are you *mental?*”

“Why are we taking the stairs?” he complained, breathless, hands on his knees. “The elevator was right there. It’s so many floors. It’s a *skyscraper* .”

“Don’t change the subject,” Chuuya insisted. Although, like he had been doing for a while, *he* was the one who changed the elevator subject.

Dazai had thought about inquiring on his sudden penchant for climbing — had considered suggesting a few more trips to the gym instead of that herculean torture. But that could have brought some questions about *why*, exactly, Dazai himself followed him. “Mori doesn’t know that Dante — He doesn’t know about me?”

“Scream it, why don’t you,” he muttered. “*Of course* he doesn’t. He’s the last person who should know it. Did you want him to lock you up with Q? You said it yourself. You’re a walking bomb.”

“He’s the *Boss*. You can’t just lie to the *Boss*, he’s gonna kill you —“

“Well, I’m the boss of *you*, so I forbid you from telling him.”

Predictably, Chuuya kicked his side. “You’re not! You’re *so* not —“

They went on, fighting some more and guiding some men who didn’t trust them and watching their loose leads kill themselves in front of them. Dazai thought he could see the realization neither of them wanted to linger on, hanging in the space between their curling hands and new languages.

Still, the seesaw stood.

At night, ripping the corners of his stolen photograph — just to be *petty*; to remind himself he could return it whenever he wanted — he didn’t think about what reasons he might have had for not wanting Mori to take a bomb away from his hands.

Dazai, he reminded the shadows on his metal walls, had never denied wanting to die.

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**One week and two days prior to the funeral.**

There was blood on his hands. He scratched away another name from Chuuya’s wall.

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**Seven days prior to the funeral.**

Chuuya dragged him by the hair, gloves soaked and arms pushing against the waves, landing the two of them on the riverbank with a coughing curse.



“Next time,” he threatened, starfishing next to him on the muddy grass, staring at the sun as if it would personally extract the water from his lungs, “I’m putting rocks in your pockets.”

The sky was devastatingly clear — the blue of a gem interrupted by the one blinding spot, making his head spin. Dazai was soaked in uncomfortable places; too dry all the way inside his skull, like a failed baptism.

The rumble of passing cars on the highway shook the ground; he held onto the grass, strangely — burning.

*[It was a last resort plan, for one of the last pieces of paper hanging from Chuuya’s roof. Undoubtedly — if the barely contained enthusiasm and the lack of a reaction to Dazai’s taunting about the milk in his fridge meant anything — it was a plan the other boy was looking forward to.]*

*Either that, or he just had a thing for stars.*

*The Yokohama Observatory And Astrophysics Museum rested at a fifteen minutes car ride from the outskirts of the city, in the middle of wild grass and old highways. There had been no need to bring any of Mori’s men along, and they would have certainly been more useful in the city — nonetheless, Noguchi had led five mafiosi in their direction, with accusations of secret business on his lips.*

*“Maybe you were right about killing him,” Dazai watched Chuuya mutter, hiding behind a twelve feet tall reproduction of Saturn, as the boy’s side bleed into his gloved hand.*

*The shootout had dragged all the tourists out in a screaming marathon, and the alarms had yet to stop blaring. He wasn’t sure if the Nine Rings squad had found out about their trip, or just followed the mafiosi’s clumsy chase to their own mission — he did know Noguchi had almost stopped breathing from a stray bullet, and that Chuuya had pushed him to the side.*

*“Fucking morons,” he was saying, between teeth. He had been pulling Dazai by the wrist right as it was happening; the bullet had easily grazed his ungodly skin — not getting stuck, at the very least. “Fucking idiots. Is the woman gone?”*

*Dazai lowered his head as a bullet flew by. Noguchi was directing the shoot-out much better, now that his eyes were stuck in the widened astonishment of watching Chuuya scream, go, you fool, at him.*

*“She threw herself from the balcony of the fourth floor,” he let him know, voice rough, fighting his skin to get out. His eyes found the splattered frame of Professor Hinata in the middle of the floor; he forced out: “Bounced onto the Earth statue, I’m pretty sure — No other way of losing her head. Oh. There it is.”*

*The lifeless skull rolled their way, right as some screaming fool barreled behind their hidden spot, his rifle shooting in quick succession. Chuuya didn’t even raise his eyes or pause his cursing — kicking his leg so high from the ground it formed an angle, stopping the bullets on impact; then, sending them back.*

*“Whatever,” he snapped, inconvenienced. “We need to get out of here. Can we kill them and be done with it?”*

*Dazai tried to sense disappointment in his tone. He had been yapping around pretty pathetically the whole day — jumping from stargazing spot to stargazing spot like an overly excited child, armed with knives from teeth to toes; he hadn’t even pretended not to gape at the Dark Room with the universe projections they had been supposed to find the Professor in.*

*He had had to pull him away, eventually, once his neck had started to break from being tilted. Venus and Uranus had painted his silhouette in bright colors; he had been only slightly more interested in the signs than in the Professor’s absent smiles.*

*Now, he was bleeding on a fresco of the Milky Way. Dazai shrugged. “Yeah, we’re done here.”*

*A boring matter — escaping. He slid down to steal fallen bullets; blindly threw them in the air, not even waiting to check if Chuuya would jump in the right spot to grab them. The blur of a solved business and some ancient astrophysicists’ statues ran across his eyelids, weighing down bones that hadn’t slept in three days, and spent all of those days near Mori’s intertwined hands.*

*Dazai was never really tired. Sometimes, though — occasional enough to never enter Mori’s notes — he was quiet.*

*“Sir,” one of Noguchi’s men snapped, clearly aggravated, once silence had fallen, almost slipping on the fresh blood from the fallen Nine Rings. “Sir, this isn’t right —” Dazai wiped dust from his coat, thinking about the ripped pages Chuuya had hung in his room, “Forgive my words, Dazai, but Executive Kouyou wanted them alive, they were direct orders — they need more prisoners to —”*

*He cocked his gun and shot him in the head.*

*The man fell abruptly, without a gasp; Dazai was scarcely reminded of Elise’s complaints that killing on TVs never looked like the one she had witnessed. It had been quiet before; it suddenly got quieter.*

*“Words not forgiven,” he concluded. He nodded to the remaining mafiosi, petrified. Noguchi’s nostrils were flaring. Dazai only met his eyes. “Let this be a lesson on appropriate intervention, yes?”]*

*“Oh,” Dazai heard his throat push out. Spring was at the door; the wind was freezing, nonetheless. He realized, rather abruptly, *impolitely*, that he didn’t exactly remember how he had ended up in the river — he had been inside a car, he was sure. Not speaking, but still — seated. Breathing. Corporeal.*

*The asphalt had burned one side of his chest. He must have jumped out. He wasn’t sure of why he had been followed; it had been painful.*

It had felt —

His ribs were soaked too. They pressed against his lungs; spread and tightened, pierced the skin until Chuuya's curses and spats were a background issue. He had floated rather peacefully. His throat had been filled with water. There had been no need to speak at all. It had felt —

"Oi," Brusque in nature; hands always covered, even as they caged his malfunctioning rib cage from the front and the back, pushing him to sit up. The river was right there, floating aimlessly between ripples and pollution. Its trace on his flesh was the realest thing around. "You're fine, idiot."

*I am*, he didn't lie, because Mori had trained him for this, even if he had never realized. Dazai knew when his body was betraying him; knew better than to let anyone else perceive his fist against a traitor.

And yet, it had felt —

"*Alright*, no," Chuuya snapped, pushing him to the ground again, right an *inch* of an instant before he could throw his body over the riverbank again. *Again*, he called, *again, again*. The moment he felt him fight back, his grip became less of a push and more of an outward *wrestling*. "I'm not fucking dealing with — *Hey!*"

"Think you can manage not to be a problem for *ten minutes?*" Dazai snarled, as they rolled around the disgusting grass, kicking and punching and looking at the rushing waves as if they would come alive to help him.

"Think you can manage not to be a *freak* for ten minutes?" Chuuya snapped, crashing his head against the ground. Dazai bit him in the arm, where his jacket had been ripped; he cursed out, kneeling him right between the legs. "Fucking piece of fucking bandaged *shit!*"

"You suck," he whined. The fresh water was a siren; the silence and the compressed lungs and the *fear*; deep into his bones, urging him to swim up, to long for — "You *suck*."

In a distant portion of his brain — as faraway as the riverbank slowly got, as their brawling dragged them further and further away; Dazai's reaching hands impossibly useless compared to Chuuya's — he felt Chuuya's blood stick to his clothes.

"I told you," Dazai panted, backing away with his arms stretched, once they managed to climb to their feet. The boy was caging him in — the feeling of a cornered beast in an alley made him grin, *almost* — except his face pulsed. He walked to the side, slow, attempting to escape, and said: "This *partners* thing needs to have some ground rules."

"We are *not*," Chuuya snapped, charging him like a bull, "*Fucking partners!*"

The landing was so hard on his nape that the world spun without mercy — he could only kick his feet and whine and throw as many insults as his throat allowed, each sound so heavily distant from his own control it was an outer body experience, as the boy grabbed him by the legs, mercilessly pulling him to the road.

*Childish*, Dazai considered, but he wasn't sure of which one of them he was meant to insult. He knew aggravation worked, most times, so he kept it on — not really sure of what the result was meant to be.

*But it works*, his never delirious mind assured. *It always works, so it's fine.*

He dragged him all the way to a laundromat on the other end of that portion of empty highway, only hurling back insults at him when his whines grew louder in tone and purpose. Even there, once Chuuya let go of him, he took his good time kicking against the floor, lamenting the horrible circumstances inside his wet clothes.

The laundromat was small and rusty, lacking any life outside of the two of them. Empty dishwashers creaked sporadically, in tandem with the flickering light panels on the ceiling. Chuuya wasted no time and no hesitation removing his clothes, scouting inside the free clothing box in bright red underwear.

“Done with the temper tantrum?” he simply asked, when he saw him loudly drag his feet to the rows of dishwashers. The cold had started to settle in his bones; if he could have torn his flesh off his skeleton, he would have. He didn't know if the two were related.

“You're one of Mori's spies,” Dazai accused. “He sent a dog to sniff out my attempts, so he can sit in his *stupid* chair and do his *stupid* paperwork and *lie* about his promise.”

Chuuya offered him a glance over his shoulder, pressing an obscene amount of tissues to the bleeding scratch on his side. The brawl couldn't have helped; his dirty glare assured it. “Promise?”

He sighed, tormented, falling on the ground again to watch the boy's clothes spin. “He'll find me something that will kill me as painlessly as possible. He didn't *swear on it*, but he wasn't smiling — And it's Mori. Elise pinky promised me in his name.”

“*Uh-uh*,” Skepticism painted his tone. “Then why did you just try to off yourself?”

“Because he's taking so *long*.”

“You're his favorite little soldier,” He shrugged, eyeing the bite mark on his arm with a grimace. “I can't see him helping you snap your own neck.”

“Too bad,” Dazai replied, darkly. “He has to.”

“You know,” he commented, clearly disgusted — and wasn't *that* something to stare at. “If I didn't know you're too lazy to keep it up without cause, I'd assume you're just too into the bit to let go of it now.”

“Don't ever underestimate my motivations.”

“You don't have *motivations*. You have plans.”

“Is there a difference?”

“I don’t care,” Chuuya said, very honestly. “I think the way you treat life is absolutely revolting. I just refuse to deal with your paperwork. Die where I’m not a witness.”

He scoffed. “I intend to.”

“Good.”

“*Good.*”

The lights flickered some more. Stubbornly, he refused to undress.

“What’s with the stars, anyway?” he muttered.

Chuuya, sitting upon the driers in stolen clothes — certainly in the middle of informing Kouyou of their irritating detour, given his annoyed *pulling* at the angel-shaped phone charm — curled an eyebrow. “What?”

He tried to blow some hair off his forehead; they were too wet to move. The bandages were the worst part of it; Dazai never *regretted* any attempt, but he did regret the consequences of failure.

“The astronomy book pages in your room,” he listed off. “Your dog tail wagging at the Observatory. Are you planning to do everybody a favor and desert to become an astronaut?”

“Fuck you,” Chuuya said, almost distractedly. His skin was littered in scratches Dazai didn’t really recall giving him — he tried to recall the moment he had grabbed him and broken the river surface, but couldn’t. He tried to imagine him driving away with an open car door and not a care in the world.

“I thought *Physics* was your thing.”

“Astrophysics *is* Physics, asshole,” He shrugged, shoulders closing in on himself — a cornered animal; no weapon in sight but his own need to give blame to his own thoughts. “The night sky was the first thing I saw.”

Dazai watched the dishwasher spin. He tried to imagine it, painted through the valleys of wet clothes — a crater of ruins and ashes, echoing in children’s cries and creaking bones, illuminated by nothing but merciful stars. Hands, pale from a life under lab lights, digging through maceries Arahaki hadn’t been kind enough to move for them. Blue eyes settling on the infinite of a devastation they had birthed.

“Did it look beautiful?” he asked.

Chuuya had had no way to follow his train of thought. Nonetheless, with the same careless he reserved for all that touched him deeper, he said: “It all does when you’ve made it. Then you change your mind.”

His lips twitched.

*Calling me a freak*, he thought about saying.

“If only *No Longer Human* could be turned off,” Dazai sighed, again, climbing to his feet. “I don’t think I would mind *death by religious weirdo’s Limbo* too much. It might just be very peaceful.”

A blink. His shoulder blades attempted to dig holes into the wall of dishwashers, feet slipping down fallen detergent and never-cleaned tiles; Chuuya’s face appeared so close to his that it tickled his nose, the boy’s grasp around his shirt collar unmerciful.

“Do you know,” Chuuya questioned, showing his teeth, “Just how many of our men have died since this shitshow began?”

“Speak your truth,” Dazai encouraged. He still had his few inches of height advantage like this. It was strangely satisfying. “Do I know that *you* might die in the name of this farce, and me — the ungrateful moron whose demise you’ll *have to* explain, one day — might just survive it all and waste it?”

His eyes tightened into two unmatching lines. He wondered if the burned one ever hurt; if when *Corruption* had taken over, he had seen the world more clearly with it — if he had seen something *worth it*. If it had been disappointing enough to keep his hands in his pockets. “Not everything is about you.”

“Not everything is about your guilt either,” he informed.

Chuuya stiffened.

Behind his legs, the dishwasher keeping his clothes trapped let out a *ding!*

“It is, for you,” Chuuya concluded. His disdain was tactile; the *something* under it was locked away with enough precision that even Dazai’s lock pick fingers couldn’t find it. He tried to pretend the urge to dig into his ribcage and scoop the viscera out to find it was normal; tried to imagine *understanding*. “Or you wouldn’t be pulling at it all the time.”

He let go of him; fixed the baggy pants and shirt he had worn in a hurry, muttering when he found the blooming blood near his hip. Dazai didn’t move.

“It’s like Dante said, I think,” he offered, eyes to the light panels. “Somebody needs to decide what the appropriate consequences are.”

“I’m not a consequence,” Chuuya informed.

“We all are.”

“To *your* plans? To Boss’? The *former* Boss? Rimbaud’s, Verlaine’s, Beatrice’s?” He threw his head back in a humorless laugh; stuck his hair under his hat like it was a job. Dazai thought about his pillow on his floor; tried to match it with the contempt in the eyes he kept laying on him. His first memory — his hands pushing the water out of his chest.

“I’ve got no intention to live like that,” Chuuya let him know. “Constantly wondering whose game I’m playing. I have my morals. I have my rules. I’m surviving this, and when I become Executive, I’m getting Elise to double up your pinky promise.”

“How kind,” Dazai commented. He wondered what he had done with all the objects *The Owner* would never receive; if Mori had already played his affectionate card for the *Old World*. If he was mourning again. “Somewhat stupidly idealistic, too.”

They held each other’s stares, silent.

*Temporary association*, he considered. He could hear Mori chuckle in the background. Stupidly, crazily idealistic — believing the game could be escaped by pure strength of will. Believing Mori hadn’t *seen* something the first time they had been surrounded by the valley of a massacre, endlessly intertwined, endlessly fighting against it — believing he would simply live on, accepting to never see it again.

“Ten tickets at the Arcade if you manage to flood this place with a single move,” Dazai wagered, at last.

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#### **Four days prior to the funeral.**

The *Pomegranate* was, not unlike its Madame, disturbingly good at hiding dirt under the carpet.

It was a Japanese architecture fanatic’s dream structure, and no one had changed it once since it had been built — a block of nature and custom in the middle of the maze of skyscrapers in one of the best areas of Yokohama. No one had ever, as far as Dazai’s memory and the archives went, referred to that cage of perpetually singing women as a *brothel*.

No dirt, no suffering faces. Beautiful women with a graceful sort of composure, smiling as soon as their eyes met.

Rather hard to see that happen from the vents.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” Chuuya snapped, crunched down where the grates of Dazai’s current stop appeared in some indistinct room. The hems of kimonos and dusty boxes surrounded him; he assumed the vents had landed him in a backroom.

“What are *you* doing here?” he hissed. “Your schedule said you had to lead *Team 56* to the assault near Chinatown —“

“How do you — *What?* ”

“You should come up with better passwords, if you don’t want your business to be found. All thirteen of them were exceptionally easy to guess. Good job on adding ten more, though,” Dazai waved the matter away. “If you *could*? I have a *Soul* to kidnap.”

A pause.

Chuuya stuck his fingers in the grates, pulling it out with such violence, he wasn’t sure if *Tainted* had done anything at all. Dazai squeaked as he was pulled out by his tie, flagging his arms out to hit back.

“Only one *Soul* left on my damn wall,” the boy threatened, on his feet, standing over his fetal body, “And you’re playing the lonely game? *Now*? You said you were still planning out —“

“I’ve come to the conclusion that *perhaps* — you bring bad luck to my otherwise ineccepibile success rate,” Dazai interrupted him, crossing his arms, eyes to the ceiling, stubborn. “I wanted to prove my theory.”

Chuuya stared at him.

When his foot came flying down between his legs, Dazai barely managed to roll away, grabbing onto the nearest object in that barely breathable space — a photo album of sorts — and throwing it to his face. “Bad dog!” he cried. “You lied *too*. Why are you *here*!”

Calling the tint up the boy’s ears a *blush* would have been rather dramatic. Chuuya didn’t get *awkward* about things; even less did he get embarrassed. He was too endlessly careless to. Still, he cleared his throat, and blurted out a: “I’m helping out one of the girls.”

Dazai stared at him.

It was only surprise that allowed him to almost — *almost*, but still *too close* for Nakahara Chuuya, the Port Mafia’s future greatest — hit the middle of the boy’s forehead with a second object — a half empty, clearly expired detergent, this time.

“*Bad dog*!” he echoed, desperate. “You found a suicide companion before *me*?”

“*What*?” Chuuya shrieked, a voice creaking splutter. The detergent had landed in his hands, he blinked at it, squinting. “*These* were the prices, back in the day? They’re fucking robbing us these days —“

Dazai could have cried. “You have an issue.”

“I don’t have any —“

“You have a *real* issue, and you need to —“

A crowd of giggles passed behind the door, a small interruption in an otherwise melodical song. The undeterred, deafeningly hypnotizing hum of female voices had disappeared in the background after a few minutes there — once he noticed it again, it was impossible for his ears not to follow along.



They measured each other, rats in a cage. In the end, with an exasperated sigh, Chuuya pursed his lips — whistling a short tune.

*Truce?*

Dazai sighed even deeper.

*[“Birds?” Chuuya asked, frowning at the search page on the laptop, bathing The Alley in bluish light. The twelve-hours-and-seventeen-minutes long video hadn’t started yet, but the stitched picture was that of a cartoon seagull waving at the screen. “Why birds?”]*

*“I like birds,” Dazai shrugged, because if he said so, then Chuuya would despise them on principle. “They’re ugly. They defecate on people. Did you know they have bags inside their body that they can fill with air, in case their lungs aren’t enough?”*

*“You want us to go around imitating birds,” he insisted, “To communicate?”*

*It wasn’t even the weirdest proposition for codes they’d come up with in the pauses of their war-directing — if anything, they were coming up with more than were needed, desperate to one up each other for the most outrageous idea.*

*Dazai pushed his own shoulder against his. “Just think about how annoying it would be. I know for a fact that Hirotsu hates whistling. We can make it a bet — who manages to make him snap at us first.”*

*Competition did to his unmatching eyes what a particularly adept painter could do to the ugliest son in a family picture. Squinting at him, he promised: “You’ve already lost, shitty Dazai. I can imitate up to twenty different species of birds.”*

*“Wow,” he sighed, unimpressed. “You really were bored in the Sheep, weren’t you?”]*

Dazai huffed, settling straighter against the abandoned boxes. “What kind of help?”

“The *asshole client* kind of,” Chuuya replied, as if it was a code he was supposed to understand. He knew for a fact Kouyou wouldn’t approve of his presence there — given she had hushed him away from the gates more than once, muttering about, *not any place for children* — and he wondered if it was an order he refused to obey. “What kind of *Soul*?”

“Not sure,” he admitted. “I do know he’s the side piece of one of the women here. Apparently, he’s the brother of a faithful patron, who has no idea his favorite client is head over heels for his — Why are you looking at me like that?”

Chuuya might as well have swallowed a lemon. He opened his hands, as if tempted to choke the life and the story out of him; ended up breathing very deeply from his nostrils.

“Furata Yoko,” he said. “The chick. Yes?”

He blinked. “Seriously?”

“She wants me to kill a *faithful patron* for her,” he confirmed, kicking the wall. “Apparently, the man has been crazy obsessed with her for years. His brother and her have a secret thing going on — he has currently hit the jackpot, and he’s about to buy her out of the *Pomegranate*.”

“And we can assume the jackpot is the pay that *the Poet* offers to uncertain possible clients?”

A huff. “We can assume.”

Silence stretched out, lulled by the hymns.

“Well,” Dazai concluded. “I suppose she might just have to lose them both, then. Pity. Perhaps, it will make her more amenable towards a double suicide!”

Planning was a quiet thing, curling inside his brain and racing to his fingers — to be traced on reachable sides of Chuuya’s body, as the boy snuck them out of the backroom. Before they could cross the threshold, one of the thrown photo albums was hit by the light of the interior gardens, showing off the set of pictures dangling from the open pages.

“That’s —“ Dazai blinked.

“Ane-san,” Chuuya concluded, sounding as if the words had never left his mouth before then.

A much younger, much more severe Kouyou Ozaki was looking straight into the camera, leaning on the edge of a fountain. Her kimono was a darker shade of pink than her preferred shade; her hair was pinned up on her neck, wild strands framing intent eyes.

Her gaze lacked something distinctively *hers* — something gracefully resigned.

“I think it was his album,” Chuuya said, as he leaned down to pick it up. Picture after picture, she was there — devouring an apple pie with braced teeth; pulling a boy, a few years older, towards a street graffiti; tilting her head to study the pouty, blond girl next to her. “Kanechi. And that must be Beatrice.”

“Pretty sure she took some of the pictures,” he replied. A younger Beatrice was staring at something out of the camera, framed by the blinding sunrise — unlike most pictures in that collection, she hardly looked *angry*.

“She was pretty,” He scrunched up his nose, seemingly disturbed by a photograph of the young Executive wearing a pair of sunglasses.

Dazai clicked his tongue. “All women are pretty. But don’t let her hear you say you used the past tense for her,” He paused. “Chuuya, did you have a plan to get rid of your woman’s tormentor?”

“*Huh?* Yeah, I was —“

“Scratch it. Come with me.”

The boy spluttered.

“What in God’s good, execrated name,” a too familiar voice questioned, behind their stumbling frames, right when Dazai had begun to grow confident in his plan, “Do you boys think you’re doing?”

“Keep walking,” Dazai encouraged.

“There’s no fucking way you actually believe that is going to work,” Chuuya hissed back, despite only speeding up their descent down the corridor. The hems of their stolen kimonos caught under their feet; when they almost bumped against a passing woman, Dazai offered his best high pitched apology.

“Don’t *do that*, you *buffoon* — “

“We,” he whispered, singing, “Are supposed to blend in.”

“She’s already seen us!”

“There’s no way she recognized us from —“

A luminescent blade sliced the air, mere inches from their naked throats. Chuuya pushed him back so fast he landed against the wall, losing his balance on the wooden sandals — when he fell with a squeak, he pulled on the boy’s ankle before he could run, landing him on the floor.

Towering upon them, shouldered by *Golden Demon* and her blank-faced ire, Kouyou crossed her arms, smiling with all the anger of a block of ice.

“Well,” she offered, with a tone that spoke of doubling up the calligraphy lessons she had promised, following her house fire. “Dare I say, Chuuya, dear — Purple isn’t quite your color.”

Finding clothes hadn’t been hard — none of the doors in the courtesan house had keys, and there was an abundance of colorful fabric to pick from.

The *obi* of Dazai’s green, female-model kimono was too high, and the lack of *hakama* was a strange change from the New Year’s parties where Mori had forced traditional clothing on him — but he thought, despite the lankiness and stubborn bones, he had done a good enough job, between that and the wig.

“We’re just —” he said, easily, “Taking advantage of the wonders of childhood.”

“Isn’t that nice.”

“Ane-san,” Chuuya intervened, pushing the sides of the too-grown kimono, struggling to stand. The golden flowers sewn on his collar matched his eye; the flower piece holding his hair left his face devoid of unruly strands, rendering it *too* naked. “Listen.”

“I am,” she assured. “I cannot *wait* to hear your explanation for this. All those times I begged you to let me play dress up with you, and you *refused* — “

“Except you don’t exactly have a right to ask for an explanation,” Dazai intervened, mourning that story. He stood as gracefully as he could, blowing hair out of his lipstick-sticky mouth. Proudly, he recited: “*All and any members of the organization are required to allow Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuuya to proceed as they judge best.*”

Kouyou stared him down — still smiling. “You truly want me to believe this is about the *Nine Rings*. ”

“You have no idea,” Chuuya muttered. “How about this — Ten days of non-complain obedience in your assistance if you pretend you never saw us?”

“Tempting,” she admitted, waving her hand to vanish *Golden Demon*. “But you’re already a pearl of obedience, dear. And you two *know* you’re not allowed in here. Not as visitors; not as clients —“ Her smile cracked. “Most certainly not as *workers*. ”

“Can’t two boys have some semblance of fun?” Dazai insisted. “These are stressful days, you know? The battlefield grows tormenting even for — *Hey!*”

“Blood isn’t a good look on any sleeves. Particularly, not ones in my service,” the woman let him know, patting down the side of his kimono with attentive hands. “You better hope this isn’t from my girls — *Commander in chief*. ”

“Of course not,” Chuuya intervened. His head piece had begun falling to the side, despite the little effort; murdering Mihara Gouta had hardly taken *any* effort, given his drunken, nonchalant stance on the bed he had been watching them approach from. “You’re the one who doesn’t want any dirt on your grounds, aren’t you? Only the respectable kind of assholes —“

“Language, little god.”

“ — and it’s not even the first time I’ve helped you out with that.”

“No,” Kouyou conceded. “Just the first time you have required the aid of such cute looks. *Ah*, look at you —“ She let go of Dazai’s clothes, moving to pinch both of Chuuya’s cheeks, despite his protests, under the giggles of the singing women passing by. With a clenched-teeth smile, she added: “First time you require assistance, too!”

“Chuuya is training me,” Dazai lied, easily. The boy’s head snapped to him. “I’ve decided to trust his dog instincts, for once, and accept that his street days might have taught him some — very few — moves I —“ He swallowed around his pleasant grin. “ — *lack*. ”

“Two boys as cute as you?” she cooed, not quite *touching* Dazai, but patting his head gingerly. “If you went around like this more often, wouldn’t it be so nice? You will grow soon, you know? You won’t be so adorable for much longer.”

“Field training is the best option,” Chuuya insisted, muffled by the pull. He raised his arms, as if to slap her hands away — stopped at the last moment, resuming to simply shriek: “*Can you quit that?*”

“We’re done here, anyway,” he concluded. “The little speck of dirt has already been taken care of. In a better world, you would thank us for it.”

*[Mihara Pao was a tall man with too tight clothes and sunglasses that were definitely too small for his face. He had latched onto Dazai the moment the door was opened, which solved their doubts on his supposed similarities to Furata Yoko — with him came the stench of tobacco, and Chuuya’s dropped jaw.*

*He had died rather disgustingly, the hard line in his pants offensively evident and the bloodied sheets under him sticking to his swollen fingers.*

*Something had unscrewed enough inside his drunken mind to make him decide Yoko wasn’t all he needed; the glance Chuuya and Dazai had exchanged over opposite sides of the corpse, kimonos unable to have been removed by Mihara’s inebriated senses, had been carefully devoid of anything but distaste.*

*“I don’t think this is what Boss meant with our free planning,” Chuuya commented.*

*He was wrong, but Dazai kept quiet about it].*

“I suppose you aren’t wrong,” Kouyou sighed, eventually, dragging the tip of her umbrella down the tiles. “I’m not, unfortunately, allowed to question your current actions. I have to believe they have been done for the good sake of our syndicate.”

Her gaze turned sharper; pleasing until the very last inch of her curled lips. Dazai felt the air sizzle with the hiss of Chuuya’s fighting instinct, involuntarily.

“I would very much like to believe that,” she added, somewhat unnecessarily, staring right at Dazai. “Should you prove me wrong, I’m *sure* Boss would be delighted to receive my report on your behavior. It will certainly come of some use, in the wake of Executive nominations.”

*You cannot waste time with theories*, she had said, eyes blinded by rage — and the shadow of a girl that occupied most of that dusty album, kept in an old backroom of the place she hated most.

Chuuya stared at the floor, fists tight, resolutely stubborn. Lips stained in makeup and kimono slipping down his shoulder, Dazai got the feeling the situation should have felt less heavy.

Like a current, Kouyou’s face lost its sharpness. “Anyway,” She clasped her hand under her chin, sweet, “I will let this go, this one time. We will deal with your consequences once this overpowered *Silver Oracle* of yours is dropped. Now, Chuuya — Why don’t you give me a *Rich Girl*?”

The boy’s expression morphed into horror. “No fucking way.”

“*Rich Girl*?” Dazai echoed.

“It’s nothing,” Chuuya snapped. “Nothing at all. We should go. Right now.”

“I hardly think it’s nothing,” Kouyou cut in, blinking slowly. “It’s good tradition. All the girls who work for me are subjected to the test. It’s all in good fun — Merely to get them more comfortable —“

“I’m not a girl,” he reminded her, eyes flashing. “And I’m not having any fun.”

“You work for me. You’re wearing girl clothes.”

“That’s not nearly the *same* —“

“Should you be resistant still, though,” she sighed, flagging her fan open to dramatically cut the air in two, “I might have to bring you to my office, and have a more detailed conversation about your actions in *my* territory. *Silver Oracle* or not — What Boss doesn’t know won’t hurt him, will it?”

If Chuuya’s burned eye had been half as cursed as the daily glances it received swore it was, Kouyou would have been a pillar of salt. Dazai was very careful not to say a word, lest he reminded the boy of his near existence.

Hesitance moved Chuuya slowly — he stood straighter, pushing the inside of his knees together, tilting his body forward. He refused to drop the woman’s smiling, unmovable gaze.

Sudden enough to startle him, he raised his arm and pointed an accusing finger at her. Pitching his voice so high it was unrecognizable, he warned: “*Next time you won’t be so lucky!*”

The silence that followed was abyssal.

Undeterred, Kouyou clapped, polite.

“Don’t say a word,” Chuuya warned, between teeth, voice much lower, not moving an inch.

“Was that,” Dazai started, petrified.

“Don’t you fucking talk.”

“Was *that*,” His entire face seemed to shatter on impact, destroyed by a growing grin.

“I’m gonna *fucilate* you —“

“— A Hirose Fumiko’s *Rich Chick* reference?”

Some unfortunate worker had to wipe the tears of hilarity Dazai spilled from the ground, even as the statuary Executive did her best to hide her own behind her fan — an enraged, *screaming-like-a-banshee* Chuuya had to drag him to their meeting point by the collar, holding up his laughter-stricken spine with the pure ire shaking his fingers.

He had barely managed to get himself into some semblance of composure, when Furata Yoko’s crazed, gleeful eyes appeared — behind the ajar door of her room, hands stained with the blood of the corpse they had covered upon her bed.

“Oh, dear,” she offered, barely a whisper. She was a thin woman, pale and corvine, with eyes so wide they looked strange on her face. The bandaid on her left one had allowed Dazai to keep his bandages on; her companion, Komako, was staring at the blood that soaked it with concern.

“You two did a wonderful job,” Yoko stared at her hands, lips trembling in an attempt to smile. “Isn’t it just wonderful?”

She brought her hands to her lips. Komako, hair red where her cheeks were turning bloodless, turned away.

“Yes, absolutely,” Chuuya agreed, curtly, clearly done with the day’s tribulations. He had removed his clothes on their way down, leaving them on the floor; his nails were still sinking in Dazai’s wrist. “We did our part. Now bring us to him.”

“Koyama,” Yoko called, not moving. “Bring these gentlemen to the basement. And tell Pao — Tell him I’m doing this for his own good, yes?”

*[“Mihara Gouta has requested me every night since the day we met,” Yoko began, as she helped set their costumes into place. “I’ve been working here since I was sixteen years old. I thought I would have to live like this until the end of my days, and — then, he came.”*

*“His brother isn’t like him. Pao — Pao is good. One night, Mihara was too drunk to even leave my bed, and he ran here to bring him home. When our eyes crossed — He asked me my name. It was a nice change. They usually tell me their own first, so that I can know what to scream.”*

*Dazai thought all stories from the Pomegranate were the same — slightly too romantic at the edges; too sensual. A rose fragrance, insisting to the point of nausea.*

The first Boss of the Port Mafia married a prostitute from the house, *he had told Chuuya, in some diner they had been kicked out of for a brawl, after a failed chase.* She used to scam secrets out of powerful men in the city. That was how he got the idea to turn the House into a valuable asset.

Kouyou’s spies, *the boy had recited, dutifully.* And the woman?

*He had shrugged.* He turned her into a whore of occasion, when he needed information.

That’s like — fucking gross.

Don’t let the men hear you say that, *Dazai had tutted.* They all like that old story so much. The older ones will tell you it’s poetic — Our syndicate thrived thanks to the love of such dedicated people.

*Dedicated?*, he had insisted. *To what, each other?*

No, *Dazai had clarified.* To ruining each other’s life so thoroughly. She ended up murdering him; she, in turn, was murdered by his heir, and had her corpse left in a cell to decay. As per the former Boss’ instructions.

*“He asked me questions,” Yoko sighed, still. “He wanted to know everything about me. I told him I wished I had more time to read, that I used to devour entire books in a few hours — and the next day, before his brother arrived, he brought me a book. A book of knights and queens and love, and I...”*

*A haze covered her eyes, englighting their color. “Ever since then, we’ve been hiding from Mihara. He would kill us both if he found out. But Pao — Pao has been working. He wants to pay me off, free me from the Pomegranate. He came to me, one day, screaming victory. He said he’d met a man who’d promised him everything he wanted in exchange for something of little value. ‘My life,’ he told me. ‘He wants my life, but I can keep living anyway. And soon I’ll get you out of here.’”*

*“Ever since he made the deal, he was — he was different. Everything about him was dimmed. I asked him to tell me what the deal had been about. Pao said he’d been shown what Heaven looked like. That he could go there whenever he wanted — that I should go, too.”*

*“He told me about Dante and his Souls. I was terrified. I procrastinated. I told him I would think about it, and secretly I began searching for someone who could help — but no one seemed to know about Dante, or what was happening.”*

*“Until one day,” she laid her eyes on them, intent. “Until one day, he complained about two shadows working to ruin Dante’s plan.”]*

The closer they got to the basement, the less furnished and elegant the road became: no chandeliers or pricey wood, but air that smelled of dust and louder unmistakable sounds. Their guide didn’t stop until they went down the last flight of stairs, marching to the door at the end of the corridor.

“We need to be quick,” Chuuya whispered. His mouth was still splattered in lipstick. “If he knows we’re here, too — He’s our last chance.”

Dazai cranked his neck. “Break his jaw and his hands. Don’t let him digest anything — Don’t let him touch anything.”

Koyama fiddled with the lock on the heavy door, the clang of rusty metal echoing off the walls. There were no windows and no light that wasn’t fire; when the door opened, it painted shapeless shadows around them.

A man was sitting at the dead center of the room. According to Yoko, he had been there for three days — kept safe and still until she could finally find *who* the two shadows he had been mumbling about were.

He looked like every well-placed man Mori had ever let him torture — unfit for prison, with his freshly cut hair and nice clothing, oozing off superiority despite the circumstances. When he raised his head, his eyes were settled on something too far away to even try to imagine it.

Chuuya’s face sharpened for the attack. Dazai’s mouth caught up on the situation before his mind did — he grasped his arm, nullifying him. “Wait —“



“*Ah,*” Mihara Pao said, blinking, gaze focusing. He offered them an uncertain smile, raising one hand to wave. “No need to worry, little shadows. I have no intention of killing myself.”

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya: i like stars because they were the first thing i saw after emerging from the debris of the destruction my own self brought to an entire portion of the city

dazai: [idc if you had a happy childhood don't make that my issue.png]

hi there!

some trivia about this chapter, to start off: tsuchiya yukio, who we will see more of, is inspired by a irl male author by the same name. her ability is named after one of his works: faithful elephants, a true story of animals, people and war. i just felt like bsd was missing that snow white animal charmer element yk

another trivia — the entire last arc of this chapter, taking place at the pomegranate, is inspired by the fifth chapter of the divine comedy, hell section. you might be vaguely familiar with the story of paolo and francesca; if not by popular storytelling, then purely because hozier wrote francesca and ruined my life with it. there are some details i took from their story (which i suggest you check out because 10/10) which made me giggle ngl. pao and furata. subtle right.

and that's pretty much it! as always, i hope you've enjoyed this chapter. we're slowly diving in more into the partnership side of soukoku, and into my personal headcanon that they'd despise talking to enough to learn secret languages instead (like it's normal). i hope you enjoyed, and i hope to see you next time, if you made it this far.

see you :~)!

# BECAUSE

## Chapter Summary

*There was certain an etiquette to follow when welcoming higher ranked members to one's homes.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xi.*

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*Case number: 08896772*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. and their subordinates brought fundamental information to [...]*

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### Three days prior to the funeral.

*Crimson* was the only way to describe the full moon in Yokohama.

Blood-light washed the buildings with unconventional gentleness, smearing through the windows of the apartment, painting the walls in red. It drowned the city in a scarlet wind, an ominous sort of tinge that seemed to recall dawn in its dirtiest shades. When the doorbell rang, the last cloud hiding the moon disappeared, deepening the scarlet shadows.

Hirotsu was waiting behind the door, envelope in hand and a half burned out cigarette between his lips. Composed as ever — if the sight of the red marker lines all over Chuuya's face surprised him, he didn't show it.

"Good evening," he announced. "I believe I might have found something."

"The *something*, is it a flamethrower?" Chuuya asked, knuckles white around the edge of his door. "Because I'm looking for one."

"Not exactly," Blood stained his collar; a new enough consequence, that his mission must have been harder than usual. Successful, still, given the cigarette. "But you boys do have a mission budget."

"We spend it at the Arcade," He waved the matter away, unimpressed. "*Enviably success rate*, remember? Shame, anyway. Get out of my apartment. How did you even find it?"

The man's foot barely managed to sneak in the closing door, bones rattled. "Executive Kouyou let me know."

"Traitor," he muttered, with the same vengeance he had reserved for his Boss since the so-called *Pomegranate Accident*. "I made it clear *I'd* decide who gets to know where I live."

"I will gladly remove the information from my mind," Hirotsu offered, absolutely serious. "Not right now, though. I looked around for information on the *Nine Rings* seal, as you asked. I found it."

From his non-ideal perspective, Dazai saw the boy blink, skeptical. "And *you* personally came to bring news?"

Awkwardness wasn't built for his monocle and white beard; nonetheless, when he settled his eyes over Chuuya's shoulder, he did so blankly. "A great part of the *Black Lizards* support the quiet campaigns that demand your heads on a silver platter. I decided taking the matter in my own hands would be better."

"That's nice," Chuuya replied, distractedly. "So, no flamethrower at all?"

“Death by fire is not even in my top five most well-considered methods of suicide,” Dazai intervened, spread on the beanbag that was Chuuya’s only piece of furniture. “And death by *you* is to be escaped at all and any costs. I will have to refuse.”

The cigarette almost fell from Hirotsu’s mouth. He doubted it had anything to do with their matching marker stains, blue and red and *vicious*. “What are *you* doing here?”

Panic widened Chuuya’s eyes; served him right, he thought, for spreading the voice that he would put *mummy-repellant-mines* all around his apartment just to ward Dazai off. “We’re —“

“Having a sleepover,” he concluded, serious.

Chuuya’s flinch was a full body experience. Through gritted teeth, he confirmed: “The Mackerel and I are having a sleepover.”

“This guy has never even heard of the *Sleeping Beauty*,” Dazai added, subtly rolling a finger near his temple. “And he goes around talking about hundreds of nasty spots-having dogs movies. Can you believe it?”

“Sleeping *what*?” His nasty glare straightened his shoulders. “I mean — Yes. Whoever makes a dick joke first loses bean bag privileges,” he confirmed.

“And has to steal Ane-san’s favorite *kanzashi*. ”

“And has to perform *revenge method 132*. ”

Dazai’s lips parted. “Now, wait a second —“

“A sleepover,” Hirotsu echoed, stuck. His poor cigarette had landed on the floor; his shock had been washed away by bone deep exasperation. “The two of you. Are having a sleepover.”

“Yes,” they agreed.

As if the man hadn’t heard a word, he insisted: “Willingly.”

“That might be taking it too far,” Chuuya muttered, opening his door wider.

Hirotsu frowned, eyes beginning to roam inside. “Why is your computer under the table?”

“I’m under the table too!” Dazai waved.

“Shitty Dazai likes being under the table,” the boy concluded. “You tell anyone about this apartment, I will stick that monocle in your senile rib cage, permanently. Alright?” A nod. “Alright. Come in.”

There wasn’t much to look around for, but Hirotsu tried all the same, polite until his last breath. The mess on the wall was the most eye-catching part, but the man wisely decided to brush past it, studying the concerning amount of medicines on the table. His gaze lingered on

the crime weapons: the two markers they had been trying to gauge each other's eyes out with.

That the old man knew where he lived, now, probably meant *something* to Chuuya — who was fidgeting a bit more than usual, arms crossed and eyes following the Commander's nape like a rifle sight.

It didn't seem to relax when Hirotsu, corners of his mouth tilted downwards and shoes removed, questioned: "Chuuya, did you move in recently?"

"A month after joining," Walking heavy strides to the table, Chuuya proceeded to sneak his foot under it and kick him in the side. "Move the fuck up. There's a guest."

"And you want him to sit on the beanbag?" The spirit of Kouyou Ozaki blinked in his eyes, nurturing his next kick. "*Ouch!*"

There was certain an etiquette to follow when welcoming higher ranked members to one's homes. Mori had never clarified where their temporary role landed them — there wasn't a name for it, either; except, perhaps, *target*. Hirotsu fell somewhere under the Executives and over Mori's Intelligence; seniority and survival from the old reign made him more respected than that.

Like most respected men in the Port Mafia, he never drank from already filled glasses.

"I *think* I can get you tea, Grandpa," Chuuya called, from behind the counter, searching inside his almost empty kitchen shelves. He was standing on his tiptoes; Dazai's mind memorized the free mocking material with unrelented energy. A corner of it counted freckles on the small of his back, shirt rising, shaped like an elephant muzzle. "No, I was kidding. I do have several *Zena*."

"He also has *one* teacup," Dazai informed him, taking the envelope from his unresisting hands. He dropped the contents on the floor, eying the scattered pictures critically. "A chipped one. But you can't have the coffee one, that's mine. Hirotsu, couldn't this have been an email?"

"*Fuck* emails," Chuuya said, with feeling.

Before he could go on a tangent about his in-person preferences, or his deeply-rooted issues, Dazai hurried to add: "Why did you bring me a four years old's drawing of a crane?"

Hesitance slowed down his response.

His eyes had yet to abandon the emptiness around them; he observed Dazai, too — traced the skin under his eyes and his slightly shaking fingers. Good at his job, as always. *Good enough*, he thought, *that he almost managed to be so unnoticed*.

"I have drunk enough energy drinks for several lifetimes — so, no," he answered, finally. "And that would be *my* drawing, Dazai, thank you very much. I had to copy it in less than thirty seconds, before the room I infiltrated blew up. Forgive the hurry."

“Oh,” He hovered the paper upon his head to study better. “But it *is* a crane, yes?”

“And it’s one of the hints those who search for the *Nine Rings*’ seal are granted,” Hirotsu confirmed. “Those who wish to try have to be shown the way by particularly relevant figures in the organization — like the tattoo artist Kouyou mentioned. Most of the clues are only understandable to ancient families; it’s all a play on their lore and their history.”

“And cranes, apparently,” Chuuya jumped on the counter, opening his *Zena*, studying the drawing over Dazai’s shoulder. “Are cranes supposed to mean something different for them?”

“What do they mean for *you*?”

“Kouyou added a crane to the mural in her tea room,” He shrugged. “Means longevity, she said.”

“It could be the same,” Hirotsu replied, as he leaned down to gather the mess of papers from the floor — reports over reports, photographs stained in blood at the edges. “Each hint describes the seal in some way, supposedly. I hardly doubt it to be the cage of some forgotten power, but it might be connected to an Ability.”

“Like Tsuchiya Mi,” Dazai considered. At the man’s face, he clarified: “The doctor. Her medical tools are infused with their first owner’s Ability, but she’s the one who actually exploits the power.”

“Even if you wanted to ask, she’s currently out of town,” Hirotsu said. “Ace brought her with him to the extraction point for the chemical cargoes.”

“He brought our best *doctor* on a possible battlefield?” Chuuya snapped. “Is he insane?”

“Boss and Executive Kouyou are testing an old theory,” the man replied, perfectly balanced. Mori had always liked to test out his sleepless nights’ thoughts during bloodbaths. Typical of a doctor. “He believes the men aren’t giving everything they could yet. Deprived of our healing grace, they might start pulling their weight. Between the pills and the battle, we’ve already lost too many.”

Dazai squinted at the scribbled cane, dragging his nails down the paper. “Slug, how likely is Yukio to put poison in our food if we ask about her sister?”

“Do I look like I’d eat anything offered from a mafioso, at the moment?” he scoffed. The Commander made a face. “I don’t know. I can ask Koda to talk to her, but is a link all that possible? For all we know, the seal isn’t even special. Beatrice said it was all symbolism.”

“Beatrice?” Hirotsu asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dazai replied, swiftly. “Remind me our numbers on the southern border? I have reasons to believe the *Nine Rings* will target the Kimoto trade, next.”

*We have to find it anyway*, he traced on the paper, keeping his eyes on Hirotsu. Chuuya leaned a bit more on his back. *If we don’t, the Nine Rings will keep coming back. Getting rid of the syndicate once and for all would do wonder for the Mafia’s name.*

Chuuya's hand sneaked on his shoulder. *Do you think you could nullify it? Tsuchiya's tools don't work on you.*

*It would prove whether it's Ability-infused or not, he considered. Step one. We need to find the seal. She must know where it is.*

*So we have to find Beatrice, he sighed, staring at the ceiling.*

*Brings us back to lobster.*

A pause. *Lobster?*

*I said lobster.*

*What?*

*One. Step one.*

*How are they similar?*

“—not counting Ace's battalion,” Hirotsu concluded. “What makes you think they will target the organ trade? It seems counterproductive. Even if they're trying to shut us off economically, why focus on a market they can't join? It would —

Dazai threw the papers on the counter. “Don't worry about it, old man. Just considering. This whole war thing is getting boring.”

“You can say that,” Chuuya scrubbed his eyes with his palms. “Not even that much ass to kick.”

He had opened two buttons of his dress shirt, or perhaps lost them during their marker fight. Apart from the red lines all the way to his Adam's pome, the edges of his Port Mafia tattoo peeked between spiral, unnatural scars.

*I'm not going to kill you.*

Was Hirotsu's mark still as visible as it had been the day he had gotten it? Had he frowned as he got it, or kept as still as he did surrounded by bullets? Perhaps he had been old even as a youngster, muttering about ink tainting his skin.

All of Dazai's scars looked out of place on his body — the tattoo included. *It hardly mattered*, he considered, because scientists wrote entire papers on the death of the sun and then went on with their day. Dazai would never grow old enough to witness it.

“Excuse me,” Hirotsu was asking, looking around with the politeness of an expert liar. “Could I use the bathroom?”

Busy as he was chugging his drink, Chuuya just nodded towards the hallway. Alarms blared in his head; he smacked a hand across his back, making him choke.

“No!” Chuuya yelled, between coughs, turning a startled gaze on them. “No — No, you can’t. Sorry. No bathroom.”

Calmly: “Why not?”

“You know how it is with gravity manipulators,” Dazai intervened, vacantly, while the other boy fished for air. “He got mad at me for one *small* comment on his height and *boom!* Bathroom soaked. All kinds of stuff on the floor. I’d steer away.”

Hirotsu stared at them. Keeping his eyes on him, Dazai sunk two fingers in the boy’s side, forcing the coughs out of Chuuya’s frame.

He sighed. Massaging his temples, he walked into the kitchen, pulling the closest drawer open. “I’m going to pretend I believe you, and we are not going to talk about this. ‘That fine with you?’”

“Absolutely,” Dazai jumped up.

“Fucking great,” Chuuya mumbled.

“And,” Hirotsu insisted. “You’re going to swear that whatever is in that bathroom isn’t going to cause Boss more problems than he already has.”

Quietly, they shared a glance.

Ten years more dug ten lines more on his face. “Lie to me, boys.”

“There’s nothing in the bathroom, sir,” Chuuya crossed his hands behind his back. “And if there were, it wouldn’t cause Boss any problems.”

Hirotsu nodded. Motioning towards the door, he declared: “Your neighbors — I don’t know why they all closed their doors in terror when I passed by —”

“They’re afraid the bastard will bring out the bunnies again,” Chuuya explained, with no context.

Clearly exhausted, the man nodded again. “Go ask them for plates. And glasses. *And* chopsticks. I can gather something to cook you dinner.”

Dazai paused. He listened to the rattle of the few pans that had just been discovered, the *pop!* of plastic bags for food he doubted Chuuya had bought himself. Perplexity was painted on the other boy’s face, too — but a sharper kind of confusion; fragile, glass shards at the edge of a precipice.

The old man had gone out of his way to give them clues. He deserved a chance to correct his mistake.

Tentatively, he pushed: “Why are you doing that?”

“Have you already eaten?”



They exchanged a glance. “No.”

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“What is it to you?” Chuuya insisted.

“I have read your personal reports,” Hirotsu shrugged, dropping rice in a container that had never been used. “Assassination attempts, high value missions, Boss’ secret instructions — I’m not trying to lecture you. I know you’re — *self-sufficient*. You don’t want people in your business. I get it. It’s an age thing.”

*An age thing*, he mouthed, just to taste it.

An *age thing*, he thought, lips quivering. An *age thing*, like *almost sixteen* were an illness of kinds, a virus no one had yet found a cure for, a caress with too long nails — sinking in a child’s skin and filling their head with foolish things. *You used to be so nice. You used to listen so well.*

The pettiness of adolescence — Dazai scraping at the dirt under fingertips and staring at his ceiling for hours at the time, sleeping with a gun under his pillow. An age thing, as if Chuuya living in an unfurnished house was a matter of laziness. *He’ll buy a couch when he stops being a teenager. He’ll fill the fridge when he’s all grown.*

Hirotsu — uncaring or unaware that no one cooked them *dinner*, — insisted: “But Dazai looks like he hasn’t showered in years, and you, Chuuya, almost passed out during regroupment this morning —”

The boy sputtered. “No, I *didn’t* — “

“You’re no use to Boss if you’re dead,” the man insisted. “You have men. Use them. You don’t always have to be on the field. When’s the last time either one of you slept?”

Dazai opened his mouth to answer, but a pointed glance to the skin under his eyes told him it would be useless.

Discomfort was pulling Chuuya’s eyes in every direction. Scoffing, he concluded: “Whatever. I’ll get you plates. You play chef, since you’re so damn knowledgeable.”

He stalked out of the apartment, leaving the door open — possibly, unwilling to slam it. Their teeth wouldn’t end on the curb, if their pranks hadn’t landed them there — but he knew Kouyou wouldn’t forgive the disrespect.

Mori would sigh. *An age thing*, Dazai thought.

“I’m going to help,” he announced grandly, wiping his features clean. The wind from the open door tickled the sweat stains of his shirt; everywhere Chuuya lived always felt too cold. “We don’t want the dog to bark all over the neighbors’ porches, do we?”

Hirotsu hummed. “Certainly not.”

“Isn’t it sort of peculiar, how we’re all hardwired for three meals a day?”

“Can’t say I ever thought much about it.”

“*Oh*, I have!” Dazai twirled to the door, the ground a razor-sharp edge to the blade on his wrists. “How does that saying go? *Eat or die*. Work to make bread, and eat that bread. How aggravating.”

Inevitability and blindness were much the same. *Dazai and Chuuya* and their handler. “Get salt, too,” Hirotsu called, as he skipped down the hallway.

Finding Chuuya was easy — he had left thin cracks on the ground with every step, all the way to the floor over their own, landing on the dimly lit threshold of apartment 908 — *right* over his.

The door was open; inside, to put it concisely, was chaos.

Not a piece of furniture matched the other in color, style, or state of destruction. The wallpaper was a bright yellow, patterned in little parrots — the walls were littered in rifles, revolvers, machetes, and weapons of every kind, some of them covered in stickers. The map of the apartment mirrored Chuuya’s own; on the other side of the counter was the kitchen, *littered* in Polaroid pictures and magnetic souvenirs.

An enormous chandelier dangled from the ceiling, each crystal piece — *real* crystal, if his time in Chuuya’s old job had taught him anything — a different color. It painted colorful squares on every surface, raining on the exaggerating number of couches in psychedelic colors — two of them pushed together by a sheet with an enormous replica of a seagull.

*No*, he corrected himself. Not a seagull.

“Robbing a dead man’s house? Seems tasteless even for you,” Dazai called, making his way inside. A *squeak!* under his heel started him; the neon green wolf shaped toy stared back at him.

The *squeak!* reappeared — this time, though, from the colorful parrot perched on the windowsill. A beautiful animal, with disconcertingly intelligent eyes — it tilted its eyes as soon as Dazai entered its visual field, as if more than ready to attack.

“Your bandaged ass ain’t ever seen taste,” Chuuya said, unimpressed. It took him a moment to find him — he was kneeling behind the counter, searching for plates in the lower kitchen doors.

“Kouyou has brought me to wine tasteries too, you know? I was just smart enough to escape,” Dazai jumped over a plastic bag of cutlery and chopsticks.

Dropping to the ground, he waved at the mistrustful parrot, studying the curved line Chuuya’s shoulders drew against the kaleidoscope-like wall. There was a stiffness to it that was strangely malleable; the sort of fragile allowance a wounded beast might concede in the darkness of an alley, away from eyes.

He hadn't worn it around Hirotsu. Dazai didn't know what to make of him wearing it around him.

"How come Albatross owned all this silverware?"

"He liked parties," He shrugged, casual and fake, head stuck inside the door. "And he liked money. Most of all, he liked impressing people. Pretty sure this collection is from Brazil."

"And so is the parrot?"

"Ōmu?" Chuuya glanced over to the bird, rubbing at the marker lines on his face. "I'm not sure. The thing might come from another planet, honestly. Creeps me the fuck out."

"*Fuck!*" Ōmu repeated, cheerfully.

He blinked. "He called his parrot, *parrot?*"

"Yeah," His deep sigh was too fond to be fully exasperated. "He did."

Accepting it, Dazai surveyed the apartment again — scattered clothes on the floor; old knick knacks and reports; pictures half extracted from their frames, and never fixed. It didn't quite look like a place that had not been lived in in months.

Tilting his neck until it burned, he marveled at the ceiling — almost every inch of it was covered in movie posters, crooked and faded, of every genre. Only one factor grouped them together: Lippman's face, and the full exploitation of his public relations facade. *One of the best Executive candidates*, Mori had said.

*Like every other Flag*, he considered. Verlaine had been smart in many ways.

"A dramatic idiot," Chuuya agreed, eyes stubbornly on the plates. Stuck between the pictures were post-it notes and excerpts from journals and books; the closest to his face recited, in curling letters: *when a loved one dies, you have got to kill youeself*. "But yeah, I suppose. *Smart.*"

Dazai didn't waste time wondering how he had followed his train of thought. "Someone was a big fan," he commented, instead. He remembered the media talking about Lippman's death for weeks. *A gas leak*. He wondered if his fans mourned not having a place to shed their tears on.

"Or a big piece of shit," Chuuya insisted. His fingers twitched on a photograph; he didn't know if it was remnant frustration or affection. He didn't know the difference. "I was never sure. He'd *beg* Lippman on his knees to bring him on set, and he'd make us go to every single first show, and he'd do stuff like this. Either he was a master of sarcasm, or he sucked at it."

"Was it your idea or Albatross' — to move in under his apartment?"

Chuuya squinted. "What's this, *20 Questions?*"

“Gathering data,” he specified. “Off-limits. It’s the best explanation you’ll get. But you *want* to babble on and on about them, clearly, so I don’t see why we shouldn’t pursue a situation which benefits us both. Say, is Dante’s *Limbo* this place?”

On the window seal, Ōmu screeched. Chuuya had his jaw clenched so tightly it was pulsing. “You’re nothing but a miserable waste of medical supplies —“

“I’ll tell you about the Sheep recruitment,” he interrupted, fiddling with a peculiarly shaped fork — the end resembling a skull. “If your material is amusing enough.”

“Who cares about your amusement?” the boy mumbled, slamming the kitchen door like a gunshot. As one, as if electrocuted by a sound they had both been expecting, they flinched.

The silence took a more fractured note.

The ocean of pictures badly stuck to the walls and the kitchenette fell into his eyes. Red hair and a permanently complaining mouth ruled most of them; not all of them were stolen candids, though. As quietly conspiratorial as possible, he offered: “You want to go back to Hirotsu’s sudden guilt complex turned housewife tendencies instead?”

His grimace could have rusted the silver.

“It wasn’t like I had anywhere to stay, after the Sheep,” Chuuya vomited up, clipped, dragging his nails up the crack in a ceramic plate. “Kouyou offered me a room at hers, but I don’t —“ A pause. “*Didn’t*, I guess — trust her like that. Stayed at this one motel, and Albatross found out. He saw a spider in the shower and screamed like it was the damn *plague*. He dragged me here. End of your stupid story.”

“And he didn’t suggest you buy furniture?” he asked, a tad too petulant.

The aggravation of an owner whose dog had run off too far away. Dazai had never *contested* the Flags — not the way he had whined behind Kouyou’s gowns, going on and on about how *he* had dragged *Chuuya* in for *his own* entertainment. It had never seemed worth it; he knew how to pick his winning battles.

Between pranks — *torture training*, Mori had called them, once he had explained them in detail — and creaking Arcade buttons, Chuuya had only existed as long as he was in his visual field.

“Wouldn’t shut up about it, actually,” Chuuya replied. “He had planned this — *trip*, I guess? Wanted to go to the nearest *IKEA* and pick the most outrageous furniture. Iceman kept sighing. I kept delaying. I don’t really — this stuff, I forget it. I lived in the streets. A bed is fine.”

Dazai met the parrot’s eyes again. Despite its clever eyes, the stubbornness with which he was trying to bite the window handle off was astonishing.

*How despicable*, he considered, almost a whine. Understanding seldom wasn’t.

“Did you buy the apartment?”

Chuuya shrugged. “No, but he did. He had no living family, though, and I was the only one there to hear his last words — at the *Old World*,” A pause. “Boss is rebuilding it, you know. Told me I should have just let him know about the issue — that the income would be great, or something.”

*Of course*, Dazai didn’t smile, because it would have felt too mean.

He had seen the boy pass by the street where reconstruction was happening — all under the grasp of Mori’s sweetest smile. All he had seen on his face was longing, and the distinct awkwardness one might feel after summoning a disappointing ghost.

*Distance*, she had told him, once, *is merely a word. We made it up not to leave it empty.*

“I just claimed he had left me the apartment, like the motorcycle,” Chuuya dragged his eyes to a picture, pinned with a sun magnet. Pianoman’s face was covered in paint; Doc was attempting to clean it. “I mean, it was the best choice for everyone. Wouldn’t wish this ugly wallpaper on anyone. And you haven’t seen the bedroom mural —“

“So it was better to keep it where you could reach it?” Dazai concluded. “Where you could freely lock yourself in, without anyone complaining to the landlord about the grieving garden gnome?”

“And you’re better off pretending you’re not *ecstatic* about Hirotsu playing the *caring game*?” Chuuya snapped.

Disbelief soaked his laughter. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Come on,” He scoffed. “Your whole face lit up the moment he put on that stupid apron. Where does a freak like you get a thing for homemade meals?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. Cut after cut, a seesaw going up and down. He knew, distantly — it would have been easier to talk if they got off it. “Your Sheep promised me one, though.”

Chuuya sneered. “The only things the Sheep could offer were booze, bread, and tight babysitting hours.”

“And lies,” Dazai reminded him, easily. “I was thirteen, and I was dressed nicely, under all the dirt. *You look like a smart kid. Want to join?*” He snorted. “They told me I’d *finally* get a *nice meal*. I was all bones. I’m not surprised you don’t know about me, though — I slipped right through their fingers. They were probably too embarrassed to report their failure to the boy sweating off to make them a feared syndicate.”

“Why?” Chuuya asked, so deeply annoyed by his own curiosity one would have thought he wasn’t the one feeling it.

“Why was I all bones, or why did I refuse?”

“Both.”

“Your stories aren’t *that* entertaining.”

“Oh, for *fucks*’ —“ He seethed. He breathed. “Alright, so you were clearly living in the streets. Why did you refuse? The Sheep had a good reputation, and with the spike of human trafficking cases caused by the previous Boss —”

“Do I look like someone who would get human trafficked that easily?”

“They would have kept you safe.”

Dazai leaned his chin on his hand, looking up at him through his eyelashes. “You would have?”

His full-body, revolted shiver was *tactile*. “In case you don’t remember, I *told you* I would have murdered you on the first day. And *you* said you’d have me assassinated. Probably steal my supposed throne as well.”

“Oh, so *now* you remember it?”

His forehead didn’t feel creased; when the boy’s fingers pressed against it, though, he felt his eyelids flutter — breathing out. “Irrelevance tends to cause forgetfulness, did you know?”

“Dazai Osamu, King of the Sheep,” he drawled, theatrically. “Dazai Osamu, best martial artist in the Port Mafia. Dazai Osamu, Arahabaki vessel.”

Chuuya snorted. “Nakahara Chuuya, Demon Prodigy?”

Their knees brushed against each other, legs crossed and an absurd amount of silverware between their bodies. He studied the naked border of land between the boy’s gloves and his sleeves — the whitish scars peeking between freckles, unrealistic in their undeadliness. He wondered if it was obsession, too — even if it burned.

“I didn’t accept because it wasn’t what I wanted,” Dazai said, eventually. “Your Sheep promised me a chance at survival. Unfortunately, there was nothing I wished for less. *A scrawny thing like you will end up dead by the night*, they told me. I prayed they would be right. The idea of joining them seemed so —”

He scrambled for a metaphor, something to make a woman who had hated his stuttering ways proud — for something to accurately depict the sheer loathing he felt. “They looked like what they turned out to be: loudmouthed traitors. All so unbearingly *boring*.”

“Boring,” Chuuya echoed.

His tattoo peeked through the sides of his shirt; his hands had ripped a few pictures off. There was no secret method to print memories on fingertips, but he tried, and he tried, and he *tried*

“Them asking me to join — it was everything. Suribachi was hell, and I was a bomb ready to explode. *Again*,” Something like a grimace pulled his face; the vulnerability at the edges was more violent than any bullet. “If they hadn’t — I don’t know. Shirase gave me a piece of bread. Fuck, I didn’t even know what bread *was*.”

“That’s sad. Bread is very good.”

“It *is*, ” Chuuya frowned. “They didn’t need *me*. They just needed everything I had to give,” The huff out of his mouth sagged the air with bitterness; then nostalgia; then something Dazai was not *like-them* enough to understand. “Jerks. But they were kids. I can’t — I know they sold me out. Blaming them seems fucking cheap, though.”

*An age thing*, Dazai thought. A council of thirteen, piling up stolen cargoes on Mori’s desk — and only one person to throw rocks at. The face Chuuya had made as he watched Shirase embark. *An age thing* — allowing something as unfruitful as codependency to mold you into a thing made of loyalty and sweat.

It was despicable. It was *always* in his visual field.

“Alright, so you owe them everything,” Dazai conceded, bored. “But what did the Flags even offer you, to make you so loyal to them?”

“Nothing phenomenal, asshole,” Chuuya mocked. “I didn’t stay with the Sheep for a stupid piece of bread, or a roof, or the stolen cough drops. I don’t get sick. I could have survived. Doc, Iceman, Pianoman —” His lips turned white; he pressed them hard enough to taste blood. His or theirs, he didn’t know. “The Flags were everything the Mafia is meant to be.”

On the reports he had read out of spite — to be mean was to be *precise*; and he hadn’t thought there was anything wrong with it, until Hirotsu’s mouth had curled down — the Flags’ deaths had been praised. *They died, essentially*, it had read, *in an effort to give Nakahara more time, so that he might kill Verlaine and save our Boss. As we are all bound to do.*

The Port Mafia conduct was admirable, in theory. Dazai didn’t doubt all those flashy shows of loyalty — something he felt in his *bones* — had roped Chuuya in with the efficiency of a light to a moth.

*They died, essentially* Dazai had thought, where Mori couldn’t look him in the eyes and remind him that he was *necessary* for that city, which would have not been a lie — *for nothing*.

“Nothing special,” Chuuya echoed. “They were just my friends.”

The kaleidoscopic chandelier fractured his eyes, staining their already unmatching color further. Back when he was younger, people had called them *the devil’s mark*.

Chuuya had disappeared for a week, as soon as the Hospital had let him hop around with his black hole wounds. His reappearance at the Headquarters had come with distracted condolences and questions about the red sky — he wasn’t allowed to answer.

They had met again on one of the couches outside the meeting room, where Mori had asked them to wait. They had kicked each other’s feet and decided *Corruption* was a good name for a bad deal. He had made a tasteless joke about most of it — except for the human shaped question mark hover on his lips. He felt no need to mock irrelevant doubts.

His hat was in place. Red strands had been styled to cover his right eye, expert in the way only someone who had gotten a fair shade of black eyes could master. When Dazai had mocked, *what's with the new look?*, Chuuya had, surprisingly, only looked up.

He had fallen utterly quiet.

*"Physically unable to get sick?"* he questioned, finally.

"You can bet," Chuuya climbed to his feet, grabbing all his stolen goods. He flicked his forehead. "Nothing like you. Never had a fever, never had a cold, never had a sore throat. Arahabaki is — rather *efficient* in eliminating threats. He wouldn't appreciate it if I died so easily, I suppose."

"Wouldn't he?" Dazai replied, surprised. "I had assumed he wanted nothing more than a chance to rip your tiny body to shreds and escape."

He tilted his head to the side; an ear offered to a sound no one else could perceive. "He doesn't really *want* anything. He exists, so he destroys. I'm his cage and his only possibility to actually do either. Breaking free would mean putting an end to anything he might ever wish to annihilate."

*They were simply my friends.*

Dazai couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. Even a tenth of what Chuuya had wasted so freely and easily on all those people would have cost him everything.

"Chuuya," he called, as he locked the door of Albatross' apartment. When he turned, his amber eye was the soiled ground in the backyard of an old house — unfit to ever grow anything but poison. "Chuuya, what did you see in Dante's *Limbo*?"

It twisted his mouth: "Why can't you just —"

"I don't know," He shrugged. Dazai liked having him in his visual field. Dazai wanted to tear his eyes out before they could roam. Dazai wanted to see him be an Event Horizon again — if it killed him, if it killed them both, if it killed everyone. "You didn't refer to Arahabaki as a *him*, before."

Silence embraced the hallway; Albatross' door closed in the space between them, a soft *thud* that failed to startle them.

The skin around Chuuya's lips turned whiter and whiter; when he tore them apart, they were ruby and bitten. "Let's just go."

Dinner was a strangely light affair, crawling up the naked and crime-lined walls of the apartment — not unlike the nights Mori had left him and Elise alone in the clinic. Hirotsu had given his all with the little he had — Dazai hardly recalled the last time he had eaten something not quickly swept off from a street vendor.

Chuuya eyed the maze of rice, vegetables, and meat distrustfully.



“It’s not going to attack you,” Dazai assured him, switching their cups with ease. “I get that you and a carrot are barely different in height —“

“I *will* tear you apart.”

“That’s not nice,” He broke a protein bar the man had thrown into the mix in two, forcing one half in his hand. “*Come on*. Partners need to share.”

Hirotsu got the bean bag, because the ghost of Kouyou Ozaki hovered in the corners of the kitchen. “*Th’s ‘s ac’ually good*,” Dazai nodded towards him, mouth stuffed with food. His body would regret the sudden interruption to emptiness, but he knew how to harvest. “Like — *se’iou’y, g’anpa*.”

“Is the nickname truly necessary?” Hirotsu had hung his coat and scarf to a nail he had mistaken for a hook — it was actually Dazai’s failed attempt to find a pipe and flood the apartment. “Your compliments are appreciated, though. Miranda dislikes my cooking.”

“You said you met her during a mission?” Chuuya asked, distractedly dividing his rice in portions with his chopsticks.

A hum. “More or less. I had never looked for anyone to spend my life with, but — abandoning her seemed impossible.”

“That’s so romantic,” Dazai sighed. “If only I could find someone that dedicated to commit a double suicide with me. Do you think Miranda would do it for you?”

“I — hope not?”

He made a face. “Then she isn’t the *right one*. I’m not sure of what a *right one* is, though. You know, Madame Tanaki says her husband wouldn’t hesitate!”

“She says it to shut you up, moron,” Chuuya explained, helpfully, with the same noncommittal tone he reserved for the secretary these days. “When did you meet?”

“Oh, it’s been almost ten years now,” Hirotsu — he didn’t quite *smile*; almost. “Coincidentally, it was the mission that landed me a spot in the Black Lizards. I didn’t become Commander until Boss’ reign — but joining the Lizards had been something of an obsession for me. Miranda was my luck in a bottle.”

“For Mori to give you that much power, you must have been a vocal denouncer of the old Boss,” Chuuya observed.

“Not at all. In fact, as far as I know, I was the first man to attempt to assassinate him.”

A pickle fell from the redhead’s lips. “What?”

“I remember that!” Dazai jumped in, gulping down his food. “Mori was absolutely terrified. You appeared out of nowhere, all obscure and vengeful. I’d never heard Elise whine so loudly.”

“And you weren’t executed?” the boy insisted, eyebrows brushing his hairline. “He *promoted* you for trying to get rid of him?”

He raised his chopsticks. “I would.”

“Boss saw my potential,” Hirotzu explained, wiping traces of sauce off his mustache. He recalled the first time they had eaten together — one of the vague afternoons after Mori’s take-over and before Chuuya’s existence, back when Dazai would twirl around in boring circles and annoy people who didn’t even turn to look at him; facing each other in a booth in some Western franchise shop, as the man nodded politely at the torture methods he’d come up with.

“He thought he and I were more similar than I had first assumed. He’s a terribly smart man. One conversation, and laying my life in his hands seemed the most obvious choice.”

“I’d been loyal to a fault to the previous Boss. I don’t know if you remember, Chuuya, but when we first met, I told you I understood your attitude,” He stared down at his bowl, pensive. “I, too, had once relied solely on my Ability and strength. When I was a bit older than you, I was proved wrong. If the previous Boss hadn’t recruited me, I — Wouldn’t be here.”

Hirotzu sunk his chopsticks on the last piece of meat, squinting the eye behind the monocle to study it. “All old stories, anyway. I don’t suppose —” He raised his gaze, meeting their matching expectant looks, slowly crawling closer on the floor. A sigh. “Well.”

“I was trained by a stubborn man,” he offered “For two years, I wasn’t allowed to use my Ability. By the first week, there was no one I hated more than that man. I told him I wished to offer my life to the Boss who had saved me. He told me — *over my dead body you’ll join my Lizards.*”

“Is he dead?” Dazai guessed.

“He is. He was wounded to the point of no return during *that* mission, ten years ago. I killed him, out of his own request. His last order was my appointment as a *Black Lizard*,” Hirotzu raised his glass, a silent toast. “And Boss’ first order in his new role was my appointment as commander.”

Chuuya still appeared unconvinced. “If you detested him so much, how did he gain your loyalty?”

“I don’t know,” Hirotzu offered him a blink. “How did he gain yours?”

The answer was either too complicated or too easy; nonetheless, the boy went for the cowardly road of changing the subject. “Miranda — Does she know about — you know,” He moved his chopstick. “Your occupation?”

“I assume so,” The man shrugged. “It’s not exactly a topic of conversation. During the previous Boss’ last months, she went through a phase of cutting my shirts into shreds whenever I came back home late.”

“I did that to Chuuya!” Dazai gasped, happily. “It was for a greater good, though. Those tacky pants he had started wearing —“

“That was *you*?”

“That was after you tried to lock me inside the trashing tunnel at *Building One* —“

“Which,” he spelled out, “Was after you filled my taxi with flour, and started spouting bullshit about *blocking my airways* —“

“If you hadn’t so rudely interrupted your *Free From The Sheep* party, I wouldn’t have needed to —“

“Some more ramen, boys?” Hirotsu asked. “Or would you prefer *me* to list off every cruelty you’ve put me through?”

They ate.

They talked more, twirling Hirotsu around *militia*, future plans and nostalgic stories, framed by unofficial suggestions on what to do about the lack of acceptance their command was receiving — and then, when Chuuya’s alarm ticked midnight, they called it a night.

The door closed behind the commander with a soft *thud*, undeterred in front of the still-concerned gaze the man threw to the apartment once more.

Chuuya laid his back on it, meeting his eyes. “He’s gone.”

“He’s gone,” he agreed.

“Not much time left,” the other echoed. He moved away from the door, and nodded. “So. What the fuck do we do about the man in my bathtub?”

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## **Two days prior to the funeral.**

Mihara Pao fit surprisingly well in his makeshift cell. Although, Dazai supposed, shattered legs fit almost everywhere.

They had tied shreds of one of Chuuya's old shirts around his mouth, wrists and calves, but the man hardly looked wishful for an escape plan. He had laid his head down on the floor of the bathtub; his pained, permanent frown assuring that he wasn't under the effects of Dante's Ability.

"Then," Chuuya started, fiddling with Hirotsu's stolen lighter — watching Mihara struggle against the light without making his legs creak. "One day in solitary got you bored enough to talk yet?"

"*Boredom* is such an abstract concept," Dazai replied, crouching down next to the tub. He was more eye-catching than his brother had been; whinier, too. "Having fun with one-self is fundamental."

"You got much experience with sitting alone in the dark for hours?"

Savageness curved his lips upwards; their recent prisoner whimpered, eyes widening. "Oh, you have no *idea*."

They dragged Mihara to the main room, legs sweeping the floor and quiet sobs tumbling down. A seat stolen from the open window of a neighbor was settled in the middle of the space; the man's head rolled back and forth on its edge, begging for the cooperation of a tired skeleton.

Every lamp was turned on; Chuuya threw the lighter into Dazai's waiting fingers and moved his hair back. Echoing Mori's most collaborative minutes, he offered: "Hit with purpose, not with violence."

"Shut your damn mouth," Chuuya replied, automatically. He brought his fist back and, ignoring Mihara's muffled screams, he swung at his face.

Over the years, Dazai had decided torture was a simple thing: a rhythm. Hammer over nail over bone; *thump* after *thump* — knuckles over flesh over scream — shriek after shriek. He watched Mihara's face turn from one side to the other, spitting blood on the floor under the glow of *Tainted*; he counted, *tip, tip, tap*.

If he tried hard enough, he could see the clockwork of Chuuya's physics-oriented mind calculate each possible outcome in a fraction of a second. A child learning not to strangle the newborn left in his arms. *Hurt, don't break. Break, don't hurt.*

The wet *crack!* of bone severed the night

"You said you're not like other *Souls*," Chuuya reminded him, pulling the piece of fabric on his mouth down. His wounded cheekbone followed the motion, tilting unnaturally. Making sure to be louder than his screams, he insisted: "What did you mean? Why didn't you die as soon as we came to you?"

Dazai twirled behind him, busy in a new round of *Hopscotch* through the sauce lines on the floor. "One question at the time," he reminded him, turning on the lighter. "*Yes and no* questions first."

“No one *asked* you.”

“But lessons are the weapon of the most capable warriors,” he quoted, dragging the tip of the flame by the boy’s jaw, lighting his mismatched eyes like fireflies. He pushed his hand away, face stubborn. “You insisted on taking care of the cockroach yourself. Least you could do is do it *properly*. One question.”

Still seething, Chuuya repeated: “Are you really different from the other *Souls*?”

Mihara stared at the ceiling, blood splattered through his chin and lips. He might have answered, if given a few moments more. Since they didn’t have that kind of time, Chuuya raised his foot and kicked one leg of his seat — when it lit up red, he rotated his body and slammed his combat boot straight into Mihara’s chest.

The chair stood still under the kick; instead, the man’s rib cage shrieked in protest. Chuuya kept his shoe where it was, pressing harder and harder as leaned close. “You look like an absolute wimp. Be true to your shit nature and start spilling your guts.”

“Don’t humor him —“

“Would you *shut up*?” Chuuya directed his next kick to the chin. Mihara’s head snapped back with a sharp shout; a tooth flew out of his mouth, landing on the floor.

Violence could hardly be taught — Mori had often insisted on that point. It could be directed, perhaps; a fountain in peculiar shades of red, kept from the streets and ordered to flood the marbled halls.

*It’s very easy, you see, he had explained, in lack of a manual, enthusiastic. You’re angry, but not really. He’s the cause, if you are. Is he, really? It doesn’t matter. You’re not angry, but you will look so, because it’s his fault, and he should know. Angry people are always right. You want to hurt him, and you have a right to. Because he’s the cause, and you’re angry.*

*Who is he?*, Chuuya hadn’t exactly scoffed.

He had shrugged. *Whoever Boss says, I guess.*

Chuuya’s gloves were dripping coagulations of blood onto his floor, by the time Mihara’s screams had turned into little more than whines. He had rolled the sleeves of his shirt up, but it had served little help. When he pushed his hair back, he left threads of blood all over the strands.

When he breathed in — the sides of his lips curling at Mihara’s useless attempt to slide back; the strange, instinctual spasm of his thumbs humming in finally, *finally* repaid energy — Dazai felt it burn through his lungs.

“Y-yes —“ Mihara gasped out, through his half shattered jaw. “Yes, yes —“

Chuuya pulled him forward by his hair. “Are you currently under Dante’s influence?”

“I — *nh* — I, he —“

His free hand wrapped around the man's chin, clenching around the fractured bone. His mouth was forced open by his thumb and little finger, pressing into his cheeks until his lips shaped an infinite sign. "You heard the asshole. *Yes or no?*"

"*Nuh — nh —*"

Clenching deeper, "Can't hear you."

"No!" He shook his head as much as he could, frantic eyes traveling to Dazai, mistaking him, for some bizarre reason, as a possible saving grace. "N — *nuh*, no —"

The boy pushed him back into his seat, shrugging his hand to get rid of lingering dirt. "Great. Now give me a sentence, yeah?"

It seemed like the challenge would tear Mihara apart; threads of reddened drool stuck from his bleeding teeth to his lap, to the floor. When he tossed his head back and forth, moaning, another tooth fell out. Every motion caused his legs to tense, and every tense leg caused a scream; Dazai could see the muscles twitch in the points where Chuuya had slammed his gravity-altered foot: femurs, fibulas, heel bones.

Dazai dangled forward, bored. He leaned his chin on Chuuya's shoulder; informed him: "Mori's books say the ribs hurt the most."

Promptly, glimmering fingers merely *knocked* on the man's chest. His shout was animalistic, dying down the final vowels into nothing more than voiceless white noises, drowning through the snot and the blood.

"Have you ever been under Dante's influence?"

Mihara breathed. It came out in sharp, hoarse whistles. "*Y-Yes.*"

Pushing forward, Dazai intervened: "Do you *remember* being under his influence?"

"He'll — *H'll k'll* — me, *he'll* —"

Chuuya grabbed his face again, ripping a groan out of his throat. "Worry less about what he might do to you, and more about what I'm currently doing."

He whimpered.

"Say, Pao," Dazai jumped the distance between them, leaning against the first shoulder the boy had fractured. "Don't tell me Dante was clumsy enough to build you upside down."

"No reason to let someone so willing to talk go, though, is there?" Chuuya replied, settling one hand on his other shoulder. He leaned all his weight on that support; no red glow appeared, but the bone cracked under his fingers all the same.

Mihara retched; Chuuya was quick to push his jaw up, black fingers a stark contrast to the deathly white skin scarlett stained, closing the gate before any actual vomit could get out. He

bit his tongue in the process of swallowing — as soon as he was allowed to separate his lips, he spit blood and drool on the carpet with a guttural burp.

“He —“ he gasped, uselessly backtracking on his seat, eyes so wide they were escaping their sockets — planted on their faces. “He made — mistake, he... his Ability didn’t work. He killed me. He *thought* he killed me. I just — I ran. I *ran* —“

Suspicion tilted Chuuya’s eyebrows. “How did you end up under his influence if he thought you were dead?”

“Answered — *I* — Answered the call, everyone answered the call — attack the Headquarters — I heard the order, but I — *nuh* — I didn’t have to —“

They exchanged a glance. “You chose not to answer the call?”

“I can — hear. *Hear him*. His orders. His Limbo, I... I only saw it once,” Tears filled his eyes. “Oh, it was — it was...”

Dazai nodded. “And *that’s* how you knew about the *two shadows*, right? He must have been sending orders for the mass suicide during our search.”

“And how come he failed?” Chuuya insisted. “He just — I don’t fucking know. Fed you the wrong cross? Counted twenty seven seconds wrong?”

“I didn’t — he —,” Mihara gulped, shaking his head. “You can’t, I *can’t* —“

Scoffing, the other boy stole the lighter from Dazai’s hands, throwing it in the air. When it landed in his palm, turned on, and he settled the flaming tip on Mihara’s cheek. Undeterred by the scream climbing up his throat, he pressed down harder.

Mihara retched, again, blood dripping from his mouth in sticky coagulations. A sharp smell was slowly poisoning the air; he had squatted in enough latrines to recognize it. Confused, senseless sounds left his agonizing lips, growing louder and louder. Only when Dazai tapped Chuuya’s elbow, signaling him to lower it, he let out a long, pained whine.

“Didn’t want any —“ He gasped, breathless, wryly. “I don’t, and he said — it was supposed to — work, I swear, I *swear*; — I don’t know why it didn’t, but — know *too much*. Too much, he — he will — Furata said —“

Humming, Dazai crossed his arms over the back of the man’s seat. He leaned over his bent spine, broken and panicking, nearing his face to Chuuya’s own to stage-whisper: “Look close, yes? This is where you should start paying attention. They always blabber about their loved ones, at some point. It’s the guilt making them talk.”

Chuuya didn’t look anywhere but at him, one hand still holding onto the man’s throat. “Guilt?”

“He stumbled into Dante’s hands because he was looking for money to buy her out, correct?” he explained. “If Dante is convinced he killed him, though — how does that work?”

Understanding morphed his eyes into tight lines, surveying Mihara's face carefully. He leaned gloved hands on the edges of the armrests, tilting his face to find the man's hazed gaze. "Oh. I know how it works. Suribachi City overflows with assholes like you. You made Furata your pledge, didn't you?"

Broken veins were scattered throughout the white of his eyes; as soon as he registered those words they seemed to multiply, red webs injecting terror and shame in the faded green. "S-She —"

"She told you she could wait," Chuuya interrupted him, moving closer. Mihara's flinch shook even the seat. "But Dante must have promised you a *shit ton* of money, plus a visit to Heaven, right? Told you you'd get everything after the war, at the simple cost of temporary ownership over your girl."

Dazai hummed. "Is that why you allowed her to keep you in the basement? You're big and strong. You could have escaped. You must have known her looking for *the two shadows* would have brought you problems. What, did you feel guilty?"

"You — You don't *understand!*" Mihara stuttered, frantically. "You — He, you have no idea of what — this is my fault. He promised me everything, but the Judgement failed, and — and now Furata..."

"Furata is his property," Chuuya concluded. "And since he thinks he killed you, you have no way of saving her — unless you reveal yourself to him. At which point he will *definitely* rip your face apart."

"The *Judgement*," Dazai echoed. "Is that the process that gets you under Dante's influence?"

Hesitant, he nodded.

"*Beautiful* name. Onto the important stuff. You're still a *Soul*, even if mysterious circumstances supposedly gave you autonomy, correct? That means you can bring us to Dante."

"Not that you have a choice," the other voy clarified. "You're telling us where he's hiding. Every *Soul* must know, or there wouldn't be any need to kill them off. Where's the fucker?"

Silence.

At the man's stubborn refusal to mold his whines into something comprehensible, he moved his hands from the armrests to circle his wrists, right upon the rope.

Tightening his fingers, slow and with intent, he spelled out: "This might come as a surprise to you, but you're dead meat all the same. No need to fear Dante's gonna get you. He isn't," Chuuya's voice stayed casual; he nodded along to the man's shaking, horrified head. "I'm gonna get you first."

"Y-You —" Mihara stammered, fingers spasming in his grasp. "You — *If* I talk, can I —"



“Can you go?” Chuuya concluded, in his stead. “Fuck, *no*. You think I’m a moron or something?”

Clearing his throat, Dazai offered him a smile. “You’re being too tough, Hatrack! I beg you to forgive him, Pao. It’s a newbies’ method.”

The wood creaked under his grip, his teeth gritted against each other. “Who the *fuck* are you —“

“Listen, why don’t you see it like this,” he insisted. “If you talk, I’ll get you a quick death. I’ve got a gun, you know? Freshly recharged. You won’t even feel a thing. No one more than me understands the hideousness of unnecessary pain. In fact, wait here a second —“

He skipped his way behind the counter, humming cheerfully as he searched. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Chuuya called.

Victorious, he showed off a bowl with leftover vegetables and a pair of chopsticks. As soon as he got close enough for the smell to fill his destroyed nostrils, Mihara eyed the food as if he had never seen anything quite similar. Dazai dragged his sleeve lower down his hand, covering the side of his palm — ignoring the man’s flinch as he got closer, he wiped the overflowing blood off his lips.

“That’s better,” he said. “Now, say *aaaah*...”

Under Chuuya’s suspicious glance, he dropped the food between Mihara’s shaking lips. Starved and exhausted as he was, it only took him three bites to finish everything off.

“We’re on a bit of a tight schedule, you see,” he continued, apologetic. “We need you to collaborate. You’ll die at the end of it, yes — but we promise to free Furata in your stead. That would make you happy, wouldn’t it? Who wouldn’t want to die happy?” He sighed. “If you don’t want to, though — I’m sure my partner here can make sure your death is everything I’d never wish mine to be. He’s got *magic* fingers, did you know?”

The spider crawling up and down the cracks in his eyes was a terrified creature. He was Port Mafia — but the lowest kind. Any higher, he wouldn’t have said a word. Any higher, he would have probably pretended not to fear the two of them.

“So,” Dazai asked, tapping his lips with the chopsticks. Blood and sauce mixed with snot; he dragged them down, painting lines on his chin. “*How* do we get to Dante?”

Mihara gulped, unable to look away, powerless to resist the need to keep his eyes on Chuuya’s own as well. A whistling sound left his throat, caged by lips moving aimlessly in the air. “You *c-can’t* stop him.”

“We can decide that on our own,” Chuuya reassured him. “What are you, *Input Man*?”

“No, you don’t — you *can’t*. He’s — He can end it all whenever he wants. He’s just waiting for — for you. He’s just waiting for you,” Breathing harshly, sharply, he begged Dazai with his blurred gaze. “And the *Book*, you know it — The *Book* will —“

He paused.

*There's a room*, Mori had explained, his palm somehow both cold and sweaty on his eyes, his voice the only lighthouse in the sea of shadows. Dazai had learned to walk his way down darker paths, though; he could feel every piece of furniture, every smile lingering on the doctor's lips. *There's a room, and you're the only one allowed inside.*

*It has wide walls and no windows. The door is only yours to use. If you ever need to see with both your eyes, that's where you need to go.*

Distantly, Chuuya's voice was a distorted murmur, scratching all the wrong parts of his mind. *What book?* Mihara was still staring at him, still talking with his deer eyes, still talking. Dazai couldn't remember if he had been smiling — he knew he wasn't anymore. He knew his arms burned, and his legs were there, attached to his body, and that he was *real*, and wasn't that a grievous enough thing?

The chopsticks shook in his hands, following spasming fingers. *Lisichka, what's that in your hands?*

Someone was screaming. It was a distinctively irritating sound. It took him a moment to realize it was too close; Mihara was tearing his vocal chords to shreds, struggling against his seat, eyes —

No.

No eyes — Dazai's chopsticks had sank into each of them, bloodied and cracked all the way to their middle.

“Oh,” he said. *There's a room.* “See, that's what happens when people change the subject.”

Swiftly, he extracted the chopsticks. They made a wet, visceral sound; splattered blood onto his face, warm and sticky and distinctively vicious against the bandages. Under Mihara's howls, he met Chuuya's unimpressed gaze — he hadn't taken a single step back.

“That's disgusting,” he made sure to inform him, still. An entire fraction of his eyes was evaluating Dazai head to foot, hidden behind Arcade screens and voice cracks. “And if he passes out, I'm blaming you.”

“Soul,” Mihara gasped, through the screaming and the sobbing. “*You, Soul, Soul* — find him —“

Politely, Dazai reminded him: “Yes, yes, we're aware. Which is why you need to —“

Realization hit him straight in the head, leaving him breathless.

“Oh,” he corrected himself. “Ah. Now I get it. You're saying he can do it?”

“Need to —“ the man swore, blinking destroyed eyelashes upon ruined organs, suffering with every movement. He sobbed like a child, loud and desperate, whines breaking the sounds at

the tips, as desperate as gulps of air. “Need to — his influence, need to get him — He can get you to him. He can.”

Dazai squinted. “How do I know he won’t get him to commit a good old style suicide?”

“Too *precious*. Too powerful. Can’t risk to lose him, can’t — you, you *demon* — I promise, I promise, *stop*, I *promise*, I *promise*, I *promise* — “

He sighed, throwing the chopsticks aside. “This is rather embarrassing. I was *considering* leaving you alive, but you’ve witnessed my obliviousness — Chuuya, please, go ahead.”

“*Wait!*” Mihara screeched, fighting against his restraints, tearing his skin apart. The seat shook so violently it almost fell; when Chuuya raised his fist again, he contorted his head, trying to push himself back with the sheer power of will.

It was, as most fights were, useless. His hand lit up crimson, bright and vivid, charged to its maximum weight. The sound it made when it crumpled against one side of Mihara’s skull wasn’t familiar, but it fit to a point in an orchestra Dazai’s had never missed a concert of. The hit snapped his neck on impact — dropping the dead weight of his head against his chest as his body shut down.

In the silence, Chuuya cracked his knuckles.

Over a corpse, dropping blood onto the carpet with the efficiency of a clock — *torture is rhythm*, he reminded himself, *is tic, toc, toc, tic, scream* — both their hands dangled at their sides, stained and sticky.

On the ceiling, the lights seemed to flicker.

Dazai knew to expect it, so he watched the rush of energy leave Chuuya’s eyes — sudden like a fever. It left him swaying forward, for a single moment; hands reaching for something else to decay. When they didn’t find it, he set his jaw — clumsily wiping blood off his face like a child.

“I’m *him*, aren’t I?” Chuuya asked, a life later, voice blank. He raised his eyes from the corpse; met his own like he knew he had been watching, and couldn’t quite think of a reason to tell him to stop. “*I’m* the one who can get us to him.”

Dazai snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth, tasting rust. He shrugged his hands, watching blood drops land on his lips.

“You’re a *Soul*, yes,” he confirmed. “A *Soul* with a valuable Ability and *great* connections, who he’d be a fool to kill,” The abandoned rice on the ground had mixed with the blood, almost turning into that strawberry flavor Elise liked to pretend to eat. “Who he would be afraid to lose.”

“But,” Intolerance battled angry features — but felt a descent into default. “But I don’t *know* where the fucker is.”

“Because you’re not under his influence,” He shrugged, sharply turning around to study their map. A smile made its way up his lips; he passed his palm over it, unsurprised when all that came off was red. “The solution is pretty easy. You might even like it.”

Chuuya sighed, kicking the corpse starting to stink up his living room. Not quite Mafia etiquette; given the way his foot almost got *stuck*, Dazai politely averted his eyes. The first time he had tortured a man, Mori had locked him in the bathroom of the clinic, devoid of all that was sharp and poison.

*Come out when it feels like it was wrong*, he had said, with a smile that reeked of affection. Dazai had never understood if he believed inflicting those lessons would birth empathy or hatred. *Then we start again.*

He wondered if the Sheep had ever stayed to watch him do it.

“Alright,” Chuuya crossed his arms. “How do we get me under mind control?”

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### **Ten hours after the funeral.**

There were two police cars at the entrance of their meeting spot — just far away enough for it to be a coincidence.

As soon as his feet touched the roof of the first of the warehouses, Dazai studied them. Apart from the silent police lights on top of them, they were barely visible — he knew cops patrolled the Port area every night; they usually kept away from the deepest corners of that Mafia territory, though.

“— *number of disappearances has doubled up in the lasts month alone*,” the distant voice of a radio was saying, through statics and the shattered windows of the warehouse. It had *attempted* to be a *Nine Rings* base, until they had led a squad to get rid of them; it seemed they had left some equipment behind, though. “— *authorities — can’t help but wonder — what is the real nature of these mysterious disappearances? Does it have to do with the rising levels of gang violence our city has experienced in the past weeks? Can the police be blamed for their leniency in —*”

Dazai yawned.

He had felt his presence as soon as landed on the roof. Chuuya wasn't any sound in particular — built for unicity, yet unable to accomplish it. But he was *loud*. He'd electrified the air since the first moment Dazai had laid his eyes on him, leaving the taste of a storm bound to come on his tongue. Louder than anything else.

He walked to the edge of the roof of the abandoned warehouse. There was no railing; when the tip of his shoes caressed the dark emptiness under his eyes, he bent his body ninety degrees. "Aren't you supposed to be lying low, zombie boy?"

"This is the best you get," Chuuya replied. "Any lower, I'd have to be in your pathetic shoes."

A faint red glow surrounded his body, cooling the air he occupied. He was sitting cross legged on the front wall of the warehouse, mere feet from Dazai's bent body, their chest parallel lines.

Wisely, he'd settled just far enough that he couldn't reach out and nullify him. He watched the sleeves of his coat float. "Anything yet?"

He shrugged. "No. Should my self-esteem be dented?"

"It depends. Is Dante your type?"

"Not really," His black mask hid the hesitance he could see crinkle the skin around his eyes. Slowly, he dared: "V, on the other hand —"

"The dead boy goes for the dead man," Dazai conceded. "Happy ending for everyone involved."

Chuuya snorted. His camouflage would have been more trustable if he'd gotten rid of the hat as well — but they were still laying their *anti-Corruption* faith in the metal lining inside it.

"We should rob a bank," he suggested.

Chuuya glanced up. "Boss would get mad."

"We should rob a bank *naked*," he replied. "We're basically kids. Nobody can look at the security cameras."

Confusion swam between his eyes. Eventually, he blinked. "That can't be right."

"That's easy, then," he said. "Just trust me."

He made a face.

His camouflage, he considered, would have also been less suspicious if he had refrained from defying the laws of gravity. The warehouse was one in two lines of identical buildings facing the port; waves crashing against the railings filled the night in a lonely symphony — but Dazai had never been so foolish as to believe *silence* meant *absence*.

The police car lights flickered.

“If I ask you not to run, do you think your *Soul* -self will listen to me?” he wondered. “It’s such a beautiful night. Perfect for a walk by the ocean. Perfect for a suicide, actually.”

“Control your urges,” Chuuya grunted, fiddling with the buttons of his jacket — the only true sign of agitation. “We’re not trying to serve Dante victory on a silver plate.”

Tension hadn’t marked a single inch of his body since the plan had been sent into motion — true to his stubborn nature, he’d sworn a lot, bought himself a bottle of wine to celebrate his funeral, and trained by punching holes on the concrete.

“Was it that you didn’t want to feel like you had with *Corruption* again,” he questioned — because at times, he caught him looking at his own hands as if uncertain of their true owner, “Or that you didn’t want somebody to fiddle with your body and mind again?”

Chuuya’s blue eye had disappeared through the dim waves of flickering light poles; the amber one, though, settled on him, battling the outspoken desires of his turned head.

“Both, I guess,” he concluded, blankly. Then, as if it was nothing: “And the thing you want from Dante — just how much did it need me to end up under his influence?”

He paused.

Miscalculation, clearly. The brain and the brawn, they went around calling them, still. Another mistake on their part — Dazai, who downed companionship with the same boredom he dedicated to the pills in his pocket, that will never kill him but *might*, and that Mori disliked vividly, *still* would never willingly work with someone who wasn’t —

Mori would have knocked on his forehead, amused and absolutely enraged. Little prodigy with stage fright. *How dare you give keys out freely and forget to change the lock?*

“Heavy accusations,” he sighed, dramatic and unserious and a *warning*, one that he already knew wouldn’t be taken for what it was. “What gave me away? Enlighten me.”

“You freaking the fuck out the second time someone mentioned this *book* was certainly a clue,” Chuuya answered, easily. His hair floated like a halo around his face; underwater and sinking in the midnight air. “I also believe that if you wanted Dante dead, he’d *be* dead. You’re sneaky like that. You enjoy watching the Port Mafia struggle; it’s why we’ve been stuck for months. If he’s alive, that means you think you can get something out of him. Something you need.”

He tilted his head. “What’s your theory, then?”

“Who knows. Maybe you *do* want me dead.”

“You ever doubted it?”

“You’re not really like me,” Chuuya answered, which wasn’t an answer at all.

“This might surprise you,” he replied, sincerely. “But your demise only interests me in the realm of what I consider personal entertainment. Who knows, I might have even grown fond of you!”

“Don’t make me throw up.”

He deflated. “Whatever.”

“You know who I *almost* miss?”

Dazai blinked. Dared, “The... Flags?”

“No. I mean — *Yes*, but. Adam.”

A vaguely metallic sound echoed in the back of his skull. “I think I’m slowly convincing myself I made him up.”

“Fucking gum-eating android,” he muttered, but the fondness was there — the same shade of red and green of Albatross’ chandelier, the same tilt of his mouth when he remembered Iceman’s favorite brand of cigarettes. “You know what his greatest dream was?”

“Dystopian robotic apocalypse in the form of political overthrow by his peers?”

Chuuya huffed. “Not at all. But he did watch shitty apocalyptic movies whenever he was feeling down. I think you’re kinda like that.”

Privately, Dazai wasn’t sure of what he was supposed to be more upset about: being compared to a British automaton or being compared to someone who’d ever get bored enough to fantasize about a political *coup d’etat*. “Sci-fi isn’t exactly my genre.”

“No, like — whenever something doesn’t go like you expect it to, you just revert to your. I don’t fucking know. Your, *I am omniscient and you are all chess pieces to me*,” He rolled his eyes so far his head could have fallen with the weight. “You said you wouldn’t hide stuff. Then Dante started one-upping you, killing his *Souls* right under our nose — and you immediately returned to your obsessive megalomania. Boring.”

There were many words he was saying.

Dazai could hear them, so obviously, they were being spoken. Perceiving their hum wasn’t hard; it was concentrating on what their association meant that challenged him. He blinked, opened his mouth — closed it again.

“You think you’re a chess piece?” was all that left his lips.

Chuuya hummed. “Everyone is. I find it interesting that you don’t believe I’ll make you pay for it someday.”

Dazai leaned forward — dangerously so. He tasted the salty oxygen drying his lips, ignoring the metallic pull of his own gravity. He could have lied to him. It was rather easy, lying to

dogs. They usually came barking and wagging their tails soon enough. Short memory or foolishness to blame; Chuuya was neither of those things.

“You’re not,” he concluded, calculated, “*Just* a chess piece.”

“Thank you. I aspire to be multi-faceted.”

“If you think I treat you like one, you clearly haven’t seen me interact with most mafiosi.”

“*Most mafiosi* are assholes.”

“Hey,” he remembered, suddenly. “We *are* mafiosi.”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I’m an asshole. That’s fine. You know, Q once told me they think it’d do you good to admit you’re one too,” A frown overtook his traits. “Wonder where the brat is, right now.”

“To both our displeasure, I promised you to actually work together,” Dazai said. “Here’s promise number two: I wasn’t lying about the partner thing.”

“And promise number three?”

The sea hummed; he echoed the sound, minimizing it, trapping it. “Trust.”

His head tilted back, further and further, exposing the pale line of his throat, the black circle breaking it in two, his Adam’s apple. How many hours had he spent in that same position, ever since he’d broken free from the military facility? Perhaps he’d been a normal sight in Suribachi City — *don’t freak out about the boy sitting on the walls. He’s just bored.*

“Here’s promise number four,” Chuuya told him. “If you fuck me over, I’ll kill you.”

He watched his arms reach out — studied each fraction of movement, each ounce of air moving aside to let them through; counted the leather lines on the gloves a mere rock-throw from his nose.

An offering, hesitancy put aside; a pale copy of eyes that still matched putting their fate in his hands, even at the cost of the answer they wanted the most. It seemed so long ago. What a rare thing it was, to not be a giver.

“Worry about the bad guys,” he told him. “That’s who we’re killing.”

“Silly fucking moron,” was his sugary sweet remark, unfit for all his leather and all his vibrant *red*. “We are the bad guys.”

Dazai grasped his hands.

*No Longer Human* tickled the hollow caves of his bones, reminding him of its constant presence, dormant but never gone. Something in nullifying others emptied out every artery in his body. It was a pain he could stand — a pain he would stand until the rest of his days.



*Silly*, he thought — every nerve in his hands struck by the sensation of leather and sweat, twinning his fingers, holding tight. He wondered if his flesh could shock him; if he blamed him, even just a bit, be it for an electrified spear or the way he left his shoes all untied in his *genkan* or the way Arahabaki had shrieked, *free*. Nullified, Chuuya weighed as much as the coat on his shoulders — but it felt less like incumbency, and more like a debt he'd never repay.

*Silly, I'm not letting you fall.*

He pulled the other boy up; rock-climbing to the edge of the building, Chuuya didn't let go of him until his feet were on the ground again.

After brushing invisible dust off his clothing, he huffed: "You know, with this forced cooperation thing, you'd think we would have more casual conversations."

The idea was laughable, of course. "When we try those, we get kicked out of diners," he reminded him.

Another huff.

Most days, he wanted to know what he thought about time travel — what his physics textbooks said about space, what he believed God looked like, what he supposed the *Book* was, what his mind — so similar to those he'd spent his entire life around; so *different* in heart — would say about the things Dazai's own conjured in Mori's torture books.

Some days, though —

"Alright," he said. "It's your birthday soon, isn't it?"

Chuuya blinked. "Of course you'd know, you creepy fucker."

"I respect my elders."

"Why don't you respect *this* —"

"*Oh*," he interrupted him, squinting at the darkness of the street. "Here they are."

When they stopped in the makeshift square at the center of the warehouses' ground, Koda Katsumi was scratching the edges of a brightly white emergency kit with nervous, well cut nails.

"You didn't seriously bring *him* along," Chuuya wasted no time hissing, a familiarity in his cadence that grated against Dazai's nerves, and his eyes set to an unassuming pick-up truck parked a stone-throw from them. "I said *someone reliable*."

"He wouldn't let Tsuchiya come alone," the man explained, apologetic, glancing shyly in Dazai's direction. "Not after —" He trailed off.

"After the engagement?" Dazai blinked, owlsh. "I'm a bit offended we weren't invited."

Koda made a face. “*T-They* aren’t —“

Clearing his voice, Chuuya cut in: “Where the hell is Tsuchiya, anyway? ‘S cool if she brought you, but I specifically requested —“

“*Ah*,” he interrupted, glancing anxiously at the car. His breathing was shallow. “Yukio is — There’s been an accident. We came straight from the extraction point; that’s why Noguchi followed. With — with Executive Ace’s team.”

“Executive Ace’s team?” Dazai echoed.

Something akin to a shut door turned the other boy’s features into stone. With a voice softer than impudence, he dared: “Doctor Tsuchiya?”

A vein in Koda’s clenched jaw trembled. He kept his gaze on the vague silhouettes behind the truck’s windshield; he shook his head.

Dazai took the hit in silence.

“Shit,” Chuuya said. His hands fell out of his pockets; he kicked the front of his shoe against the concrete, opening a small crack. With *feeling* — though Dazai couldn’t guess which one — he insisted: “*Shit*.”

They didn’t move to trace letters or knock combinations; but when Dazai met his eyes, the message was clear. They had asked Tsuchiya to investigate her sister’s second-hand Ability. Ace’s mission hadn’t been without risks — it didn’t necessarily mean *anything*, apart from future complications for the Executive.

The timing, though, was too precise.

Dazai opened his mouth to get on with it; he was interrupted by Chuuya’s complicated gaze, set on the car. “How’s she holding up?”

“I don’t think she’s had much time to think about her shit at all,” a new voice intervened, right before Koda could open his mouth. Noguchi was carrying a rifle behind his shoulders, arms raised, rendering his frame ever bulkier and taller than it normally was — venom had turned his eyes red. “Hard to, when her *superiors* put her in charge of the extraction team.”

“It’s not like we knew,” Dazai lamented. “You’re always so quick to accuse. Condolences for her loss. Her tools. Are they safe?”

Noguchi’s face turned blank. In front of him, Koda flinched, alarmed, turning paler than his whitish-blond hair. Sending a pointed look to Chuuya, he started: “Sir, please —“

“She can have tomorrow off,” the boy said, eyes running across calculations they couldn’t see. Dazai knew their numbers, though; knew there weren’t enough people to trust with the job. “But I can’t do more than that. We need everyone we can get our hands on.”

“Not like you got a day off when Verlaine was around,” Dazai muttered, eyes to the sky. “The meaning of *emergency* is self-explanatory.”

If gazes could have killed, Chuuya's own would have turned him into a dusty trace on the wet concrete. Still, *something* was stuck in the corners. "Her sister died. Shut the fuck up."

"You know better than me that we can't afford to waste time on sympathies," Dazai said, much lower, leaning his face down. The *thing* on his face, rotting wisteria and blank eyes — he'd seen it countless times. As he followed his brother's traces up and down Yokohama, ignoring how the blood of his friends was still stuck to his soles; as he barked and dealt with Dazai's schemes with a knife wound in his side and the handprints of his only family on the blade. As he mocked Dazai's insistence that he *could* — that he *would* — come up with a plan that wouldn't cost him the only proof he could ever obtain about his past. "Do as you preach, or don't preach at all."

"I know my limits," Chuuya replied. "You won't make me decide others' own."

"I'm not. The *Nine Rings* are."

The fish tattoo on Noguchi's face moved with him when he laughed humorlessly, breaking their stare down. Koda took a step back. "What else should one expect from *you* two."

Chuuya glared. "Excuse me?"

Noguchi almost took a step forward. His whole body was sharp lines and hostility; distantly, Dazai considered that his hands were definitely big enough to crush both of their skulls. The man didn't add anything; he seemed content to stick his tongue in his cheek and glare at nothing at all.

"Sir," Koda stuttered, eyes flying from one glacial face to the other, hands torturing each other. "*Chuuya*, it's just — we came straight from the announcement meeting, she's had no —"

"Half of the syndicate has lost someone in the past few weeks," Dazai commented, idly. "If we had time for that, we would switch from weapon manufacturer to funerary house."

Noguchi's nostrils flared.

"I'm sorry for Tsuchiya," Chuuya said, harsh and *sincere*. A car crash coming to life. "But you're slowing down the process. Mourning is her right — I *understand*. We're giving it to her. But we need to understand the damage the organization has suffered because of her loss. *That* is what *I* need to be concerned about."

At that, even Koda looked startled.

With a snarl, Noguchi pushed him to the side, walking right up to Chuuya's nose. He was several heads taller than him, much wider — his grip on his gun was easy enough to interpret.

"Take it back," the man warned, barely a whisper. "Take it back *right now*, bastard."

"Noguchi," Koda hissed.

“Shut your fucking mouth. *This* is the son of a bitch you want me to trust?” He spit on the ground; the coagulation of bitter drool landed right between Chuuya’s feet. A few droplets hit Dazai’s shoes. His lips quivered. “Him, and Boss’ psychotic bitch? With their shit plans *no one* is allowed to know about, and their fucking little theatre plays of funerals? Tell your buddy to *apologize* —“

“I can’t,” Chuuya replied, untouched by the scrunched up tattoo on his face — calmer than he had expected him to be. “And I bet Tsuchiya understands it, too. Where is she?”

“You think I’d let you —“

“This isn’t your decision to make. Tsuchiya Mi was a *fundamental* asset. We’ve just lost one of our most useful Ability Users. Since you’ve been going around claiming *you* should have been made commander instead — I’m sure you understand how much of an issue that is for every single one of us, correct?”

“Fucking *idiotic* me, expecting you to have some respect for the dead,” Noguchi growled — a tad too meaningful for it not to hide information. A tad too grieving, for a grief that wasn’t even his.

He put two hands on Chuuya’s shoulders. He pushed.

*Oh*, Dazai thought, dangerously amused, watching the other boy stand incredibly still. His crimson glow painted the air with barely repressed ferocity — sunset over a war field. *Bad choice*.

Chuuya stared. “Respect for the dead,” he spelled out, very slow.

One step forward; the faded ground under his foot shattered. Noguchi didn’t move.

“You want to talk to *me* about respecting the dead?” he echoed, again, something endlessly unamused curling his lips. “When you’ve been sending your men to stalk us for *weeks*, knowing that they’d be declared conspirators and possibly killed in *your* stead? When every mission that’s failed has failed because of your petty, *childish* insistence on being nothing but a stubborn, miserable, inefficient *piece of shit*?”

Koda held his breath. Dazai watched.

“Do not blame your incompetence on me,” Noguchi warned, low.

“I’ll blame whatever the fuck I want on whoever the fuck I want,” Chuuya snapped. “I’m your superior. You know how many men — how many of *my* —“ His voice bent on a sound; something a tad too sharp to be anger, “ — Were killed in the last few weeks? She can cry in a corner until someone finds her and snipes her damn head, or she can *do something about it*. That’s not your decision to make. Whether you like it or not, you’re under *my* orders — and my orders are to *fucking do something about it*, so she can cry the rest of her life out in the aftermath. *Alive*. We keep moving and we make them pay, and we watch each other’s backs, and we *shut the fuck up* when our superiors are *talking*. ”

“Enough.”

As if rain had taken the color with itself and bled it down her curved shoulders, the grass green of Tsuchiya Yukio’s hair was messily faded near the tips. Perhaps, Dazai considered, she had missed her dyeing appointment for the war. Perhaps it was the unspeakable in her eyes — the fractured edges of a glass Dazai had never quite felt the coldness of.

*Mourning is a waste of space*, Mori had said, the day they had passed by the Under Port to wave Sama goodbye. Then, he had frowned. *Or maybe the filling of it. I can’t never remember.*

“Enough,” Tsuchiya repeated. Her voice was stiffer than concrete. She met their eyes with her chin raised, taking just the inch of a step *more* to separate herself from Noguchi. “I apologize for the delay. I won’t waste your time again.”

“Yukio,” Noguchi insisted.

“I said *enough*,” She set her jaw, looking at him with something inscrutable between dried tear tracks. “Thank you. But this is what I’m here for.”

Slowly, Chuuya deflated. The tension was still sticking to his nails, though — the spasms had nothing quite to do with electricity. He gazed at Noguchi like he couldn’t understand what to look for; Dazai felt the pieces fall together with blinking ease. *Ah*, he considered. *Ah*.

“Well, this is wonderful,” Dazai intervened, shattering the silence with his most unimpressed smile. *This is why I don’t make friends*, he thought. “Chuuya, why don’t you take advantage of the situation to explain the plan to our guests? And to ask Tsuchiya if using her sister’s tools will come with a cost or not.”

The boy curled an eyebrow. “What, you’re busy?”

“I’m about to be.” He searched underneath his coat, humming; he extracted his gun. With the wisdom of someone who knew they would be the first target, Noguchi was the quickest to jump ten steps back, one hand outstretched in front of a startled Tsuchiya. Chuuya didn’t move an inch.

Koda went down with a guttural gasp.

“As an incentive to show us your skills,” Dazai explained, nodding towards Tsuchiya with the weapon, as the bony body hit the concrete in a disturbingly wet squelch. The stain on his chest, right upon his heart, bloomed wider and wider with every heavy breath he took — when Tsuchiya yelped and fell to her knees next to him, he settled terrified bloodshot eyes on her. “So don’t get too distracted, Yukio, yes?”

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?” Chuuya half shouted, pushing him to get to Koda. But Dazai could see the gears turn in his head in real time, as he watched the woman extract the metal box from her coat. He didn’t pay it any mind.

Snapshots blinded his sight, flashes and bruises — the hands around his collar; the distance between his shoes and the ground; the *electric* shock that went through his spine when his back was slammed against the wall of the warehouse.

Everything wavered violently, blurring his vision; when he got it back, Noguchi's fish tattoo was mere inches from his face.

Dazai's gun settled under his chin.

"There you are," he said, as the man froze, liquified rage in his eyes. *Ah*, he thought, *that's why Chuuya won't kill him*. All bleeding loyalty. "Come on. The smell of fresh blood is horrid. Let's talk in your car."

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The pick-up truck smelled of excessively old gunpowder and something specifically more sophisticated. Dazai settled on the passenger's seat, just to make sure Noguchi's trembling fists would not waste both of their time smashing his nose against the steering wheel.

"You fucking tried to kill him to get *me*?" Noguchi growled, staring through the windshield at the mess of limbs on the faraway ground.

He shrugged. Something emerald shone in between Tsuchiya's hands; Chuuya held Koda's own. "You don't seem the type who would accept a secretary-set-up meeting."

His laughter was humorless. "And when I stick my fist down your throat? Have you planned for *that* too?"

"Of course," he replied. "That's assuming you're stupid enough to lay your hands on me even more than you've already done, though."

"You think I won't?"

"Yes," Dazai answered, honestly. "I really do think that."

Something in his tone seemed to have convinced Noguchi. Perhaps he'd found his answer on his face; on the falling tilt of his mouth — he could feel it, free of the unexercised strain that sometimes invaded his muscles when he smiled. *At your core, Dazai*, Mori liked to tell him, *I think you're a rather angry young boy*.

*And you're a sad old man*, he'd usually reply, fully aware that the two of them shared their core features everyday a bit more. *Who's worse?*

The man struggled in his seat. Succinctly, he snapped: "What the fuck is wrong with you two?"

He hummed. "Chuuya could use some dog tendencies less."

"She could have healed a *wound*. You could have just — cut my skin, or —"

"For my own reasons, I needed to be sure that the tools could bring the wounded back from almost death," Dazai nodded. "There's a reason I didn't stick around to hear Tsuchiya's life story — unfortunately for him, Chuuya doesn't have access to the Intelligence files *I* have. I know it all — the benefactor who took her and her sister in. The sweet way the man treated Tsuchiya," He tilted his head back. "The *sweeter* way he treated his sister. That's why the Doctor had it written on her will that the tools had to be destroyed after she died, correct? She didn't want to further that man's legacy."

A muscle in Noguchi's jaw fluttered. He wouldn't answer, Dazai knew. He didn't need him to.

"We can't let her destroy them, of course," he continued, as if obvious. The man stiffened. "Such a powerful Ability — It speeds up the healing process, correct? There's a limit to the people she can heal, but it should be just good enough. I am particularly amused by dying wishes, and I'm sure Chuuya would respect them much more than me — but Mori would never let her proceed. And I act on Mori's orders."

"Leave her alone," Noguchi managed to spit out. "She's been through enough."

Dazai ignored him. "Abilities like that are fascinating, aren't they?" he said. "Abilities, in their most natural state — they're inherent to a person. They accommodate their hosts. For one to be passed down to whoever the User decides — The cases are rare and scattered. There's probably only one more of its kind in Yokohama; two at most."

"She's not an Ability. She's —"

"You're something of a people man, aren't you? I'm sure the team will be ecstatic to have you explain everything to them. They trust you more than they trust the two of us, certainly," Dazai paused. "Or is it respect? Fear, maybe?"

"No," he corrected himself. A complicated expression had taken over Noguchi's traits. "No, it's not fear. You're not that kind of man. You like loyalty. You don't want second-hand respect — *unstable*, walking on the fragile shells of terror," A scoff escaped his lips. "Chuuya is a bit like you. Less naive, more willing to shoot an asshole in the face. Not you, though. He won't let me kill you."

"And it's unfortunate," Dazai explained, dropping lower on his seat, childishly kicking his feet against the floor of the car. He turned to look at the man; he attempted not to flinch. "Because, Noguchi Toru — I really, *really*, want to kill you."

His body was tense; his knuckles white around the steering wheel. With a ferocious kind of hesitance, violent in its pretense to not be there, he encouraged: “Do it, then, *demon*. If you’re so damn sure —”

“If you don’t mind reminding me,” he cut through, nonplussed. “Which one happened first? Me not accepting you into the *Secret Force Unit*, or Chuuya indirectly causing the death of your beloved superior, Albatross?”

Over the gates of the warehouses’ ground, the distant police lights shone intermittently. Koda was sitting up, healed and breathing; Chuuya was gesticulating viciously, explaining a familiar plan. Dazai had never shot one of his friends before. He could only imagine how well it would end for him.

Noguchi had turned into stone.

“I —” He licked his lips. “How do you —”

He tapped the pin on his tie — some old melody Tanaki liked to hum. “The Hatrack and I are severely underappreciated, — and offensively overworked, by the way — but your antagonism was too vicious to be mere jealousy. I didn’t get it. Going to such lengths just to try to get rid of two brats in temporary leading positions — you even asked the *ever-so-neutral* Tsuchiya to help. No one else knew where we were going, that night after the dog fight. So much dedication.”

As mediocre as the *Secret Force Squad* could sometimes be, they were all several steps ahead of the man’s current abilities. As for Albatross — stealing some old documents from his apartment had been much easier; especially, once he’d caught a glimpse of Noguchi’s face in the photographs all over the kitchen.

“My personal feelings don’t —,” Noguchi stuttered, several moments later. Ruffled feathers and mourning lips. “Both of those — it was a long time ago. It doesn’t change the fact that Boss put you on a pedestal you don’t deserve, and yet neither one of you has gotten us out of this war.”

“*Yet* being the important bit,” he chirped. “If you’ll let me illustrate our plan? I think you’ll like it as much as I do. I need you to spread some horrible, *horrible* rumors about Chuuya.”

Noguchi paused. “Rumors?”

“Well, that’s the *final* part. The start — I’m sure Koda and Tsuchiya will be happy to tell you all about it. It’s the middle that’s important,” Ge tilted his head. “Unless you want the war to go all the way to August.”

Predictably, he folded.

Dazai started explaining.

The mess of reactions stuck to his face once he was done was entertaining, but he only studied it to find sincere disbelief. Noguchi seemed to have reached a simple enough



conclusion — Dazai usually wore another face whenever he felt like tricking his subordinates.

He breathed out: “But why not tell the men any of this?”

Dazai waved the idea away with one hand. “That’s Boss’ business. Why ask *me*? Don’t tell me the, *Boss’ little bitch*, comment was meant to be an honest taunt. That’s nonsensical even for you.”

“But —” he insisted. “This is — Is this why — The suicide pills?”

“I’d almost forgotten — suicide sounds terribly boring when I’m not the one who’s dying. *Alas*, Boss wouldn’t give me the pills,” He sighed, fingers itching for the things he *did* have in his pocket. “Chuuya made the same face when he found out about them, by the way.”

Noguchi appeared deeply uncomfortable. “Fuck you telling me that for?”

“I don’t know,” he mused. “Sometimes it’s fun to leave hints.”

“Hints?”

“Yes,” Dazai yawned. The man stood a bit straighter; like most Port Mafia members, he was smart enough to understand when their resident demon’s mood started swinging in the wrong direction. “I want to make this as clear as possible, Noguchi. I would have found you even if Tsuchiya hadn’t chosen to bring you along — I knew she would, though. People are stupid like that. That stupidity is, very rarely, useful — it tells me you won’t mess this up, if you’ve got lives on the line.”

“The *Souls* are going to die by the end of the week. *All* of them,” he specified. “The ones from our ranks that we can save, we’ll try to save. It won’t be all of them. Inevitable calculations. Boss will probably appoint me as the official survey for their unofficial return to normality. Do you *know*,” He kept his eyes to the heartwarming view outside the windshield, “How incredibly *easy* it would be for me to lie?”

Horror dawned on Noguchi’s face. “You — you *can’t* just —”

Dazai tilted his head. “Can’t I?”

“What the fuck do you *want*?”

“Some respect would be nice,” he started listing off, pressing casual buttons at reach. The chant went up and down: “A day off — A new gaming console — to watch most people in this syndicate spontaneously catch fire. To *set* fire to the rest. To rip your pathetic head off your body and gift it to Chuuya in some pretty box, so that maybe he’ll stop bitching about *gaining respect*.”

Bravely enough — paler than a sheet — Noguchi didn’t do him the favor of gulping.

“Here’s another thing I want: to tear him apart and listen to his dying screams. People try to kill him all the time, but *me*? I’d be so good at it.” He sighed. “But that’s stuff I can’t have.”

Not yet, anyway. So here's something more sensible — I want you to do your job well. And if anything you do to complete this job — be it unnecessary risks, or your petty thirst for pointless *revenge* — ends up bothering me or my unrealistic aims —“ He turned to look at the man. “You’ll regret not managing to put a bomb under at least one of my cars. Alright?”

It was just a look. Nonetheless, Noguchi didn’t breathe.

“Waiting for an answer,” he reminded him.

Something like surrender blurred his eyes. That was good. Dazai thought everybody would have it much easier, once they accepted he wasn’t one born for their rational scrutiny.

“Alright,” he said, quietly.

“Alright?”

“Alright,” he echoed. “Sir.”

Against his lazy shoulder, his car door was almost ripped off the hinges.

Yelping just a tad too high-pitched, Dazai almost landed on the ground. “Alright, *alright*, you want me to apologize?” he whined, already raising his arms to hide his knees from the rotating kicks that were undoubtedly about to hit him. “Are you mad about Koda? I knew you were going to be mad about Koda. But I knew she would heal him, I just didn’t tell you because you’d be so *annoying* about it — *You’re* my dog, I don’t have to tell you anything, anyway — *Chuuya*, come on —“

Half on the concrete, he paused.

Underneath a layer of freckles and Koda’s blood, over the cage of his lowered mask, the boy’s face was pale — a ghostly veil framing dim eyes, glossy at the edges, as if searching through water; settled on a place so distant it was nowhere to be found. *Distance*, she always said, *is just a word*.

His hands were abandoned at his side, gloves dangling. His spine was too straight — was waiting for orders. When he turned to look in Dazai’s direction, he did not know him.

Hesitantly, a mistrustful Noguchi blinked, asking: “Chuuya — ?”

“Show’s over,” Dazai cut through, cheerful, moving to stand in front of him. He knew he was smiling — he assumed his smile was one of those things Mori always scrunched his nose up at, because all three mafiosi — Koda and Tsuchiya having jogged up to join — took a step back. “We have some business to attend to. Tsuchiya, do train until our next meeting.”

“Sir,” the woman attempted to say.

“Tsuchiya,” he insisted. “Do train.”

Her lips parted. She studied Chuuya over the line of his shoulders; nodded. “Sir.”

Dazai kept his smile on until the three of them were nothing more than silhouettes settling inside the pick-up truck — sure that they would turn. Waiting for them when they did; waving through their rearview mirror.

He stuck his nails so deep into Chuuya's wrist that they grew wet with blood — he stayed there; his face stayed blank. Over the gates, the police cars were still there.

“Well?” Dazai asked, shrugging the boy's wrist. “Where are you taking me?”

Chuuya blinked, looking right through him. It was insufferably detestable. *Devoid* — amongst negative objectives about Chuuya he sometimes listed off whenever he couldn't sleep — wasn't meant to fit the pimpled wrinkles on that bothersome forehead.

He turned around; tilted his head to the side, as if listening. Wordlessly, he started walking towards the gates.

“Hey!” Dazai was pulled along with surprising strength, but little attention — as if he could have been run over by traffic, and Chuuya's *Soul*-mind wouldn't have particularly cared. He barely managed to tear his nails out of his wrist; instead, he stuck his coat over the boy's shoulders, holding onto the flagging belt of it.

*Leash*, he thought, hysterically. Then he saw a familiar back near the gates, and his face fell.

“Boys?” Officer Matsuda blinked, hand and face turned towards the radio-microphone pinned to his shirt. His colleague was still in the second car; when he walked away from his own to meet them at the entrance, the eyebags he sported were lit by its lights. “What are you doing out so late?”

“Fish watching,” Dazai offered. “You?”

“Patrolling,” He squinted. “Is that a code?”

“Yes. For watching fish.”

Chuuya attempted to walk straight into his car, not granting a glance to the man. The makeshift leash pulled Dazai forward — when he stepped on the Officer's feet, the man instinctively laid his hands on his shoulders.

A certain merit had to be recognized — he let go the moment he felt him stiffen. A certain intuition; most never noticed Dazai's discomfort. Mori did; Mori hardly cared. Mori hardly touched him — he was too smart to.

“Sorry, kid,” Matsuda said, taking the first step back. A certain merit — weirdness. His eyes flickered over to Chuuya. “What's up with him?”

Dazai's mind was running. “He's drunk.”

“*What?*”

“*Horridly* drunk,” he insisted. “He’s got a thing for wine, did you know? Unfortunately, his tolerance is despicable. Given his stature, I can’t say I’m surprised,” As if he had *heard*, somehow, Chuuya’s pulling force got more stubborn, burning his palm. “At least he’s walking. Last time, I had to piggyback him. I’m *always* doing that. How annoying is that?”

“You two are too young to drink,” Matsuda let him know, frowning at his companion. “Are you absolutely sure he’s okay? This isn’t exactly —“

“What one would imagine Chuuya to be like when he’s drunk?” Dazai thought back to his screaming matches from the top of the movie theater. “I understand,” The pull grew even stronger; he squinted at the insistent direction of his feet — stared at the police lights until they made his eyes burn. His mind followed. “Officer.”

“Kid?”

“Do you have time for a lift?”

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“You don’t have a license,” Matsuda hissed, in the middle of an undeniable panic attack. His hand was so tight around the door handle, it was white. “You are *drunk*. This is a state-owned vehicle. Tell me why I’m letting you do this.”

“You’re exceptionally well-intentioned,” Dazai answered, elbows between the two front seats, chin on his hands. “And you and Chuuya have got a weird non-mentorship thing going on. *Red!*”

Chuuya’s foot slammed onto the brake. His face stubbornly stayed blank through it.

“I’m going to get arrested,” Matsuda was still chanting, eyes so wide they seemed ready to jump out. He had attempted to clench one hand around their driver’s arm; the *Soul* had simply slapped it off. “I’m going to get arrested. *Why* am I letting you do this?”

“You like Chuuya,” he insisted.

“Not very much, as of now! What’s even — “ They turned the corner at the very last moment; Dazai ended up splattered against the car door on the left. It was clear the boy knew where they were going — it was also clear he didn’t care about the *state* they got there in.

“Why isn’t he talking?”

“He’s a quiet drunk,” he lied. “Truly, *why* do you even like him so much?”

“I’ve known him since he was a brat,” the man gulped, frantically studying every mirror in the car. His fingers were slowly tickling up his chest, maybe in an attempt to reach the radio — Dazai pulled it off, and threw it out of his open car window. “*Hey!*”

“I’ve known him for almost a year,” he insisted. “My opinion of him has only worsened. What’s even yours and that Murase’s excuse?”

“The *bridge!*” Matsuda hissed. “Watch it!”

Chuuya accelerated, blankly.

“Well?”

“You’re not fearing for *your life, kid?*”

“No,” He shrugged. “Death is natural, and I have looked for it longly and attentively. I do hope I don’t die with Chuuya around, though. Boss would make fun of me for the next century. Do you presume you’re attached to him because he’s set on refusing you guys’ redemption?”

Matsuda gulped again, teeth clenched and face pale, studying the boy’s blank profile. “He’s a kid.”

“Yes,” Dazai agreed. “A petty child who needs *way* more milk than what he consumes. The milk thing is a myth, actually, but don’t tell him that.”

“You’re a kid too.”

“*Meh.*”

“You *are*,” the Officer’s feet pressed against pedals that weren’t there, hysterical. “I don’t care what those — those *people* fill your head with. I don’t care what you’ve done. Under the state law, you’re a kid.”

“What if there wasn’t a State?” Dazai asked, as leaned back onto Chuuya’s seat. He was still wearing his coat; he grabbed the belt, knotting it around his arms as annoyingly as possible. “What if we were just existing people, living and eating and loving and *dying*. Would you care about what age is legal or not?”

“I would care about how many years you’ve spent on this God forsaken earth,” Matsuda snapped, seemingly closer to believing the situation to be an attempt on his life by the second. “I would *care* about making sure the few years you’ve had haven’t shown you more blood than *anyone* has a right to see in an entire lifetime. *Red light!*”

“How romantic,” Dazai sighed.

“What is?”

“Hope,” He shrugged. “Light. It never made a difference to me, but it’s nice to hear arguments about it. Nice to see both sides are as stupid as it goes.”

“Stupid,” he echoed, disbelieving. When he met his eyes in the rear view mirror, his stubbornness was equal and contrary to the glimmer in Kouyou’s most outwards gazes. “There’s nothing stupid about second chances, kid.”

Dazai clicked his tongue, amused. “You’re the stupid one if you think those are a thing.”

The car halted so suddenly it screeched; it sent Matsuda flying forward, despite his belt — he almost smashed his forehead against the dashboard. “*Kid!*”

“Seems we’ve arrived,” Dazai blinked, hands spread on his window, trying to locate their spot. It didn’t take long; the bitterness stuck to his tongue curled his lips. “I owe you one, Officer Hope. Have a good patrol.”

The man attempted to protest. Their *Soul* driver exited the car without a word; Dazai followed.

The road home was easy to recognize — as thus, he began to reconsider their whole plan long before Chuuya effectively walked through the borders of *his* dumping ground.

“Of course,” he sighed, as the belt of his coat pulled him through the nonexistent gates of the site. “He couldn’t have picked the drug store?”

He pushed all his dismay down; ignored the grip of its nails down his bones, ignored the *sound* it made — the attempts to climb to his throat by the handlers of old resentments, and the coagulated cold air that always filtered through the shipping container’s broken door. They left footprints in the mud.

Close. No close enough — but *too close* .

*Never stop thinking*, Mori had never told him; so Dazai had made it a rule, instead — *never stop thinking; he is here*.

“It’s very rude to show up at people’s houses uninvited,” he made sure to explain to his uncaring companion. His steadfast beeline was challenging him to keep up; but Dazai had longer legs and a tickle of sorts in his veins, so he knocked his side against Chuuya’s. “We’re not even friends. The partner privilege doesn’t grant you guest privileges — Those are *mine* to grant . You’re being terribly rude. Kouyou would throw a fit. Do you hear me?”

Chuuya, of course, couldn’t hear him.

His eyes were set on the mountains of trash around them, unnaturally sure of the direction he was pulling them into. He had blinked a few times, surprisingly — eyes moving frantically underneath the eyelids, undecided on what reality they were supposed to perceive.

He wasn’t paying any particular attention to their surroundings — he wasn’t *seeing them* — and yet the skin under Dazai’s nails was itching. Everyone knew better than to step near a place the Demon Prodigy dared to sleep in.

“I’m not forgiving you for this,” he swore.

He wouldn’t remember, probably — Dazai didn’t care. He didn’t want his pupils to be stained by that unreachable memory — *Dazai’s* panorama and *Dazai’s* house, *Dazai’s* path and *Dazai’s* —

“Oh, look,” he said, eyes settling on the only other silhouettes in that rusty desert. “What did you call them? *Adoratissima* and *Grief-Induced Split Personality Disorder*, reunited again.”

Beatrice and V had made for a sadistically entertaining pair, inside the plastically real woods in Rengoku. Not *quite* V — but Dante bore the same dark curls and t-shirts with unlikely puns on them. His latest one — amusingly enough — portrayed an angel; the bubbly text around it read: *99% An Angel. Worry Not About The 1%.*

“Nice shirt,” Dazai called, startling their guests into a fighting stance. “A young coworker of mine would like it.”

The sparkling flames of a little fire burned between their crossed legs, burning old books and wanted posters against a polluted firmament. The heavy wool of V’s — *Dante?* — clothes couldn’t hide the goosebumps on his knuckles; Beatrice’s Western white dress strangled her figure in a severe, unmerciful way, reddening her wrists. The fire had carved lines of terror on their faces.

Chuuya’s reaction was the most sudden of them all, though — he dropped to his knees the moment he entered the duo’s visual field.

“Oh!” Dazai said, barely managing to save his shoes from the face-plant the boy did onto the ground, eyes rolling to the back of his head. The belt still tied around his wrist was pulling him down; he attempted to undo the knot, lamenting: “Now, that’s just sticky —”

“He’s alive,” Beatrice breathed out. Relief was like gasoline to the small fire; the flames in her eyes shone golden. “Oh, thank *God*, he’s alive —”

“I told you it wasn’t possible,” V said, with a hint of the same exasperation that had stained his words that day, at the fighting ring. It had nothing of the poeticism Dante’s monologue had torn lashes on their dying bodies with. *He never did like me*, Beatrice had told them. “He’s too much of an asset — and the boy wouldn’t have let him die.”

“That is one heavy, baseless accusation,” Dazai jumped in, eyeing the line of drool on the side of Chuuya’s cheek. “I shall let you know — Ever since meeting this dog of mine, all I’ve done, day and night, is come up with ways to cause his ultimate demise.”

“But you’re clever,” V insisted. His eyes refused to meet his own — frantically, they scattered across every piece of trash in the dumping site. “And he’s powerful.”

He sighed. “That’s how the voices go.”

“The Port Mafia wouldn’t let such a card fall from their hands. The funeral, the set up — you just wanted to find Dante. Didn’t you?”

“Wake him up,” he said. “And I’ll tell you.”

Beatrice scoffed. “*Wake him up?* In his state, the most you can accomplish is momentary shared consciousness. Please — Don’t tell me you’ve believed *one thing* he’s told you since he was *Judged*. If you did, you’re much stupider than V has been trying so hard to convince me you aren’t. And you’re no use to us.”

Chuuya’s eyes blinked to life. They were unfocused — moving like a sleepwalker, he sat as politely as possible; legs crossed and gloved hands intertwined in his lap. Dazai’s coat fell from one of his shoulders, swiping the ground as he *waited*; tickled, Dazai fixed it up.

“V is a rather good judge of character,” he concluded, tilting his head. “Which is why I don’t see why I should trust either one of you — or your ‘*momentary shared consciousness*’ moment.”

The two exchanged a look. “Do you have a choice?” was Beatrice’s question.

He hummed, conceding the point. With his free hand, he grasped Chuuya’s shoulder, easily settling himself next to his kneeling figure. Still giving all his attention to the skeptical gazes set on him, he cocked his gun and lazily pushed it onto the boy’s bruised temple.

Surprised, undignified *gasps* left both of their mouths — nothing of Dante’s and Tenshi’s composed blankness, tranquil even as it roamed through blood stained waters. Their fingers flew to the weapons in their holsters; pale and hesitant, Beatrice ordered: “*Wait* — “

Dazai tickled the trigger with his forefinger. It made an audible sound; both his guests were just smart enough to freeze, still on the ground.

“I’m sure Chuuya’s ego would get a nice boost from your deep concern for his well-being,” he started, unconcerned. The silence had taken a lighting-like taste; over the popping cracks of the fire, not even the mountains of trash dared to breathe too loudly. “I, however, am not plagued by such thoughts. Now release him — Or you lose the weapon you’re so protective of.”

“You won’t,” Beatrice insisted, fingers tense around her holster. She seemed too cautious to look anywhere but at his face. “I know you won’t. He’s more of an asset to the Mafia than he will ever be one to us —“

“He’s an unmeasurable bother and an unworthy competition for a role I’ve got my eyes on,” Dazai replied, batting a mosquito off Chuuya’s vacant face with the barrel of the gun. V made a *sound*, at it. “And people are really dying quite easily these days, aren’t they? I’m sure Boss will understand.”

V gulped, frustrated. “Beatrice.”

“You should listen to him,” he encouraged. “I only witnessed violence wake him up one time, but it was a good enough example. Though — I’m not sure how much can be attributed to Executive Kouyou, and how much to Dante’s tempism.”



The woman hesitated.

Whether it had something to do with the name he'd mirthfully offered or whether she was unsure about his real intentions — he supposed it didn't matter much. With a muttered curse, V was the one to move: he raised his unarmed hand, and drew a lopsided circle in the hissing air. No sound left his lips — instead, they gently shaped a few words into the silent night, too delicate to catch.

Underneath his grip, Chuuya stiffened.

"Thank you," Dazai said, courteous.

A nonexistent electric shock ran down his spine, making his shoulder jump ten feet — rattling his gloved hands so harshly, the everyday spasms seemed to be nothing more than tremors. He almost fell forward, palms scraping at the ground and his lungs releasing horrifyingly sharp sounds, *begging* for air. The moment his eyes gained an inch of focus, he went for Dazai's gun.

Dazai let him.

Lazily, he raised his hands near his head, as he waited for him to scramble to his feet and point it right to his chest. Glossy eyes; blown pupils. The strands of hair framing his face were blood trails on his cheeks. The world forced itself into his visual field — Chuuya looked at something else entirely.

A moment later, over the bridge of the gun he now *knew* how to fire, he looked at Dazai.

"Hello there," Dazai greeted. Blue and amber followed the motions, clearing a bit more with each word. *What did you see?*, he didn't ask. *Would it scare me too, finally?* He twirled one finger in the air — signed: *safe*.

Chuuya blinked.

"*Adoratissima* and *Grief-Induced Split Personalities Disorder*?" he snapped. A hint of hilarity tickled his throat; Dazai munched on it violently, pushing it down. "What are *you* doing here? We were looking for Dante. He's clearly the one worth shit."

Dazai sighed, petulantly, dropping on the ground. "He's back alright."

V was quick to offer his palms; a thousand times more distraught than Dante had been by the sudden absence of social anxiety pills. "I'm V, I — I swear it on my name. And this is Beatrice. We — Dante sent us to verify your condition, after the news from the funeral. But he — he doesn't know we're free, right now. We're here to talk."

"*Free*," Chuuya echoed, squinting. "You got me out of the *Limbo*, didn't you?"

The man gulped. "Yes."

"Is that your Ability?" Dazai intervened, curious, leaning his chin on his hands. Seated next to him, Beatrice threw him a careful glance — as if waiting to see what his lighter mood

would do with the gun between his calves. “You can pull people out of Dante’s trance?”

“*His Ability?*” Chuuya repeated. “Isn’t he Dante? He’s got the *Divine Comedy* thing.”

Something vaguely tired pulled V’s traits, dragging at least ten years more down his face. Grimacing, he and Beatrice exchanged a glance. “That is — That’s what we would like to discuss. As for my Ability, not exactly. I believe — it should be something more akin to *your* nullification.”

Chuuya’s eyebrows flew to his hairline. “No way. The freak’s one of a kind.”

“*Chuuya,*” Dazai gasped, hands to his chest. “That’s almost touching!”

“I need to know the name of the Ability,” V explained. “If I whisper it to a person who’s a victim of that Ability, I can more or less free them from their influence. It requires some good will from the victim — It’s not as direct as your own.”

“Dante got himself some undoubtedly compatible friends,” Dante commented.

“Trustworthy, too,” the other boy added, squinting. “And yet, here you are.”

Beatrice exhaled. Under the unforgiving moonlight, the cross around her neck glistened gently, pressed against scars Dazai had given her. “Listen,” she said. “We know you have no reason to listen to a word we say. But you searched for us. I assume you’re looking for answers.”

“Not exactly,” Chuuya shrugged. “We were searching for Dante to rip his dick off and watch him bleed out. We’re done with this war. That goal is very much attainable.”

“That is —,” Dazai intervened. “As long as V *is* Dante.”

“I’m not,” V hurried to say. “I’m not, I’m just — It’s very — It’s complicated. But we’re not — The two of us. We don’t agree with what he’s doing. Beatrice didn’t even *know* about the ways she’s been used until we found each other again.”

“I wasn’t lying,” she agreed, a tad desperate. “That day, in my office — I *wasn’t* lying. I didn’t know — according to V, he’s been using me for —” She gulped. “For so long. I *didn’t know*. After Rengoku, I just — We woke up at the same time, and V helped me catch up. I didn’t even know he was alive. I promise you. I wasn’t lying.”

Appearing a bit perturbed by the notion, V confirmed: “She isn’t. Dante’s been commanding her for months now.”

“And you never tried to inform her, the same way you suddenly decided to do *now*?” Dazai concluded. “Your petty rivalry truly goes behind the rational.”

He grimaced. “It wasn’t — It’s not that easy. Dante wasn’t always like this. His plans — they used to make sense.”

“Of course they did,” Beatrice murmured.

“And they didn’t to *you*?” V snapped. Flinching, she lowered her eyes. “Last I recall, it was a *three-people-effort* that got us where we are now.”

“Last I recall,” she muttered, all the same, “I’m *not* the one who stayed.”

It was the man’s turn to cower. His hands grasped at each other — fingers twinning and strangling, knuckles turning white. “I made a mistake. I *admit* it. That is why I’m here, trying to fix it.”

Chuuya still looked distinctly unimpressed. “Alright. I’m still waiting for an explanation of your split personality trick back in Rengoku?”

“I have a theory,” Dazai pushed a rock away with one finger. If he searched far enough, he could see the edge of the crater his shipping container rested in. “The theory is that you’re here because *you* need our help. I’d like to be proved right as soon as possible. Thus — what do we get in exchange for believing a single word out of your mouth?”

The duo exchanged a glance. Reluctantly, V offered: “We help you kill you Dante.”

He could have turned to meet Chuuya’s eyes, but he didn’t. The sole conclusion shone bright in the space between their bodies all the same — tickling their napes; throwing the knife until it landed on the only sensible option on the wall. “How tempting.”

The flames twirled. Still utterly cautious, Beatrice and V held their breaths.

“Wonderful, then,” He threw his gun a few steps away, using his free hands to attempt to tear unburned pages out of the fire. “Shame Beatrice didn’t bring any *Petrus*, this time around, *ah*? Doesn’t matter. We shall take your story.”

“I’ll decide if I still want to play safe and tear your heads off your necks once you’re done,” Chuuya concluded, dropping onto a pile of tires — kicking at his wrists to tear his hands off the flames. For his own amusement, he imagined his next meeting with Officer Matsuda.

“Be convincing,” Dazai concluded, offering his widest smile. “You don’t want to make the man you sent to Hell mad.”

chuuya, face covered in blood from torture:  
dazai: [hope this doesn't awaken anything in me.png]

hirotsu: damn bitch you live like this?

SO! if you're still reading — damn. thank you so much for that. this chapter actually contains one of the first scenes i ever thought for this story — specifically, the one with chuuya seating on the side of the warehouse and dazai looking up at him. it's just an imaginary that i've always liked (as anything related to chuuya's ability lol).

we finally got some info about chuuya and the flags! if you've read stormbringer, you know the famous "albatross, your floor is my ceiling" line (iconic). i kept thinking about what chuuya would do with albatross apartment, and in the end, it seemed unnatural to me that he would do anything but unhealthily fixate on it. its okay, he's a kid and he's dealing! can't wait to get more into this plot with the next part of the series (that's coming in just two chapters btw... that's so wild to me. chuuya pov incoming).

as for easter eggs in this chapter: the "when someone you love dies, you've got to kill yourself" quote on albatross' kitchenette comes from irl nakahara chuuya's poem "spring's day caprice", a three part work that was inspired by his son's early demise, and that i highly suggest you check out. lastly, the "three meals a day" speech dazai does to hirotsu comes from no longer human (one of the first chapters, forget if i can't quite recall).

as always, thank you so so much for reading, and do let me know what you think of it! i hope you have a great day, and see you next time!

# MY

## Chapter Summary

*“Alright,” he said, like he hated him for it. Somehow, it sounded brutal — the ricochet of his exhaustion against the walls, more vicious than any of his screams had been. “When did you figure it out?”*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter x.*

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*Case number: 73937393*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*Document Type 11: Secretive. Access guaranteed to: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\* of the current year, the following information was acquired by Dazai O., regarding the origins and plans of the Nine Rings leader, Beatrice [XXXX12], and her allies [Identification Name: V and Identification Name: Dante]. Ability Users: confirmed unregistered.*

*Current state: deceased.*

*V [...]. Cause of death: severe blood loss. His Ability [Dido; AB6774] allowed him to release a subject from the influence of an Ability, erasing the effects while maintaining the state itself. Necessary elements — [Knowledge of the Ability's name] ; [Physical presence of the victim]. Registered as dead for seven years, before his reappearance. Cause of previous death: Dante and Beatrice.*

*Under the belief of having caused his demise, B. escaped the town of R. The grief sent D. into an unstable state; in his confusion, he was unable to understand that V had actually turned into a — as previously referred to by Dazai O. and Nakahara C. — “Soul” [666GHI — Check The Codes].*

*As such, D.'s first experiment was doomed: incapable of giving him orders, he instead “fused” V's true conscience with his shattered mind, creating both a double and a spokesperson. [Check File: “The Metamorphosis of Author]. Whenever he was being used by D's Ability, V acted and talked as if a portion of D.'s mind had been situated inside him; it is unclear whether this occurred solely because of the mistake D. made seven years ago, or if D.'s conscience was somehow restored, making the cognitive choice to have his first Soul do and say what he would have in his stead.*

*It is unclear whether V's part in D.'s plans can be faulted to himself or not.*

*[...]*

**[Continue reading] [?]**

### Five days before the report.

“Say,” Dazai shut the car trunk, leaning on the heated metal. “What would Chuuya like for his birthday?”

Over the bluish flame from Hirotsu’s third stolen lighter, the boy’s glance was less than amused.

He had gotten rid of the mask, at last, seeing how all who needed to believe him gone already knew he wasn’t. People at the HQs had been gaping at him for three days straight. The falling sun had painted a border between the upper and lower side of his face; he looked haunted, and ridiculous. “From *you*?”

He shrugged.

“You mean you didn’t ominously discover the alleged date of my birth just to put itching dust on everything I own?”

“Unoriginal,” he huffed, wiping sweat. Beatrice’s car was a white box that seemed ready to collapse under the weight of four full grown people — three, Chuuya excluded. The color was a blinding sign even under the sun; at the very least, the men who were supposed to follow them would have no issues. “You did that in my office already.”

“Oh, yes,” He blinked, snapping the lighter shut. “That seems — a shit ton of time ago. Why didn’t you retaliate?”

“You mean you *didn’t* receive all those publicitary calls I paid for? That Korean food place took *so much* convincing on my part.”

Chuuya’s head snapped up. “Fucker, that was *you*?”

“Hey,” V interrupted them. He was walking towards the car, the phone he’d been muttering into now hidden in the pockets of his latest hoodie — *I’d Jump Into Flames For You (I’m Water Man)* — and a permanent grimace on his face. “Are you ready to go?”

“Waiting for the *boss*,” Chuuya muttered, nodding towards Beatrice. “Whenever it suits her to put an end to her personal tragedy.”

The deep blue satin of her dress fluttered along to the Spring wind, dramatically framing her joined hands and tilted head. She was a delicate pillar; the eyes she offered to the sky were rancorous.

Apparently, she was praying.

“I thought she didn’t believe in God,” Dazai commented.

“She believes in herself,” V replied. A hint of pettiness made its way through the slightly panicked features that had warned him outside a pharmacy. “I’m sure she’s convinced it’s almost the same thing.”

Chuuya's mouth curled downwards.

Delivering Beatrice's head on Kouyou's porch still seemed pretty high in his list of priorities; it ought to be admirable, his resort *not to*. He knew he had met the Executive's gaze at every occasion, since that night at the dumping site — he was many things; a good liar, occasionally, too.

The *after* — that would be on him. Beatrice and V had asked to be freed; to be allowed to die. Dazai thought it slightly stupid on their side — no one wanted a suicidal freak's definition of freedom.

"Tell her that her temple will take four to five working days to build," Chuuya slid into the backseat, immediately plastering his shoes against the leather. "Let's go."

The streets of Yokohama grew brighter at night, revealing a new firefly-made skyline that Dazai's retinas would never stop finding blinding. Blurry reflections passed them by in the water — floating lanterns and the insistence even poorer neighborhoods had to illuminate along to the firmament.

He wished, suddenly and agonizingly, to have brought his gaming console.

Instead, he kicked the back of Beatrice's driver seat. "Are we there yet?"

"Not yet," she said, startled, between a curse.

He waited a bit. "And now?"

"We're not doing this."

Dazai changed strategy — he kicked Chuuya's calf. "So? What is it that you want?"

"For you to forget I have a birthday," was his distracted answer. He was unsubtly observing every turn of the woman's fingers, refusing to relax even once the highway appeared behind the windshield. His dirty glance — along with Beatrice's — stopped V's awkward attempt at starting the radio.

"*How* do you have a birthday, anyway? You did say *alleged*," Dazai mused, ignoring him.

"Boss told me." *Of course*. Mori's peaceful smile was all too easy to visualize. Chuuya had joined out of sheer need for what he was missing; feeding it to him piece by piece would keep him where he was. Lovingly abandoning trivias in his hands to keep him warm during the wait — to make him *thankful*. "I just counted the first day of the year, before."

He blinked. "So this is your first time celebrating it?"

"I'm not celebrating, beanpole," he scoffed. Dazai found it depressing — the immediate certainty that he would spend the day at the Cemetery, sitting with stolen graves. "I'm a bit busy, if you haven't noticed."



“Sixteen and you haven’t grown an inch,” He sunk a finger in his cheek, compassionately. “I suppose there’s not much to celebrate.”

Somehow, the kick managed to land between his ribs. *“I’m still growing!”*

Again, V cleared his throat.

“So,” he spoke up, finding his eyes in the rear view mirror. The man had spent the first part of their journey plastered against his door, throwing not quite *undetectable* glances to Beatrice. To encourage him, Dazai set to rolling his creaking car window up and down. “It sure took us some time to find you. Up for some betrayal yet, Tenshi?”

“Should be used to it,” Chuuya muttered.

Both their guests’ hands tightened — around a steering wheel; around an old revolver. *I can put it away*, V had offered, in good faith. Dazai had shrugged. *I don’t usually get hurt when Chuuya’s around.*

*That’s nice*, he had said.

*That’s horrible!*, he had whined.

“Survival is survival, no matter the means,” Beatrice bit out, clipped. “I’ve lost entire *months* of my life doing someone else’s dirty work. The sooner Dante is gone, the better it is.”

They didn’t exchange a glance.

“As for Ozaki,” Beatrice said, barely a whisper. “Kanechi should have known better than to welcome anything the Port Mafia had touched.”

Chuuya’s flinch shook his bones all the way to the half-moons he had printed on his palms. “And he shouldn’t have known better than to welcome a traitor who sold him out on a jealous whim?”

“I didn’t *mean*,” she insisted, “To hurt *him*.”

“That’s nice,” Dazai intervened. “You did kill him. I’m sure V here could relate.”

The man stiffened. Beatrice quietened down.

“She didn’t mean to,” V studied the metal tunnel of his revolver, just a hint petulantly. Dazai had imagined him more rancorous, from the stories. Perhaps he had been a bitter boy — all he could find, though, was a nostalgic type of animosity. Too angry; too lost; too tired to be either.

*“I didn’t mean, she didn’t mean,”* he huffed. “Why are people so obsessed with *intentions*? Facts are facts. *My dog died*. End. Why philosophize whether their heart had meant to stop beating or not?”

Chuuya made a face. “I hate your dog metaphors.”

“Because you’ve accepted your true nature?”

“I’ll shove a this car so far up your nose, you’ll —“

“Her power is... unpredictable, at times. Paired up with Dante’s, accidents were bound to happen,” V interrupted them. “She’s always been the smart one. The smart one, the good one, the *whatever Dante says* one. If she’d wanted me dead and gone, she —”

“I would have found a quicker way to do it?” the woman concluded, tonelessly.

V’s mouth turned up. “It doesn’t matter. If everything goes as it should, we’ll both be dead soon.”

Beatrice didn’t find anything to add.

The *one* condition for their help — a peculiar decision, certainly. Chuuya’s godly hands had struggled to grasp it. Dazai had wondered about his own cynicism; one of those ideas that would have had Mori pause and *study* him under the lights of his clinic.

*Tell me, Dazai*, he had asked, weird and stupid — convinced he knew him, just because he had seen him bleed. *Why is it that you wish to die?*

Common mistake. Better question — *Tell me. Why is it that you’re still here?*

The car jumped. Chuuya sneered. “Wonder just how much of that shit is your own thoughts. ‘You think Dante might be making you forgive every and all asshole move she’s pulled?’”

Beatrice scoffed. Her wristwatch, still rusted and offensively vintage, reflected the blinding lights of a car running in the opposite road. When it blinded her eye, she didn’t blink. “Don’t be a hypocrite.”

“*Oh*, I apologize. Whose fault is it if I’m in this state?”

“Dante’s,” she relied. “And you know it.”

It was V’s turn to sneer.

Stunned, she momentarily lost control of the wheel, jolting the whole car forward. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Hey, Traitorous Holy Mary — if you could keep from *crashing the car?*” Chuuya snapped.

“*Traitorous Holy Mary?*” Dazai echoed, delighted.

Red bloomed on his cheeks. “It was just — this poem — If you want to bitch about your unresolved issues, let’s exchange seats and *I’ll* drive.”

V blinked, not rudely. “Aren’t you boys, like, thirteen?”

“We’re almost *sixteen!*”

“Really?” Beatrice squinted at them through the rear view mirror. “You look thirteen.”

“And you look like a —“

“Kids,” Dazai tutted, just to stress them all out a bit more. “We still have an hour of driving. We could mercilessly kill each other, if we so wished. Does anyone want to play *Spelling Bee* to pass the time?”

Disappointingly, no one said a word.

His car window rose again, stopping halfway to the end of its road. The cold wind whipped inside, blowing red strands into Chuuya’s eyes; he directed an annoyed look to the perpetrator. Dazai didn’t turn to meet his gaze. All the same, he felt him pause.

Imperceptible and unnoticed, Chuuya’s gloved fingers landed on the buttons of his own car door. Blue and amber eyes kept following the road; every inch as arrogant as the sun — his window started moving, too.

The abandoned hills that led to Rengoku were a blurred line under the moonlight, stiffening the lines of V and Beatrice’s shoulders. Climbing out of the car, Dazai followed the hard light in their eyes, all the way to the main road — empty, and devoid of any light poles. The smell of rain embraced them, framed by the night and the hoots of invisible owls. If he searched hard enough, he could see the outlines of the bridge they had jumped off from — hear the rush of the *Kinatai Kawa*; the *tip-tip* of shower water landing on porcelain.

Chuuya slammed his door shut, searching the darkness with his phone’s light, charms whipping his wrist at every step. “Didn’t miss the mosquitos. Shit, is it going to rain?”

Right on time, Beatrice slapped her arm. Eyes on the splattered bug on her palm, she said: “Too many parasites in this place. The explosion didn’t help.”

The glance she directed to V received no response — the man was too busy breathing in, hands flexing greedily. By the time he managed to tear his eyelids apart, only nostalgia was there to be given.

“We’re from here too, Bea,” he reminded her, somewhat desperate. “We can’t just wash our hands of something we were part of.”

The appellative had her spine snap up. Clearly dumbstruck, she stuttered: “V, I don’t —“

Dazai hummed, louder than necessary. “All this talking about parasites — are we playing the cockroach game? I want to be an *Ectobius Vittiventris*. Chuuya should be a *Tryonicidae*.”

He stared. “A *Tryoni*— what?”

“If handled incorrectly, it can release a horribly unpleasant smell,” he explained, excitedly. “It’s been compared to that of a wet dog! Don’t you think it’s perfect?”

Behind them, V and Beatrice were still locked in a gaze. The man was the one to clear his voice. “Ah, well — you know much about cockroaches?”

“*And* insects,” Dazai specified. He had stuffed Mori’s shelves at the clinic with stolen books from the *Yokohama Central Library* — and then, with jars filled in something different from pinned butterflies. “*And* reptiles. And bees, occasionally, but I’m allergic,” He sighed. “Not allergic enough for the anaphylactic shock to kill me, though. They’re nice little creatures — *unlike* certain dogs I’m involved with.”

“Motherfucker,” was Chuuya’s answer. He grabbed his fingers, pulling him down the valley — after one last, *dirty* look to their guides. He mimicked retching. “Come on. If I have to stomach their drama while tumbling down a creepy dark hill, I’m going to gauge my ears off. Tell me shit about bugs.”

He lit up, allowing himself to be dragged along. “*Really?*”

The road was made of eerie noises and dim cellphone lights, surrounded by shadows that seemed to mold themselves into vaguely human shapes. By the tenth rock he had tripped over because of Dazai’s skips, Chuuya gave up on cursing — using *Tainted* to float a few inches over the wild grass.

Beatrice and V kept a few steps behind, either arguing or reminiscing, or both. The outskirts of old, ghostly Rengoku weren’t all that interesting — they seemed to have endless whispers to waste on them, still.

“Female *Lampyridae* of the *Photuris* genus mimic the flash pattern of females from other species to trap the males,” Dazai explained, nodding towards the light-emitting insect held in his cupped hands.

The fireflies appeared here and there through the grass, flying mindlessly around them to join the starry sky. “So, Madame Tanaki,” Chuuya concluded, carefully toneless, turning his body upside down to study one particular bug. “Didn’t she win her latest husband over by dressing up like his ex wife?”

A blink. “That’s a fair comparison. Apart from the reproductive system, which is —”

“*Gross*,” he replied, grinning savagely. “How many do you figure I can catch in my mouth?”

He huffed.

Sooner than he had assumed they would, the weed-like placed rows of houses appeared at the edge of their vision. A cobblestoned path led them through that *not-quite* village, not too different from Rengoku — until V’s panting lungs paused to marvel at a familiar, half-destroyed building.

Dazai observed it. He concluded: “Wasn’t this place more blurry last time we were here?”

“You *think?*” Chuuya replied, crossing his arms. “Maybe it was the mud in your lungs?”

“Who knows.”

The square of ivy-covered bricks had been plastered under his eyelids since they'd stumbled their way out of the river. Jumping over the mountains of trash surrounding it wasn't harder the second time, but Dazai could barely keep his body from laughing from the sheer frustration being back there gave him. Dante had been there for *months* — and they had missed him, nonetheless.

*Mori would laugh*, he thought. Maybe not quite.

"Here we are," Beatrice said, no enthusiasm. "Welcome to *The Purgatory*."

"The only *B&B* near Rengoku for twenty miles," V intervened. "The director of the *Institute* owned it — used it more as a holiday house than anything else. The three of us used to come here and —"

Dazai scratched the scar around his thumb. "Plot your world domination?"

Neither of the guides seemed to appreciate the joke. Without a word, they set to pushing the door — *tried* to; until Chuuya, impatient, rotated a kick into the lock, catapulting the wooden obstacle several steps inside the house.

"It said push," Dazai said, helpful.

He only received a nasty glance.

Their tormented state hadn't allowed them to investigate the place, the last time they had stumbled through its doors — this time, Dazai's gaze roamed over faded wallpaper and cardboard boxes, and the white sheets covering most of the creaking furniture. His shoes seemed to *sink* in the layers of dust; V sneezed.

Chuuya's floating-self didn't even snicker — proof enough of his sudden alert. Dazai crossed his hands behind his back, humming. "I'm assuming it's the room with the creepy door?"

Beatrice made a face. She did direct them upstairs, though — to the furthest decaying door, splintered at the edges and kept still against the frame with too much tape. An ominous hole shattered the center of the surface — the result of a punch, sealed with cardboard pieces.

"Don't act rashly," the woman ordered. Her eyes were on the door, not seeing anything at all. "You will get your information. We will get rid of him. Just — Don't act rashly."

"Paranoid?" Chuuya mocked.

V gulped, holding onto his revolver. In a slow, calculated motion that stiffened Beatrice's shoulders, he laid his hand upon hers on the doorknob. "What was that old password we used?"

*"Abandon all hope,"* she said.

"Joyous," Dazai commented. "Open up."

The clinic, he recalled, had been as much of a home as Mori's workaholic hands had managed to make it. The beeping of the machines; the abandoned coffee cups; Elise's drawings on the walls; the results of Mori's clumsy motions and Dazai's attempts all over the floors in glass shards — sometimes, he would sit on *his* stool and spin, spin, *spin*, and watch the tornado of unbridled existence around him.

*Not hell*, he would muse, *not heaven either*.

Purgatory looked exactly like it, though.

Contrary to the rest of the house, every inch of that room was pristine — from the flower chandelier to the silk curtains; floor-to-ceiling bookcases and a wooden desk, strewn with books and a bundle of silver crosses. Medical equipment made up the rest of the space — beeping machines, cables with no starting points, cabinets bursting with pills.

All the mechanical roads carried to the same, sole focal point — the man sleeping in the Hospital bed.

“Are we sure he's alive?” he asked, just to make some noise.

He didn't exactly *look* alive. His complexion was darker than any comatose patient's relative would have bragged about, with dark curls to frame shallow features that looked a tad too young — but, despite the *beep* of the monitors and the slow rise-and-fall of his chest, Dazai had been around enough corpses to know the smell of rotten.

A sound climbed V's throat, filling the room. The longing in it didn't quite make sense — when he tried to take a step forward, Beatrice put an arm out.

“Well,” Dazai insisted. Next to him, Chuuya finally landed on the floor, shoulder pressing against his with an energy that told him he should probably hold onto him — just to make sure he wouldn't rip off the IVs and be done with it. “Dante, I assume. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

A slap on the nape. “Are you *stupid*?”

Beatrice gulped. “So it's — Real.”

“No reason for me to lie,” V replied, just a bit rude, just a bit dazed. “I told you, he — Must have woken me up by mistake. I was on the floor. Right there. There's no other possibility. For him to be in this state, he must have — “

“Hit himself with his own Ability,” Dazai concluded, echoing words from the dumping die. “How entertaining.”

“Is that even *possible*?” Chuuya intervened, just as skeptical. “Physically, I suppose — But to the point of caging himself in his own limbo? How would he do it alone?”

V shook his head. “I don't know. My last clear memories are the days before — before my death. *Souls* don't remember the things they did in that state; they're not even allowed to *talk* about them. There must be something Dante made me forget.”

“No other explanation,” Beatrice took a step forward — then another; another, unshadowed by the terror on her friend’s face.

Pale hands reached out, freezing on their way to Dante’s face. Her wristwatch reflected the green of the heartlines on the monitor — slowly, she let her arms fall to her sides again, fists clenched. “He can’t give himself orders to become a *Soul*. He’s stuck.”

“And you’re the reason,” Chuuya intervened. “No way to activate *Divine Comedy* without your Ability. Which means you’ve been a *Soul* for —”

Throughout her recruitment to the *Nine Rings*, most probably, she didn’t say. Throughout her time with Kanechi — her short-lived history with Kouyou Ozaki — her rise to the power.

Her voice was merely a whisper: “A long time.”

“*Hey!*” Dazai called, hands and nose plastered to the window. “Hatrack, come take a look at this.”

Suspicious, Chuuya fit himself in the space next to him, searching through the darkness of the endless valley behind the house. “What am I looking at? Fuck ass, in the middle of fuckery?”

“Elegant. Look better.”

“*I am,*” he insisted. “I don’t —”

His voice trailed off. He pushed himself against the window — the breath that escaped from his mouth was cold enough to create a stain of condensation on the glass.

The darkness had a shape, if one searched hard enough. Under the heavy sky, with the rain it refused to let go and the lighting filling the distance, hundreds and *hundreds* of silhouettes stood in the empty field, clean rows and stiffened, wounded bodies — an unlikely army.

Waiting.

Gently, he tapped on the glass.

“He called them here,” V offered a frightened look to the body on the bed. “They’re — *How* did he recruit that many people?”

“He’s commanding them,” Beatrice echoed. The panic in her white knuckles didn’t reach the sharp line of her lips — abruptly, she reminded him of Kouyou. “In his *sleep?*”

“I still don’t get it,” Chuuya squinted. “It’s too — He used his Ability to save himself from yours. But why would he order you to use your Ability on him?”

“They must have fought,” V seemed even more terrified by the notion. “Knowing — Knowing Dante, he wouldn’t have wanted her to be with him because of the influence of an Ability. He must have freed her, and she must have attacked him. And now —”

“And now he’s here,” she concluded, eyes on the bundle of crosses on the desk. “And I’ve helped him every step of the way — and I know how.”

Belatedly, Dazai realized she wasn’t looking at the crosses — instead, she was focused on a narrow microchip, abandoned near the edge of the wood. “What’s this supposed to be?” Chuuya asked, as he made his way to pick it up between two fingers.

“A transmitter of sorts. The *Nine Rings* use them,” Beatrice said, voice thin. “They can be connected to one source and spread the same orders through more than one piece. I believe, perhaps —“

V’s gasp was the loudest thing in the room — she slapped her hand on Dante’s mouth and nose, all the hesitance to brush his skin gone, and she *pressed*.

It took some deadly quiet seconds — the low, metallic *beep* of the machines became more intense, a heartbeat growing quicker and quicker and quicker — right as V snapped: “That’s *enough*, Bea —“ Chuuya yelped, dropping the microchip.

“It electrified me,” he muttered? frowning. “How the fuck did it electrify me through leather?”

Dazai leaned forward. “Perhaps it came from the inside. You kids did ingest some — less than recommendable substances. V here jumped ten feet in the air.”

“You’re telling me he’s manipulating people with that old heartbeat trick of his?” V lamented.

“Heartbeat trick?” Dazai blinked.

“Electric shocks through the crosses, orders to the nervous system,” the woman summarized.

“Kingstain said he heard a voice, though. There must be some way for him to manipulate those, too,” Chuuya replied, nudging the chip with his foot. “His Ability is *that* powerful? It’s ridiculous.”

“Abilities are not human creations,” Dazai intervened. “As such, they can’t be anything but perfect. It’s a matter of balance. Dante’s Ability is overly mighty — which is why it comes with a *heavy* limit of time. The thirty three seconds requisite would make his Ability nearly impossible to use, if Beatrice didn’t exist.”

“So her existence is the shittiest coincidence on Earth,” he huffed. “Good job.”

The woman made a face. “It’s not like I *asked* to be born in Rengoku. There’s a reason I jumped the border as soon as I could.”

V scoffed. “Don’t pretend you would have left, if not for me.”

“Of course I would have,” Beatrice replied, after a few blinks of stunned silence, disbelieving. “We talked about it all the time. That place was hell on Earth, and you *know* it.”



“I do,” the man shrugged, uncomfortable — eyes still stuck to Dante’s emotionless face. “*Dante* knew. But we couldn’t leave. We had no means to. *You*, with no strings and your whole inheritance — If you had wanted to leave, you would have.”

“What the *hell* are you —“

Chuuya head tilted to the side, only once. His gaze followed the green heartlines as if hypnotized; his shoe laid upon the microchip, ready to crush. “*No strings?* What about your parents?”

Dazai yawned.

“Parents?” V echoed. The pull of his confusion almost tore his eyes from Dante. “What parents? We met at the *Orphanage*. She had nobody but us.”

*Silence is a spider*, one of his bedtime stories used to start with. *Silence is a spider, and its webs are everywhere you forget to look*. Outside, thunder roared. It lit the room up in white, painting their shadows in striking lines against the walls. Beatrice’s shoulders were all they could see. Pale hands dangled from the small of her back — delicately long, unconcernedly twinned.

Calmly, she said: “Dazai, you said you wanted to know about the *Book*. Correct?”

He leaned against the bookshelf, blinking. “Are you sure you didn’t get that backwards, Tenshi?”

“*You*,” Chuuya said — a single word widening his eyes, shimmering with an enraged epiphany. “*Oh*, I *knew* you —“

“I’m sure Beatrice will be glad to confirm all your suspicions. Mine too, obviously,” he replied. “If not her — Well. Perhaps *she* could enlighten us.”

V’s perplexed, careful gaze had found the sole uncovered window again. “Is that —“ he stuttered.

He didn’t bother studying anything but Beatrice’s stiffened, strangely calm figure — the intensity of the gaze she was dragging down Dante’s form. He knew what V was seeing — mafiosi attacking a foolishly undefeatable enemy; the mixture of thunder, cries of Ability, and the silence of dead men walking who couldn’t feel a thing.

“Mackerel,” Chuuya called. His hands were in his pockets — the sheer *ire* of it was dangerous. “*Oi*. Who is *she*?”

“*That*,” Dazai turned to look at him. “Chuuya. Try to die as painfully as possible. Alright?”

As evocatively as possible, he tapped two fingers under his chin.

Several things happened.

The boy's eyes widening was only the first of them — it seemed to last longer, though; unmatching eyes struck by lighting, *realizing*, shattering on impact.

No sound came from the door being slammed onto the floor — or perhaps he missed it, flung onto the bookshelves, falling into a maze of paper and medical machines, bumping his forehead, turning his vision into muddy waters all over again. Through the haze, he saw V land to the floor — saw Chuuya scream something — right before *Golden Demon* attempted to slice his head off.

“*Ane-san!*” he snapped, feet on the wall, settling disbelieving eyes on the pink silhouette at the door.

That brief distraction gave *Golden Demon* the window it needed to drag its katana down his chest — a rapid succession of crimson lines, immediately kicked away, so that he could roughly land on the floor, hands tight around wounds much deeper than any training had given him. “Kouyou, tell me you’re joking —“

“Quiet, little god,” Kouyou Ozaki replied, in a voice that wasn’t quite her own — tilting too flatly at the end; lacking the irreverence she carried like blood. She had only eyes for Beatrice. “Let us not make this harder than it needs to be.”

Upon Dazai’s petrified body, stuck under rubble and his pounding head, she was hardly more than a stain of lipstick and strangely empty eyes. She laid the tip of her umbrella on his chest — gentler than she had ever been with him.

Passing out was a decision. Nonetheless, as his eyes fell into the embrace of silence, he saw red lighting, and he heard Chuuya call his name.

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**[Continue reading]**

*Dante [...] Cause of death: lack of medical equipment, end of an induced coma.*

*His Ability [Divine Comedy; AB667] allowed him to entrap those who were exactly thirty three seconds from death into what Dazai O. has described as a “limbo”. The state kept his “Souls” [Check File] from death, threatening to kill them soon after being released from the grasp of Ability. It is important to specify that D.’s Ability allowed him*

*to mold an illusionary “Heaven” or a “Hell” — completely personal to the subject’s psyche, memories, and mind. The Ability required the collaboration of B.’s own.*

*Two years after the accident that caused V.’s “death” in R., Dante fell into an induced coma, victim of the reflection of his own Ability, which occurred during [see next paragraph]. Since his Ability demanded the use of vocal orders to command his Souls [Check File: The Microchips], another solution was prepared to accommodate his orders [see paragraph 7.6].*

*It is unclear whether his part in his own plan can be faulted to his own decision. State of death: enemy of the Port Mafia.*

*[...]*

**[Continue reading]**

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*— He’s in the car, and they’re going there, and Hirose Fumiko is playing. The glass of the window is merciless and icy against his forehead, bumping against him with every hole in the road. He knows it’s the cool windows, too — the ones that look black from the outside. Raindrops chase each other down the surface; the ones he’s cheering for lose almost immediately.*

*“Lisichka?” she calls. He should turn to look at her, but raindrop number four is —*

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— the world was soaked and bone-chilling, whipping him viciously in the middle of a gasp.

“For fuck’s *sake*, ” Chuuya snapped, through the haze. His voice seemed to come directly from inside his skull. “Why do you take so long to wake up?”

His attempt to scratch the daze out of his eyes immediately highlighted an issue — the TV cables that tied his wrists, tight enough to tear blood from his skin. Then came the rain, insistently stubborn — until the red silhouette behind him crawled forward, slamming his feet onto — something.

A strangely charged silence welcomed him — their heavy breaths echoed against tiled walls, framed by a *tip tap* so familiar, it awoke him. The world turned clearer — the bathtub, the moon outside the window.

“Did they seriously put us in the shower?” he croaked out, blinking flames away.

Chuuya huffed. His distaste was so heavy, he felt it reverberate through his spine, where they had been tied up against each other — black cables around their middles, wrists, and calves. The water Chuuya had turned on crowded under their pants; distractedly, Dazai wondered if he could die by electrocution.

“Yeah,” he said, knocking the back of his head against his own. “Loving the *deja vu*. Could have gone without the forced physical contact with a dead fish.”

“Are mackerels dead by definition?”

“No, but you will be,” Chuuya struggled against the restraints, probably just to make a point. “This isn’t even hard to get out of. Did they just put us here for fun? To highlight their stalker tendencies?”

“They know we won’t leave,” Dazai shrugged. “Not with this much at stake.”

Thunder echoed outside the windows, followed by the insistent melody of raindrops. The sound of fighting was quick to follow — weapons firing and people screaming; the *swish!* of Abilities.

“Did you manage to contact Koda?”

“The *in-ear* got fucked up,” he replied. “Considering the general ruckus, though, I would say they’ve arrived.”

He frowned. “How did they get *you*?”

“Thanks for the vow of faith,” the boy huffed. He contorted some more, exasperated — then dropped his head on Dazai’s shoulder, leaving a wet patch on his already soaked shirt. It felt strangely warm. “V was out. I tried to wake him up with some — *violent shaking*, so he could use his Ability on Kouyou. I stuck a piece of wood through her, then Beatrice got me in the head with — A hammer?” He blinked. “It’s kind of blurry.”

“You *stabbed* Ane-san?” Dazai blinked. “She’ll put you on calligraphy duty until your next life.”

A groan. “Don’t remind me.”

The warmth from the weight on his shoulder began to feel less dry; he licked a trail of blood under his nose, studying the crimson shade of the water at their feet, and dared: “Are you — like, going to bleed out?”

“You think I’d die that easily? Fuck *off*. They wouldn’t have even gotten me if I hadn’t been that angry. I —” He cleared his throat. “Let it distract me.”

“He admits it.”

“Die. You went down with one hit.”

“At least you understood what was going on with her,” he replied, ignoring him. “I thought I would need to spell it out for you.”

His offense was thick enough to be tasted. “As if she would *ever* betray the organization.” Just a fact, unchained by loyalty or deference — Kouyou Ozaki wasn’t made for betrayal. “I just don’t understand *when* Beatrice got her,” He let out a humorless laughter. “Poor Dante. We’ve been shitting on him for so long.”

“How do you know he’s still not to blame?”

“She’s been lying to us,” Chuuya spat out. “Not that fucking hard to imagine she’s been lying about everything. The man’s in a *coma*. ”

Dazai hummed. “Oh, *I* know. It’s a bit sad that you only understood it ten minutes ago, though, isn’t it?”

“First of all, it’s been *at least* one hour,” Chuuya replied, jolting him forward with a viciousness that cracked his bones. “Second, I already knew she was leading us on.”

“Sure you did.”

“I did, *asshole!*” he insisted. “I’ve had doubts. The flashes she told us she kept having from her time at the dungeons — *I* don’t remember anything from my night at the Headquarters. And now Dante — I don’t think he would have freed Beatrice, not when the risks were so high. And if she was really under his control, he could have stopped her before she said a word.”

He mimicked a winning bell. “Not a *Soul*. ”

Annoyed: “Not a damn *Soul*. ”

A sudden wave of impact rattled the window — lighting and Abilities, turning the room red. The melody of gunshots was too stable to be successful; Dazai could imagine the endless rows of *Souls* standing back up — walking and walking and *walking*, eternally.

“It’s not just that,” he started, eventually, over their shallow breaths. “I know what the Nine Rings’s seal is.”

Pressed against the side of his throat, Chuuya’s jaw clenched. “*What?* What does the seal have to —“

“And Kouyou,” he continued. “Her being a *Soul* is not news. I’m rather sure she was one even before mission *Blue Flower* was set in motion.”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

Easily, Dazai said: “I can’t tell you.”

For several, heavy moments, only the *tip tap* of water drops and the muffled roar of weapons filled his pulsing ears. The scar down his hand seemed to electrify him; he recalled the sound his throat had made as he dislocated his thumb.

A glacial word broke through: “What?”

“I can’t tell you,” Dazai insisted.

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

Thunder flared. “You’re playing the mastermind game *right now?*” Chuuya shook their joined bodies, landing his head against the wall. Dazai yelped. “*Right now*, you piece of fucking crap? With Ane-san under a religious brainwashing *scam* and our men fighting off shitty sinners *zombies?*”

The impact made him slip down the wet tub; in a graceless dance, they stumbled up and down the soaked floor, slamming several body parts against its edge and the walls, splashing crimson water around. “This isn’t about — *stop it* —!”

“You’re *fucking pathetic* — let go of *me!* — You want me to tell you you’re the smartest asshole around? Is that it?”

“I wouldn’t *mind* it,” he admitted. “*Hey!*”

The hit against the wound on his temple made him see stars. Bending him forward until his nose brushed the floor of the bathtub, Chuuya snapped: “*Fuck you!*”

“I can’t tell you,” he repeated.

“*My ass!* Promise number one! *Why?*”

Dazai leaned his forehead on the ceramic, squeezing his eyes shut. “Because I already did.”

A groan left his throat. “We’re *not* doing this again. With all the codes — you didn’t tell me shit. *Again.*”

“Chuuya.”

“*What?*”

“What did we talk about in the car?”

“What?” he echoed. “What does that —“

“Answer to me.”

“I don’t — V and Beatrice’s dramatics! *Spelling Bee*, my stupid birthday — the fuck does that have to do with —“

“With the windows,” Dazai specified. “The car windows. Shorthand twenty three. What did we talk about?”

“What are you *talking about?*” Chuuya insisted, exasperated. “We didn’t use that code.”

“And what code are we using right now?”

“*What?*” Tension quickened his heartbeat; Dazai could feel it against his wrists, right where his gloved fingers had been tracing lines ever since the first jet of water had hit him. “What do you —“

Abruptly, he fell quiet.

Too slow to be unaware, the stubborn drag of leather abandoned the skin of his arm.

Dazai could be patient. He waited for his heavy breaths to quieten down against his bones — for cold, inevitable acceptance to freeze his lungs and let them out, deflecting like a last exhale against his spine. The strength pushing him down disappeared; they settled upright again, back against back — quiet.

With a sigh that *tasted* of repulse, for the first time since December, Chuuya abandoned his body against Dazai’s own, head on his shoulder, eyes closed.

“Alright,” he said, like he hated him for it. Somehow, it sounded brutal — the ricochet of his exhaustion against the walls, more vicious than any of his screams had been. “When did you figure it out?”

“That you’re not Chuuya?” He fixed his head better in place, shrugging enough to rattle the boy’s own. “Later than I should have, all things considered.”

For a moment, Dazai was perched on the table of the meeting room — fiddling with the slices of some important document Mori had made the mistake of giving him. They were alone; Kouyou had already dragged a freshly-out of the Hospital Chuuya away. It was the first time either of them had been invited to join. It was days after *Corruption*.

*Two instances of collaboration*, Mori told him, walking a useless path up and down the room. *Two outstanding successes. Want to give me an hypothesis on why that is?*

*Because I'm your best card*, he answered. *And he's the most powerful weapon you have.*

[*I have*, he corrected himself, then — *but only where Mori couldn't reach. That I have.*]

Once he had noticed — once he'd *admitted* to himself that he knew just what space Chuuya's being left in the newly dug corner next to him — he hadn't been able not to.

"I told you, at the Hospital," he said, just a hint less superior than he would have if his feet hadn't been kicking scarlet water. "You've been weird since — Verlaine. It didn't add up; not if you had only been a *Soul* for a few days. And when you disappeared for a week after the meeting — no one heard from you," A pause. "Only Kouyou."

She had been the one to hastily tell him to *leave the poor boy alone, for a while* — once the bruises from their squabble had vanished, and boredom and the empty seat at the Arcade had settled in his bones. He could have stolen information on him; figured it out in less time than whining behind her skirts had taken.

Dazai hadn't.

He had jumped up and down the colorful reflections of the stained glass windows, one year younger and two times more dispassionate. He had come up with pranks. He had filled Chuuya's new office with crickets. He had wondered what it felt like — grieving.

"Beatrice must have gotten Kouyou first, and she must have brought you to her," he continued. "No other way to capture you. Some of the things Beatrice knew about you weren't in the archives — Only you could have told her. How low the possibility of you actually being thirty three seconds from death after the explosion in Rengoku was. All the times the *Souls* knew where we were going to look for them."

"But I think you understood, didn't you?" His shoulder blades dug caves into his. "When we fought at the Hospital, you told me you *knew* something was wrong. But you couldn't tell me *what*. *Souls* can't talk about their state. You couldn't tell me you're the spy we've been looking for. Tsuchiya Mi — you were the one to contact her sister about her. You alerted the *Souls* about a specific target. Ace's measures couldn't beat that focused strength."

"Our mistake," Dazai concluded, "Was assuming that most *Souls* were only ever under Dante's control when they were in that — *vacant* state. But it's not true, is it? You're always under his influence."

Chuuya made a sound. It could have been laughter, mocking and familiar — it could have been a defeated sigh; nonetheless, it was muffled by forcefully shut lips.

His fingers tapped against his skin as if it *hurt* to do so, nails scraping to keep contact through the gloves, fighting against themselves. He had never thought about describing touch as *relieved*.

*The P-R-O-D-I-G-Y*, he tapped, all his frustration focused on the effort it took to spell that out — an effort, he knew, *meant* to taunt him — *made me wait a shit long time*.



“And *that’s* why you were so mad after Rengoku,” Dazai concluded. “You actually noticed me trying to communicate, in the house, didn’t you?”

*Still stupid.*

“You realized it could be a communication method, one the *Soul* wouldn’t notice — so you made sure I would push for us to learn more ways to convey information,” He huffed a half laughter. “Every time you used those codes, you were saying stuff the *Soul* wouldn’t let you, right?”

*Could not say it all*, he traced. Gently — so gently it seemed uncharacteristic; followed by a pinch to the wrist, and Dazai felt strangely *euphoric*, felt strangely relieved, *hello, hello, here you are* — he bumped the side of his head against his own. *The spy thing. Body fights back. Shit body.*

Dazai snorted.

“Are you having fun?” Chuuya spoke up. “You know, *I am me*. I just can’t talk about —“ His voice cut off. He groaned, frustrated. “You know.”

“So be *quiet*, stupid. I’m trying to talk with your stupid hands. You heard what I said in the car, didn’t you? About Kouyou?”

*She kept saying we should focus on the Nine Rings*, Chuuya tapped, drawing a circle to signal the name of the organization. *She wasn’t talking about R-E-V-E-N-G-E. She knew it was Beatrice who was behind it all. She just couldn’t tell us.*

“Right,” he agreed. “She put a bomb in your taxi, you know? All in the name of getting you to focus on the *Nine Rings*. ”

“That was shitty,” Chuuya replied.

*That was smart*, he tapped.

“Damn,” Dazai commented. “That’s mildly entertaining. Must be a headache, though. If I had any pity left in my body for you, I’d feel all of it.”

“I still have a tongue to tell you to fuck off.”

“Now I get why all your insults have been more than disappointing, lately. Someone should tell Dante he’s got a distasteful sense of humor.”

*I’ve been me*, the fingers insisted, hesitantly, with fractured motions. *I’ve just. Had headaches. Also been a spy. Boss is going to kill me.* His next pause lasted a bit longer. *I got people killed.*

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” He brushed off. “Obviously, I *could* tell him, but I’ve got a better idea. I shall take care of your repentance. Maybe a torture session or two?” He lit up. “An apology dance?”

“I’m *not* doing the — I’ll bite your hands off if you try to touch me.”

“Where’s your guilt, partner?” Dazai insisted. The wound was right in front of him, bleeding and wide, ready for a second knife to sink in. “You could have destroyed the organization, you know? *That’s* why I never go anywhere Kouyou invites me to. Our *best doctor* died for your little secret.”

It thundered. Chuuya didn’t move.

Humorless laughter shook his body to the core; with the acceptance of someone who wouldn’t drown blame into blindness any time soon, Chuuya spat out: “Fuck you.”

“You trusted me to get you out of this.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always do,” Dazai shot, as merciless as he knew how to be. Chuuya had never told him what he had seen in his *Limbo* — he had never told him why he had said his name as N tortured him, either. “You don’t get to pretend I don’t make sure of it. You don’t get to pretend *this* wasn’t yours.”

Against his arms, he felt his fists clench.

Satisfaction burned through his bones. It left a bitter taste in his mouth. *Some victories are better left unsavoured*, Mori liked to say. *And some wounds are useless if not prodded at.*

Dazai made a face.

“You know what I thought when I realized Dante had —” Chuuya cleared his throat, again, as if he had choked on the letters. His fingers tapped, just as frustrated, *managed to get me?*

*“I should have let the Sheep shoot me?”*

“Fuck off,” he echoed. “I thought — *finally.*”

He paused. The curiosity of a scientist; the suicidal vein of a doctor. “Finally?”

*“Finally,”* Chuuya’s scoff lacked humor; it was somewhat amused, still — in a strangely poisoned way. *“Somebody to be angry at.”*

It was as much of a, *you had a point*, as he would ever get. Dazai wasn’t even sure if he deserved it. With a sigh, he dropped his head on his shoulder again, stuck on the pounding of Chuuya’s blood against his temple.

He knew how those documents in the Archive would end, as long as they carried their names. He knew the page would be scribbled and scribbled *and scribbled on*, until someone would grow stubborn enough to turn it. He knew *overflowing* was a second nature for the damned — he knew that there wasn’t enough paper in the world for them. At some point, he supposed — they’d have to move to skin.

*What about the S-E-A-L?*, Chuuya tapped, finally. *You didn't say in the car.*

“Oh,” he recalled. “No, I was just making fun of you,” A pinch on the wrist. “My theory on the seal is a recent development. Beatrice slipped up quite a few times inside the room.”

“Did I?”

They straightened.

Beatrice had renovated her clothes, if slightly — the hems of her gown had been tied up over her knees, and she had let her hair down, curling aimlessly around her scarred wrists. A remote of sorts was in her hands; something he had seen in the clinic room.

*Electric shocks*, she had said.

Kouyou was right beside her.

“Look at you,” Dazai whistled. They were a strange combination — rosebuds and decayed ground, pale where one was sunkissed, bodies pushing against each other and *away from*, as if undecided. He recalled the pictures from Kanechi’s album — Kouyou’s hand in the flowers held by her fingers, but her eyes settled mercilessly on the bow of Beatrice’s lips. “Old friends reunited. Shame Kanechi’s corpse couldn’t join.”

He was used to being the subject of Kouyou’s hostility — it was startling to realize that her poison in her eyes could have been ten times more deadly.

She took a step forward. Beatrice stopped her.

“Don’t mind him, Ozaki,” she tutted. “You know better than to allow a man to anger you.”

“I have a chance to skin him alive, at last, and you ask me to ignore it?” she replied, with that strange mechanical cadence.

“I need him, still,” Beatrice insisted. “You can have him when I’m done. Chuuya, come here.”

Lightning echoed outside; even if it hadn’t blinded him through the window, Dazai would have *felt* the snap of Chuuya’s attention — of the woman’s fingers on one of the buttons of the remote. The cables fell under his grip, torn into easy pieces. He stood up rapidly enough to trip Dazai; by the time he’d sat up again, Chuuya had moved to stand next to the Executive.

“That’s rather unfair,” he noted, shrugging the loose cables off. “Three against one? Ane-san, you’ve always been a bother. He’s *my* dog, I told you.”

“You can have him back soon,” Beatrice reassured him. “I just need him to annihilate those Port Mafia men. Bringing them here to fight the unfightable — You boys must be pretty new to this leading thing.”

“Rejuvenation has been widely recognized as a necessary factor for the wellbeing of organizations,” Dazai pointed out. “You’d know everything about that, correct?”

There was no smile on her face — all the quiet, stone-made politeness froze all the same. She walked to his tub, her makeshift guards staring at the floor — she offered him a begrudgingly impressed nod. “When did you figure it out?”

“The Border,” Dazai shrugged. “You said you, *couldn’t wait to jump the border.*”

A smile appeared, dragging only one side of her mouth up. “Here’s the *Prodigy.*”

“People truly misunderstand the nature of that name,” He leaned his chin on the edge of the tub, looking up at her through dripping eyelashes. “It’s not an ode to my intelligence. Demons aren’t *smart.*”

“But you are,” Beatrice insisted. “Which is why I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Did you perhaps reconsider my double suicide proposal?”

She offered him a hand. “Stand up. We need to talk about the *Book.*”

“Oh,” Every muscle webbing his face caught fire, straining agonizingly against the instinct to smile. “Oh, I feared you would say that.”

Signs of the battle had irrevocably stained the clinic room, but the path to that destination hadn’t been spared either. The windows had been undressed of their glass; bullets rested on the floor, stained in blood and wooden splinters. When Dazai dared to sneak a look out; all he saw was the fire of rifles and the walking legs of the wounded.

Dante’s bed was the only untouched corner of the room — every shelf, every paper, and every inch of the place bore the handprints of Chuuya’s resistance. *Golden Demon*’s slashes on the walls and the furniture were impossible to misunderstand.

Right at the feet of the cot rested V — a bleeding gash on his forehead, painting his vacant eyes crimson. He didn’t even turn to look at him.

“For the sake of clarification,” Dazai offered, meekly allowing Beatrice to settle him on a stool next to Dante’s bed. “*You* went looking for Dante, yes?”

“Not immediately,” she clarified. There was something akin to contempt in the eyes she settled on the comatose man; not an ounce of the conflictual nostalgia from before. “V’s *supposed* death was a real hit. I didn’t think Dante would be that incompetent with his own Ability. I had to wait until I gained influence in the *Nine Rings* — without revealing myself as the puppeteer of their organization.”

“You’re the one who ordered for the village to be destroyed.”

“Obviously,” Beatrice searched through the mess that had once been a desk. “Both times. Initially, I thought about letting the place go. I did grow up there, you know? Not with Dante

and Virgil, but, still. Then — Well. I needed *someone* to test Dante's power on. They were close enough."

Dazai hummed. "Makes sense."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"And your," He blinked. "*Parents?*"

"The town's bakers," An amused expression. "They were always nice. Offered to adopt me, before they decided I was too sickly. They taught me how to make bread. Right, '*Zaki?*' Remember when I'd bake us loafs for our trips?"

Kouyou didn't answer, too distracted by whatever her eyes were drowning her in. He didn't munch on what the *Limbo* could be showing her — she had bleed for years to prepare for that moment.

At her silence, Beatrice made a face.

She grabbed her remote again, fiddling with some of the buttons. Under Dazai's eyes, one of the monitors connected to Dante's body sped up — the tracing of his heartbeat jolted three different times, before dropping to an average rhythm again. Almost instantly, Kouyou blinked.

"Oh —" Slowly, a smile bloomed on her face. "*Oh* , yes, I do recall. Kanechi always complained about the lack of salt."

"True Northern Italian bread has *no* salt. I've told you both a *thousand times* ," She shook her head. With a conspiratorial look to Dazai, she explained: "My father was an immigrant. God knows how he landed in Rengoku, exactly, but the war — the *true* war, mind you; not whatever fickle, petty thing the Government and the Ability Users attempted to call such — was a terrible time."

Dazai curled an eyebrow. Mori would dislike that description of *The Great War* viciously. "My speech in the Forest must have hit a nerve."

"Pardon?"

"I blamed V — *Dante* — for holding you captive and living off your forced feelings," he echoed, studying Kouyou's uncaring, brilliant grin. "Are you scared that *Judgement Day* will be lonely?"

Beatrice didn't appear bothered. "Kouyou and I reunited at the *Nine Rings* ' cemetery months ago. She was just as eager to see me then as she is now."

"I'm sure she was. How long did it take her to ask *Golden Demon* to kill you?"

"I can get your little redhead to be the same, if that's what you want."

Dazai darted a glance to Chuuya — hands pathetically crossed behind his back, chin up, stupid hat in place. He had never looked quite so straight, not even under Kouyou's best ministrations. "Assuming you won't kill me?"

"It would be a foolish move on my part," Beatrice stood up, carrying a thick dossier. "You have the answers I need. And you're not a threat."

"I'm not?" He tilted his head. "The moment I touch Dante, all your *Souls* are done for."

"You're right," she considered. "Except that's not *exactly* how it works, is it? And even if it was, I doubt you would risk the life of the Port Mafia's most powerful Ability user and most successful Executive."

"You're widely overestimating how much I care about the Port Mafia," Dazai leaned back in his seat, dropping his nape against the edge — letting his head dangle upside down. "A common mistake, but a stupid one nonetheless. *That's not how it works?*"

Beatrice climbed over V's abandoned legs to sit at the edge of Dante's bed; she offered him the dossier. "*No Longer Human* works either by touching the User or the ones under its effects, correct?"

"Yes," He nodded, caressing the lines over lines of research under his hands. "Is every document in this room like this? You've certainly been looking for the *Book* for a long time. I'm surprised V didn't have any answers for me, when I found him, that night. Maybe you just didn't want him to tell me."

Ignoring him, she insisted: "You would need to somehow come into contact with both us *and* every single person who's been affected by our Abilities. It's not a hive mind; you can't kill us by killing the roots."

"That's fascinating," he offered. "And if I put a bullet in both your heads?"

"Your problem stays," Beatrice replied. "More than half the men fighting for *me* in that backyard are from the Port Mafia. You say you don't care about the organization — I doubt your Boss won't mind the consequences. I'm sure you fear those, at the very least. And, well —" She flickered a look to Chuuya, lips quivering. "Your friend is such a delight. You're really willing to let him die in front of you?"

He snorted. "You've really misunderstood me. Anyway, he *is* dead."

"Not yet," She motioned her chin towards the file. "I'm assuming you know what I need you to do."

"Obviously," Dazai snapped the file shut, throwing it on the ground. Next to it, V didn't even flinch. "To put at least a *Soul* in almost every major city of the world — how long did it take?"

"I had time," She shrugged. One of her hands tapped Dante's leg, lingering on the sheets. "Kanechi was something of a — *delivery man*, for the *Nine Rings*. We were always around,

and overseas. Of course, we travelled less when Ozaki arrived. That was when *I* started leaving on my own.”

“All to make sure you would have someone in whatever place you would discover the *Book* was,” he concluded. “And now you want me to tell Dante where it is, so that he can command the nearest *Soul* to go take it.”

“It’s actually very easy,” the woman reassured him. She offered him her remote. “You see that tracing monitor? Chuuya let me know you know Morse Code. All you need to do is signal the location. Dante’s heartbeat will send shocks to the crosses, and they will act as messages.”

Dazai threw the remote in the air, catching it as it came down. “You truly put a lot of faith in me.”

“I’ve been searching for you for a long time. I *know* you, Dazai Osamu,” Beatrice said. “Or would you rather I —“

“*Dazai* is fine,” he assured her. “When did you start searching?”

“Long before Dante was born, of course. At the time, the plan was to use the *Book* to amplify *my* Ability. But Dante’s is much more interesting, isn’t it? Sounds like something straight out of a tale.”

Her eyes traced the pale lines left on his skin by his oxygen mask — the rise and fall of his chest. “It was some time after the war. Rengoku wasn’t particularly touched by it — if we don’t count the construction of that annoyingly sinister Border. But as you know, the wall was soon destroyed. All thanks to the *Nine Rings*’ seal — and to a little kid who got lost in the woods and found it.”

His eyes fell on the hand she had abandoned on the sheets. Her wrist wasn’t naked — had never been naked, not since he had met her, with that old wristwatch and its imperceptibly cracked crystal.

“You got it,” Beatrice complimented, following his line of sight. “Say, in the middle of all her disdainful speeches about the *Nine Rings*, did Ozaki ever tell you what they became notorious for?”

Kouyou didn’t perk up. Dazai shrugged: “I don’t know. Tattoos?”

“That, too,” she admitted. “But no. The *Nine Rings* have *never* had a man as their Boss. Progressive, right? I have always worn this badge with pride.”

“Of course you have,” he replied. “You were the one to create the syndicate.”

“Oh, better than that,” Beatrice tapped the glass of her watch. “I am the *only* Boss this organization has ever had. No need to pass an Ability-infused object down to someone else, when the object itself allows you to just — *be* , that someone else.”

Eerily, the perpetual melody of gunshots paused. Through the destroyed window, Dazai could still hear calls and curses — for an instant, though, it was as if the bullets had all run out.

“How many times?” he asked.

“This is the ninth,” She smiled. “Ninth name, ninth Boss, ninth lifetime —”

“That must have been hard.”

Complicity painted her features — a strange shadow; something that tickled him all the way to his bones. “Yes. You would understand.”

“And were they worth this final show?”

“*Worth?*”

“You’re not fully yourself anymore, are you?” He hummed. “All those times we thought you were under the effect of Dante’s Ability — that wasn’t you pretending for our benefit. Hereditary Abilities have been known to carry unpleasant side effects. You lose sight of yourself at times, don’t you?”

Beatrice’s lips fluttered. Vacancy made a home in her eyes, or just returned after some fresh air. It had always been there. *Living nine lives*, he thought — *all to play God during the last one of them*.

“I would have escaped your dungeons sooner if that weren’t the case,” she said, at last. He recalled her funeral clothing at the entrance of Rengoku. “George Kingstain — I choked him in his own blood. Just as you two told me to do.”

“I understand.”

“I know you do,” Her fingers patted his knuckles, almost affectionately. “*Suffering* should not be a price to obtain the good that life can offer. It is simply a consequence to those who deserve it.”

Dazai tilted his head from one side to the other. With no pity, he bowed his head, and swore: “I really am sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“That this ninth life of yours seemingly treated you so badly.”

“I know you are,” she said, easily. “You’re a demon. No one would know better than you. But, I must say, this was one of the most interesting ones.”

Her eyes fell on Kouyou.

Imperceptibly, they softened.

“She was truly a darling,” Beatrice sighed. “A presumptuous, stubborn little princess, who Kanechi was ready to sacrifice his life for. I wanted to snap her neck for it. It would have



been *beautiful*. They were the dearest friends I had in all my lifetimes,” Her eyes traced her face. “It’s a shame misfortune follows her so earnestly — enough to meet me.”

Dazai listened to the *beep* of the machines. For some reason, he thought of the picture hidden under his makeshift bed — that stolen memory of Chuuya; a little thorn he ought to stick back into soft flesh.

Of every addiction he had ever allowed Mori to poison him with — the possibility of someone else’s normalcy seemed the most useless one.

“Aren’t you the one who wants to enslave the world?” Dazai pointed out. “It would be easy enough to simply — not.”

That remark got Beatrice to move her gaze away from the Executive. Stone molded her eyes once again; standing up, she twinned her fingers.

“God has given me a *mission*,” she said, with the tone of someone who wanted to insist — *I know you won’t understand*. “I vowed to punish them all for what they did. The *War* —” She gulped. “Not the *Great War*. Just a War — one of the many. It’s always a war. I was only a child when I ended up on the battlefield and found the Seal. I almost *died*, and you know what they did? They said it was a *miracle*,” Bitterly, she laughed. “They made up a ridiculous story, said the people of Rengoku were *blessed* — none of us were blessed. No one is. People are imperfect creatures. And they never pay for the cruelty they are laced with.”

“Until now,” he concluded.

“Until now,” she sighed. “Do not worry, Dazai. The *Book* offers endless possibilities — I’m sure I will be able to write something for you. You can’t be a *Soul*, considering your Ability. But repentance can come in many shapes. We shall find something together.”

“That is very kind of you.”

She smiled — and motioned Chuuya forward with gentle fingers. V didn’t resist when she leaned down to steal his revolver from his fingers; he didn’t even turn to watch her lay it in the boy’s hand. When the tip of the weapon touched his temple, Dazai smiled.

“Of course,” he noted, soaked in the familiar coldness emanating from Chuuya’s body at his back. “Not that I have a choice.”

Beatrice smiled. “I’m glad you understand.”

The remote had a simple enough mechanism; Dazai assumed she had had a long time to build the best solution to her problem. He brushed his fingers on the button, studying Dante’s sleeping face.

If he wasn’t a *Soul*, if he didn’t have a limbo — was he just dreaming?

*A shame misfortune follows her so earnestly*, he repeated, because sometimes people said things, and he didn’t understand them, and he did, and he *couldn’t*, and he wanted to. *Enough to meet me*.

He let the hand hidden from Beatrice's visual drop at his side — it dangled and dangled, right until it came into contact with Chuuya's leg. Obediently, he started fiddling with the button.

*["Corruption," he proposed. The couches at the Headquarters were nicer on the eyes than they were on the back; nonetheless, they shared the one facing the door of the meeting room. If he had tried to count the number of bandages the two of them shared, they could have sat there long enough to watch their bones melt with the candles. "Get it? Because it corrupts you."]*

*"It's not me it corrupts," Chuuya replied. His eyes were settled somewhere else; as dramatic as always, as guilty as ever.*

*"You sure gained some side effects," Dazai replied, petulantly. His eyes roamed over his bandaged body, pointedly — the new set of scars he could peek at; spiral rosy lines he would pay to tear apart and see. Mori's voice reminded him that wounds were to be watched, not touched. Instead, he settled for poking the skin under his new amber eye. "And a new catchphrase, if my ears don't fool me!"*

*Chuuya slapped his hands away. "Shut the fuck up. Not my fault some stupid computer code wanted to be dramatic."*

*There was a question there — one Dazai wouldn't answer, because it wasn't worth his time and effort. Instead, he kicked the side of his shoe. "You were a black hole."*

*"If that's what you want to call it."*

*"It wasn't very nice, though — giving me hope that you would actually die."*

*"I will ram Hirotsu's rifle so far up your ass —"*

*"It was the coolest thing."*

*"It hurt like a motherfucker," Chuuya replied, unamused. Then, after a pause: "It was kind of cool."*

*Dazai got patronizing, because he could: "Small and inflammable as he is, though, Chuuya shouldn't use it when I'm not around."*

*Disbelief curled his mouth around a retch. "I don't need your shit concern —"*

*"Hey," he interrupted him. Something in his tone must have been wrong — must have been a slip up; something made for the privacy of a shipping container and an audience of trash and stars — because Chuuya turned a mildly surprised look on him.*

*In the silence of the hallway, on the most expensive and most uncomfortable couch of that castle, Dazai came to the conclusion that he would never be able to meet his eyes with ease again. Burned earth and the skyline chased his attention, fighting and blinding and crawling, demanding it with the stubbornness he was slowly learning to associate with the other boy.*

*Few things were worth the hustle that seeing was — if he looked for too long, if he looked too much, if he looked too honest — then maybe —*

*“Hey,” he repeated. Gods weren’t real; only ink and paper were. Dazai had seen it enough to know when a chapter was ending — when it was beginning. “Don’t use it when I’m not there.”*

*Chuuya looked right back at him.*

Did you need a divine eye to, at last? *he didn’t ask.* Can you see me, now that it hurts?

*“Alright,” he conceded, begrudgingly, quietly — quieter than he could ever remember him being. The weight of bandages, muffling it all. Look; we match. “I won’t.”]*

“Quicker,” Beatrice told him. “No need to lose yourself in details. Just tell him.”

“Patience,” Dazai replied. The buttons of the remote were strangely sweaty; he tried to imagine her ancient bones *panicking*, and failed. “You don’t want me to sign it wrong, do you?”

At his shoulder, he felt Chuuya’s body stiffen.

The fabric of his pants was rough under his fingers; he vowed to burn his entire wardrobe again, and burn his apartment, and burn his hat, and watch him rise through the flames with his name on his lips. “I don’t know if you know,” he added, focusing on the sensation of gloved hands trembling, fighting against an invisible cage. “But I *suck* at Morse Code.”

The gun tickling his temple shuddered.

It tapped on his bones, right back at him.

*Don’t pretend,* he had told him, soaked to the bone, *this wasn’t yours.*

Dazai let the remote fall from his hands.

“Boy,” Beatrice stood. “What do you think —“

“How was it, again?” He scratched his chin, turning to study Chuuya’s void features. Like he had too many times before, he snatched his hat off his head, plopping it on his own. “Ah. Yes.”

*“Dazai,”* she insisted, more harshly.

*“Oh Grantors of dark disgrace,”* Bluntly, unmatching eyes snapped open, looking at him. A breach through the storm — a lock turning, through the rust and the creaks and the corpses of every guard that had dared to put it in place. A famished, mauled beast, sneaking its teeth between the bars. A stranger, still — but a rightful one. *“You need not wake me again.”*

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Death had a tendency to soothe him.

Demons had no time to waste with mothers, but she cradled him all the same. Her absence touched him deeper than any blade, tighter than any rope he'd ever tied around his throat; he supposed he should have used that lonely time to breathe, — to *live* — but he always forgot. A time; a place. He never reached it.

Right at the border was a sight he'd never seen before. Until that moment, he had looked for beauty in other rotten places — places that were familiar, because he'd sought them out with his teeth and nails. He had dropped his body from the highest floor, knowing the concrete was painful and black and *nothing else*.

These days, beauty was red.

Sound was all he could feel: white noises and the rush in his ears, as his body landed on what he could only assume to be the ground. The rain had disappeared, evaporated by a wrenching heat. Laughter filled the air, or the reddish haze that had taken its place — Dazai couldn't remember ever hearing a more ancient sound. When the whipping wind tore his eyelids apart, the moon was a crimson halo.

The *Purgatory* had been blown up on impact; wood and destroyed furniture filled the valley, followed by the storm of raining papers. A crater sat in its place, and bodies were climbing their way out of it, rifles and vacant expressions still on.

Somewhere through the mist, Dazai saw Port Mafia black clothing and the unmistakable golden rain of bullets.

*Souls* raised their weapons again, uncaring of their missing limbs and bullet wounds, focused on the endless crowd of enemies running their way. The red dot in the sky dropped to the ground quicker than eyes could catch — when he landed in the middle of their rows, the earth shook with such violence Dazai watched the bridge they'd driven on an endless time ago collapse.

White fog arose; the wave of impact sent him another thousand feet behind, slamming even the trees surrounding the valley to the ground.

The eye of the storm, surrounded by the Souls' brutally eviscerated corpses, was — Chuuya.

His clothes had been torn to bloodied shreds — red paths covered his body head to toe, spiral lines and the cracks of an earthquake on the concrete, blooming almost luminescent on his

throat and cheeks — showing off the blinding lava living underneath.

His savage, wrecked laughter kept his eyes shut — the *blink* of an instant that tore them apart showed off irises shrunk to minuscule dots, their white littered in shattered veins.

He didn't waste time to recover; slamming his naked hands together, the space surrounding him lit up — a bubble that formed blisters on every inch of his naked skin the moment it exploded, filling the valley with a heat so devastating Dazai thought he could see flames. Rocks and debris flew at a speed that would beat sound ten times over, their weight exaggerated to the point of easily sinking into the men's chests — their faces, their legs, every *inch* of them — and leaving from a crater in their backs.

With another fit of laughter, Chuuya flew up again, mindlessly distributing destruction through the rows of Souls.

Coughing, Dazai leaned on a corpse at his right, using it to stand up. A wet gasp corrected his assumption; under his hands, the woman — despite the gash starting from her throat and ending somewhere around her stomach, bubbling with blood — was still breathing.

“What —” she whispered, a viscid sound, painful to the mind. A reddish dimness illuminated her pale, sweaty skin through the darkness. “What is *that*?”

Dazai couldn't have torn his eyes away if they had been ripped out by his own nails. “An enemy of the bad guys.”

The earth shook, jolting her body to the side; viscera fell from the hole in her chest, landing with a wet squelch. He reached for the gun in the back of his pants and sank a bullet in her forehead.

He ran.

The crowd of men and women shouting and escaping from the living catastrophe bumped against him with no pity, eyes set on the crater left by the *Purgatory*. It was indistinguishable in the darkness, — merely sounds and sweaty skin, sticking and touching and *tearing* — ready to trample him to the ground. As soon as empty eyes took the place of terror, he started shooting them down, leaving them to be walked upon.

A hand grabbed his calf — he kicked it away, until the groan of pain coming from its mouth turned familiar enough to get him to lower his gaze.

V was covered in blood. One of his eyes was completely shut, bruised and bloodied; his skin was a field of heat rashes, melting off on his bones.

“—*Alive*, ” he gasped out, a whistling sound, a soaked cry. “They, *a* -alive, can't — can't *die*, *can't* —“

He understood. Right as another wave of feet crashed on his battered body, Dazai ripped himself off from his grip and ran towards the crater. In the sky, the black hole widened — another vicious landing from Chuuya sent every single body in the valley to the ground.

He laughed, and he laughed, and he laughed; pretending the thing down his throat was terror, Dazai tightened his fingers on the hat that had somehow remained in his hands.

*Golden Demon* was waiting for him.

She seemed to have grown bigger — a violently pink shadow filling the night, empty faces and blades set in front of her. Kouyou stood motionless in front of her, bleeding and unconcerned, the sole wall from Chuuya's rage and the two wounded bodies behind her: Dante, laying on a destroyed bed and covered in blood, and —

Something had pierced Beatrice's abdomen and stuck her to the ground; metallic and white as it was, he assumed it came from one of the machines that had surrounded the man. Half of her hair had been torn apart by the explosion — she breathed intermittently, blood splattering with each exhale.

"You look well," Kouyou told him, blankly.

"Your protégée's dog tendencies," Dazai grinned, patting the old wound on his temple. He knew the feeling of blood; he knew how to forget it. "If he's around, I'm usually found unscathed. You don't look half as convincing, Ane-san."

She stared, lifelessly unconcerned.

"I hardly suppose asking you to move would matter," he said.

*Golden Demon* flashed her katanas, whipping the wind into his face. Kouyou didn't even flinch.

"Alright, then," He cocked his gun; clicked his *in-ear*. "Noguchi? Start immediately."

Beatrice shuddered out a wet breath. Her hands convulsed uselessly, tiredly; half towards Dante, half towards Kouyou — who turned, immediately, eyes away from him. "Wait —"

He raised his gun and shot Dante in the chest.

Shaken awake, the world took a breath. Kouyou dropped to the ground like a doll — the entire field seemed to exhale. A new kind of laughter filled the air; high pitched and excited, too young to be a god's. In the sky, the flesh-made sun stood still, for infinite fractions of a second — and then it fell.

Dazai lowered his gaze to Beatrice's wristwatch, the crystal even more cracked than before, splattered in blood. "Thirty two," he sing-sang. "Thirty one. Thirty —"

He started running.

*[“You follow our car,” he explained to Noguchi. “And when the rest of the team moves to fight the Souls — which I’m expecting will be surrounding the place — you and Tsuchiya stay behind and wait.”]*

*The idea of not joining the brawl certainly didn't excite him. Still, he asked: "Wait for what?"*

*"For whom," he specified. "They'll be in the car trunk. Don't ask too many questions."*

*"In the trunk? How are they going to fit in there?"*

*"Don't worry about it," Dazai replied. "I've already explained everything to them, but should they try to resist — you tell them this: collaborate, or the Souls won't be the only ones going to Hell," A pause. "Yes, Q?"*].

*Twenty eight.*

If he had bothered to search through the shadows staining the ground in red, he would have seen a silhouette in an overgrown shirt slam themselves against as many bodies as possible — barely resisting, barely upright bodies, victims of Arahbaki's rage and their own failing organs, now that Dante couldn't hold them together.

*Twenty six.*

Their eyes turned white, their mouths fell open — whatever the newly found limbo of *Dogra Magra* was showing them, it kept them occupied. Most importantly — it kept them alive.

*Twenty three.*

*Some running would do you good*, Mori had liked to tell him, in the clinic. He would take a look at his dead-pale skin and suicide attempts, and then he'd spout out the most classic doctor response. Only once, Dazai had tried running around the neighborhood; he'd gotten distracted by the perfect bridge to jump from. The flames engulfing his legs bore Mori's smile.

*Eighteen.*

Tsuchiya was a neon green light in the darkness, kneeled next to every convulsing body Noguchi and Koda held still for her, sinking her syringe on every inch of available skin. Q laughed and laughed and *laughed* —

*Sixteen.*

Chuuya fell, and fell, and fell, a red dot in the sky — only blood, gushing out of every volcano crack on his skin.

Dazai and Q touched the crater right as the clock ticked *fifteen*; when Chuuya's body landed, it did so with enough strength to sink in the earth, shaking it enough to make them stumble. It didn't stop Q from giggling and throwing herself against him, hands open, before escaping again from under Dazai's legs.

*Thirteen —*

Chuuya's eyes snapped open again, fractured bones and ruined skin catching fire, fighting an enemy only he could see, black holes at his hands. The destroyed fist he smashed against the ground sent Dazai down, uselessly attempting to tear his nails off the naked calf he had managed to grab.

Legs climbed over his body — when he blinked, Tsuchiya had already sunk the syringe right in the middle of Chuuya's chest, held tight by Noguchi's tattooed arm.

They dropped him again; tearing him from his grip; he rolled to the center of the crater, a puppet with no strings. *Twelve, eleven, ten* — “Executive Kouyou is in the house,” he told Koda, grabbing his arm.

“But —“

“Go!”

*Nine, eight, seven* — the sound Chuuya made as Dazai gathered his body in his arms couldn't be called a cry — it was merely a piece of lungs; the ruffle of dying wings from the grasshoppers Elise liked to dance on. Behind him, light flared in purple shades, as stumbling corpses were pushed away from his mission.

A gentle, freezing blue appeared under his hands, dissipating the last of Arahabaki from him — the earthquake cracks became wounds, and his eyes became bloodied.

Familiarly light feet landed next to him, their presence strangely known. His shoulders, unwilling to him, curved a bit — an exhale.

“Do you want me to —“ Hirotsu questioned, reaching out with broad shoulders and open hands.

“It's Chuuya,” he assured, huffing, feeling the broken bones under his palms, the man's eyes stuck on him. A moan. “I know, I know. Being possessed is so aggravating. Don't whine,” Chuuya protested again, head lolling against his back, feet hanging lifelessly from where he'd crossed them at his waist. “You're fine, partner. I'm here.”

Not a protest left Chuuya's mouth, though the repulsion was very much heard. Dazai held his naked wrists to strengthen his grip; his hands were gloveless, torn apart, and sticky with blood.

“Make sure the ones who aren't ours are dead,” he ordered, nodding to Hirotsu. It was only *half* an excuse to get his curious, too-observant glance off the body on his back — luckily enough, the man didn't seem to be in a complaining mood.

It took him much longer than five seconds to carry the two of them to the crater left by the *Purgatory* — he knew, because silence came sooner than that. Q's laughter disappeared like a falling sun, as Noguchi restrained them — *per* Dazai's orders.

Their eerily shaped eyes found his own from the other side of the bloodied grass. They waved, to the best of their abilities, through the death grip of their new guardian.



“Dazai- *niisan!*” Q screeched — soaked in such never ending blood, their hair was monocolored, at last. “Did I do good? Did I do good?”

“Mori will decide that,” he replied, not sparing them more than a glance. “But good job on the hiding part. I *almost* thought the Port Mafia would find you, a few times.”

Q laughed again. Judging by the strange look in Noguchi’s eyes, it sounded just as unstable as the shake in his veins told him it was. They kicked and kicked, half-heartedly attempting to escape him — eventually, the giggles died down, turning in ear-deafening shrieks. Too dry to be sobs; too strong not to make them pass out.

Dazai hummed, fixing Chuuya’s heavy weight on his shoulders. His head lolled forward; blood seeped from his every cavity, landing on the fabric of his shoulders from his ears and eyes — sliding down all the way to his shoes. It sizzled against skin it wasn’t touching.

The dismembered bodies on the ground stayed on the ground. The ones in Port Mafia gear rose again.

The world existed, somewhere behind a curtain of ruby water. Dazai could feel every wound in his body. When he dropped the two of them inside the crater — his body *begged*, more than any man in the Dungeons ever had under his hands.

He gathered Chuuya’s head in his lap, pulling delicately, the way Mori did with stitches and plans and smiles — lest he broke the new toy into pieces; lest he woke him up. He breathed slow, one hand on the boy’s wrecked inhales, until his eyes could actually *see*.

A few feet from them, a pink silhouette had her hands tight around a pair of bloodied ones.

“I’m not sorry, I’m not sorry,” Beatrice was whispering, frantically, whistling with every wet breath. Dante laid on the other side of the crater; somehow, V had managed to drop next to him before wasting his last thirty three seconds. “I’m *not*, ‘Zaki, I’m not *sorry* —“

Dazai’s gaze cleared, slower than decay. For a moment, he feared Q might have forgotten one *Soul* — Kouyou’s face, when he managed to find it through the blood, was vacant.

“I cannot give you what you want,” she said, almost too low to hear. “I will not.”

“Forgive me,” the woman wheezed, through the craters in her chest. “Forgive me, or *Ka* — Kanechi won’t — He won’t talk to me —“

Grief added ten thousand pounds of dried blood to the Executive’s shoulders. When she raised the red hand in hers to her cheek, though, Dazai allowed a flower to bloom in the space between their battered bodies — privacy, perhaps. If Mori wouldn’t want to know.

*She’s nineteen*, he thought.

Chuuya shuddered.

When he lowered his eyes, the mess of his skin made the search for his fluttering eyes harder than it should have been: everywhere he looked was blood, was raw skin, were those weird

scars.

“Hey,” he asked. His lips quivered; Chuuya twitched, as if he could *smell* his entertainment, and detested it. “How’s having an *Empty Head Again?* ”

A pause.

“Get it?” he insisted. Not his favorite — never quite — but if Chuuya despised it, he could respect it as a rightful place-holder. He could sweep something more off his devastating, *effortless* gallery, and hang it on his walls like a hubristic thief with a stubborn muse. “Like Hirose’s song.”

His lips shaped something, but only liquified red letters pooled down. Stubborn, shaking more than the end of the world, he raised two fingers and tapped the creases on his forehead. *Fuck. You.*

Then, a bit more uncertainly — *Tell Tanaki we did it.*

“They’re all *guilty* ,” Beatrice was insisting, gasping and crying, delirious. “They all *are* , they don’t — they don’t *deserve* , they, they’re just going to fight again, ‘*Zaki* , they, again, again, and *again* — Kouyou Ozaki, hell—“

Dazai didn’t watch; nonetheless, the glow of Demon Golden washed the ground in the colors of dawn, and those were shades he knew. Silence fell, anticipated by a clean slash of blades down fragile skin. On a crimson, abandoned wrist, the clock stopped ticking.

“Bea,” Kouyou said, quietly. There was blood on her hands, again. *Again and again.*  
“Goodbye.”

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[...]

*Beatrice [...] Cause of death: Executive K..*

*Her Ability [So Gentle And Virtuous She Appears], allowed her to bring the death of whoever she greeted, after a pause of a full minute. Given the conditions of her Ability, D. asked her to join him and V. in their “Judgment Day” mission. The wristwatch she*

*used to help him has since been identified as the allegedly legendary Nine Rings' Seal, and one of the three Ability tools existing in Yokohama [Check File CCC56] . Its powers remain unknown, as neither Dazai O., Nakahara C. nor Executive K. managed to gather the information from B.*

*Two years after causing V's death, B. returned to the village of K.. With the help of the Nine Rings, who she had joined, she destroyed the town. She then went looking for D., and used her Ability on him. To escape, D. fought with his own Ability, trapping himself in a coma-like state. B. took control of him, imprisoning him in an abandoned house a few miles from R., and manipulating his heartbeat to create messages that would allow her to control the Souls herself.*

*According to various sources, B. was looking for the Book. [For information, verify documents 01, 001, 0001, 0003, 0005, 0000, and 0; for further explanations, check "The Take Project"]. For reasons not yet entirely justified, she had come to the conclusion that Dazai O. could help her find it. To this day, its location stays unknown.*

*All and every step of what Dazai O. and Nakahara C. have referred to as "Operation Blue Flower" are to be faulted to Beatrice, latest and last leader of the Nine Rings. State of death: enemy of the Port Mafia.*

*All three bodies were disposed of according to the uses of the organization. Executive K. personally requested to be burdened with their disappearance. Details on the confrontation, and the involvement of Nakahara C. and Dazai O. are to be discussed in a successive report. The conflict between the Nine Rings and the Port Mafia is, nonetheless, to be considered solved.*

*May the blood rain feed the hungry streets of this city, and may it guide the Night Wardens to its protection.*

**Special Ability Department Agent.**

**Intelligence Archivist 061, Ango Sakaguchi.**

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*Dear*

*Kouyou,*

~~You stupid annoying~~

~~Detested~~

Ozaki,

Kanechi said I had to write you a letter, but I have no intention of offering you my apologies. Instead, I'm writing this on that photo album of his, so he'll have no choice but to give it to you personally. Kanechi, if you're reading this, piss off! I'm doing what you said.

I suppose I'll apologize for calling your Demon a bitch. I know you don't like that term; but I wasn't calling you a bitch. Not in that sense. You're not a bitch, and Demon Golden isn't either. You're just both very, very, very, very annoying. I won our last fight, by the way — I don't care if you just up and left. You need to learn to put offenses aside, princess, or everyone in that damn organization of yours is going to devour you alive. Who's going to help put out the fire from Kanechi's baking attempts, then?

You're very proud, so I know apologies won't matter much to you. Instead, I'll give you something I know you'll like more: a story.

Once there was a village. It was a small place, with so little people that everybody knew everybody's name. During the first war, a wall had been built at the border between the village and the real world. Instead of keeping the bad out, though, the border only brought it in.

Wounded soldiers kept stumbling into the village, asking for food and for solace. It didn't really matter what side they were on. When someone is bleeding out in front of you, it's hard to ask what flag is sewed on his uniform before you ask him his name.

A girl lived in the village. She had family and friends, but she was was a frail, little thing: most of the village thought she'd be dead by adolescence.

The girl, though, was stubborn (almost as much as you and your stupid Demon are. Kanechi, if you're reading, I'm kidding ) and so she survived, day after day. She joined the medical team and she helped every soldier who came; listened to every story and remembered every name. At night, once those walking corpses were asleep, she'd sit on the roof of the infirmary and look at the wall, and she'd wonder. Not about what was behind it — she knew it was bad. She wondered why it happened, and why no one did anything to stop it.

One day, the girl ventured too far in the woods. She knew it wasn't wise, and she knew she would get punished for it, but she didn't stop. Of course, she got lost. She was young and stupid and weak, and she was sure the wolves would get her. Instead, she found something: a clock.

*(See, how I'm taking inspiration from real life? Maybe this will teach you to stop asking about my wristwatch. Next time your nosy little self thinks about asking me, remember this story. Take it for granted, if you want. I'm far too old to care about whether people believe my lies or not).*

*(I can see you rolling your eyes, 'Zaki. I know you think I'm dramatic. I'm not, though. I know we're the same age. Oftentimes, I feel like I've been fourteen too many times before. ~~Do you ever feel like that?~~)*

*Anyway, the girl found the wristwatch. It was an old thing, abandoned in the woods. In the grand scheme of things, she could have easily ignored it and kept screaming for the way home — it had been so long, they probably thought she was dead already. But she'd found it, and she couldn't help but think — what if it was fate? What if she had been meant to?*

*And so the girl picked up the clock. The next day, when she woke up, she was back in the village. With one big difference: when she raised her eyes, there wasn't a wall anymore.*

*Here's your homework for the day: what's the message behind the story? Before you even say it, no — the clock isn't a metaphor. That's so boring. Be more original. I expect a satisfying answer by five hours after Kanechi gives you the album; any later and I'll call your stupid Demon every bad name in this world. Chin up, Ozaki. I'll tap my fingers on your chin, if I have to.*

*I hope this story will be enough to satiate Kanechi's whines and your anger, and that we might move forward peacefully (no, I didn't copy this from Kanechi's books, shut up) and leave it all behind.*

*For what it's worth, here's my promise: should I ever die (which I doubt will ever happen, fear not) you can have my wristwatch. Hereby I declare it: Kouyou Ozaki will be the only one allowed to own my beloved trinket, other than me. Aren't you happy, 'Zaki? Something for the two of us. Kanechi can have everything else.*

*In hopes you'll stop being annoying soon,*

*Bea :)*

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The *Under Port* was overflowing in the bitterly sharp smell of ashes and sea saltiness.

“I can’t sleep,” Q whined, fingers clenched on the belt of his coat, doing their best to hide underneath it. Their weight against his thigh was strangely cold. “I cough all day. Can’t you tell them to stop?”

“If you had controlled yourself a bit more, they would have been done with this hours ago,” Dazai let them know, patting their head. “Really, Yu-Yu. We had discussed this, didn’t we? *Go easy on our men.*”

“I can’t control it,” they insisted, squinting up at him — finally, *finally*, showing some of the distaste he had seen in their eyes whenever he visited them in the little sewer hole where he had made them hide. A well hidden desire for revenge — something vicious enough to maul him, had *No Longer Human* not been a cursed shackle. “You hurt me, you get a vision. I can’t decide more than that.”

“Learn to,” Dazai ordered. The door of the main crematorium room was too crowded by men with their orange safety suits to see a thing; nonetheless, he thought he could hear the flames tickle his skin even from there, mocking the Spring sweat. “Do you have any numbers for me?”

Q stomped their feet. “I can’t *count* that high.”

He pinched their nose. “Wasn’t talking to you, silly,” Dazai offered a curled eyebrow to the closest of the *Secret Force Squad* men, unimpressed by the way his spine immediately snapped up. “Well?”

“Three hundred and forty seven from the *Nine Rings*’ side, sir,” the man stuttered out. Mori had pushed the crown off his youngest mafiosi’s head at the beginning of the week, mere hours after the Rengoku massacre — contrary to intentions, it seemed to have made most men more amenable to respect them.

A quick glance was directed to Q. “As for the ones Doctor Tsuchiya couldn’t reach fast enough — We estimate between fifty and seventy. Some bodies are still being recovered from the rubble.”

“And on a national scale?”

“We’re still gathering numbers from news of *suspicious* deaths,” he answered. “All the *Souls* the vet didn’t heal died the moment you shot Dante, sir. Not all of them had been called to Rengoku, obviously. The *Special Division* has been receiving questions on the *Souls* in international territories by their authorities.”

“That will be a bother,” Dazai sighed, shaking his head in front of Q’s wide, curious gaze. “We will be hearing the words *Ability Business Permit* very often for a while, Q. Pray for us.”

Their face fell, only a bit. They had refused to put their shoes on all the way in; their flower-patterned socks peeked on the heels. Mori had bought them a mock school uniform as reward; they had seemed uncertain whether to be happy or terrified by it.

“I can’t,” Q said, very quietly. “Not anymore.”

When they munched on their nails, Dazai saw that some blood was still stuck to the surface. He wondered who helped them bathe. If they locked the door; if they trusted them not to go under and never resurface. If Q understood God enough to do it.

Dazai shifted their doll, securing it tighter under the back of his belt. He reached for Q’s fingers, tapping their nails comfortingly. “Let’s go. We can’t be late to Mori’s celebration. He will whine for sure.”

Before he could drag them to the stairs, they set their feet on the ground.

“Well?”

“I won’t —” Q’s mismatched pupils ran back and forth, unsure if they wanted to linger on him or on their stolen doll. They didn’t look as hungry as before; they looked empty as ever. *The devoid has a tendency to be filled*, she used to say. “I won’t get punished. I did what you told me to do. I really did.”

It wasn’t quite a question. Dazai blinked.

“*Punished*,” he echoed. “You do know you did something wrong, then. I always wondered.”

“They hurt me first. They always do.”

“And the pious solution is revenge?”

“It’s me,” Q muttered, with the frustration of an eerie child, who lacked larger words for universe-wide concepts. “It’s just cursed.”

“The joy you feel as you do it certainly won’t help your case,” he made them notice.

“You told me to hide,” they accused, still. Their fingers were pulling at a bandage around their neck. Dazai felt the strange, uncomfortable pull of Mori’s gloves under his chin, tilting him up to study his pupils. *Aren’t you clever enough to see the familiar in what you hate?* “I did what you told me.”

“Yes, you did,” he confirmed. They had pulled their sleeves up to their elbows — their skin was paler than their now-clean strands of hair. Dazai had spent a good two hours brushing the sewer-dirt out of it. He wondered if he should ask for forgiveness — if it would make sense, in a less *Port-Mafia-black* place. “Let’s go.”

The Headquarters had been polished to the point of shimmering — long tables adorned with food; distrusting people in their best clothes; every weapon shoved where it couldn’t be rusted by blood — but it somewhat clashed with the complicated expression every man walking its carpets wore.

The idea of a celebration had been somewhat controversial — what with the funerals that kept knocking on the doors and the rows of lost manpower that wouldn’t work themselves out. Dazai assumed it was exactly why Mori had come up with it.

*Make the best decision*, the man liked to say, his fingers dipped in Elise's colors. *Not the easy one. They will feel it — the discomfort. It will keep them upright. You don't challenge those who you don't understand.*

Either way. Mori liked to brag about victories.

According to the *Yokohama Government Cabinet* archives, *Mori Corporations* was a prolific weapon trade company, and a good ally in the fight against the lowlife of Yokohama. When the man got on the marble pedestal and raised a glass, drooling words of success in front of a crowd of mafiosi and nervous men who *knew-too-much*, he was smiling.

"Ah, forgive me," he heard him say, as awkward as no one would swear he was. "Public speeches aren't exactly my thing."

For reasons Dazai couldn't quite understand, if they weren't fear or brain-dead tendencies — it made the crowd laugh.

He had long since given up on finding any mild interest in glasses rooms like those — mazes of pearls and petrified grins, as hands raised glasses to toast on a victory they had only offered their bodies too. Mori had ordered the television screens to be left in — the News had yet to keep quiet on the corpses appearing all around the city, and the *miraculously* decreased cases of gang violence.

"Is this truly a good idea?" a woman from the *Black Widows* hissed, her grip around her Champagne just right enough to crack it.

"It's the only one we have," a man from the group's oldest enemies, the *Hounds*, barked back. "Did you want the Port Mafia to wipe us all out in the name of distant collaboration with — *them*?"

Dazai liked whispers. Mori, he knew, would like the notion of the underground he had personally invited inside his walls — *Hounds*, *Black Windows*, the *GSS*, and more and more and *more*, all of them written down by Dazai's yawning mind — *refusing* to say the *Nine Rings*' name out loud even more.

"*Wipe us out*," she scoffed, clearly nervous. "As if the *Five Moons* wouldn't stop them."

"They *are* one of the *Moons*. If you want to test them and that —" A gulp. "That *freak* power they have on their side, then —"

Some tables away, perched in Tanaki's lap, Q was braiding Elise's hair. The girl's luminescence was strangely vivid that day; perhaps, a reflection of Mori's good mood. He thought it good the men didn't know his Ability — with their caskets being burned, they might have felt offended by the notion.

Q jumped all the way to Tanaki. The woman — eyes so distant they might as well have been blind — offered them a tight smile.



Dazai had taken to huddling under her desk, these past days of reconstruction. She never talked, unless somebody asked a question — she would, very occasionally, let him draw on her heels with his marker. Very absently, he sometimes wondered if she, instead, dared to open her mouth when —

Blinding light hit his eye, as the veil he had been spying behind was torn away. He hissed, backing away; when he managed to readjust his sight, Chuuya was filling every inch of it.

“Dude,” he asked, bent in a half. “Why are you under a table right now.”

His voice was a nightmare turned hum — just scratchy enough at the edges to make him wince; just shattered enough along his usual *r* s to appear ripped out of leaking lungs. Dazai hadn’t heard from him — not after he had delivered his body at the Hospital and watched Mori fix his operation gloves to enter it.

Voices floated, though. The local talk of the month was a clumping of bruises, spasming fingers, and distinctively steel-lined eyes — he could either be found *right* behind Executive Kouyou’s proud chin, or by the doors of the funerary buildings.

He directed reconstruction works excellently; he refused to speak clearly on Dante’s defeat; he, as the lowest whispers went, was — *something*.

*[“...heard he just — unleashed it, or something,” the whispers over his table had said. “Hinata said he never saw anything like it. Just like that day all those months ago, in the forest...”]*

*“Can you imagine what an atomic bomb like that could do against an entire organization? Who in their right fucking mind would try against that — thing?”*

*“Our men got caught in the crossfire,” a voice had reminded them. Noguchi was anything but a ray of hope; the men trusted him, though. And Dazai needed it. “What could he do against our organization?”]*

“I hate the fake bourgeoisie,” Dazai answered. Kouyou had — allegedly by accident — kicked him with her sandals more than once. Hirotsu hadn’t done more than offer him a glass of water, from time to time.

He grabbed Chuuya’s wrist and *pulled*, despite his yelp. Only when the table cloth hid them again, he lit up Hirotsu’s stolen lighter.

“Hi there,” he said. “Nice change of style.”

Chuuya grunted. His dirty glance wasn’t as effective as he probably wished — the sheer number of bandages around the temple Arahabaki had attempted to crush against the concrete had secluded his hat from his head, and the bruises surrounding his eyes made him more pitiful than threatening.

Elise had drawn a choker of colorful band-aids around his throat — its rightful accessory laying in a crater in Rengoku. His shoulders were a particularly defensive skyline; Dazai got

the feeling he could have stopped a bullet passing by without even looking.

“I don’t know how you manage,” he muttered, scratching at his bandaged arms. The Hospital had covered him as soon as he had laid him on a stretcher; Dazai had counted the new craters of his skin as he bled on the grass, though. “It’s so *scratchy*. ”

“You get used to it,” he replied. “Did the fake bourgeoisie ask you about them too?”

“Stop calling them the *fake bourgeoisie*. ”

“What should I call them?”

“I don’t know,” He shrugged. His finger spasmed when he pressed it against Dazai’s forehead; Dazai caught it as it fell, pressing on the nail. He thought Chuuya would rip it away; surprisingly, he twinned their indexes — strangling his just enough to make it feel mean. “Assholes? I used to rob assholes like them as a *hobby*. ”

“That’s unoriginal.” *No Longer Human* was a hum; Chuuya seemed both unnerved by its sound and unnerved by its absence. The white of his eyes was still littered in broken veins.

Another round of applause filled the room. He wondered if Mori was still talking — if the camera flashes would be framed, and hung in the *Hallway*. If Mori would make them retake the picture, now that Q was back.

“So your ass always had the kid?”

Dazai blinked. “You truly didn’t suspect it?”

“No, I did,” Chuuya replied. “Seemed weird for you not to find them immediately — not when Boss kept whining about it. You hate Boss’s whines.”

“I do, yes.”

“Why even do this?”

“Perhaps I wanted the syndicate to grow a bit more suspicious of our most dangerous tool,” Dazai shrugged. “They tend to go easy on them — kid-like and all. Now, after suspecting they might have helped Dante and returned at the very last moment with their tail between their legs — They’ll keep their eyes open.”

Chuuya didn’t seem convinced. “That’s all?”

Dazai shrugged. “Mori wouldn’t have let me retrieve them from the Under Port, otherwise. They are strictly — *last resort equipment*. And I knew something was coming.”

Even under the barely-there light filtering through the table cloth, the boy’s contempt was blinding. “Your craftiness grows more disgusting by the blink.”

“And you’re alive because of me. You’re welcome. Hey,” he remembered. “Happy birthday.”

He made a face. “It’s been, like, a week.”

“Four days, thank you. I didn’t want to see you while you were all hospitalized and pathetic,” Dazai hadn’t trusted himself not to stare at his bleeding chasms with some wretched type of longing. He hadn’t been ready to explain why he had stopped him — in spite of, anyway. “But did you get the assassin I sent to your room?”

“That was *you* — “

“Don’t tell me you want me to sing the song,” he insisted. “I’m not singing you the song.”

“Don’t sing,” Chuuya agreed, nauseous, too quick.

He squinted. “Now I kind of want to.”

“You already made me do the apology dance in front of the Executives,” the boy spat, pulling at the spiral-shaped scar on his cheek. Dazai had strange ideas fly by about it — if it would bleed, if not cut in that same shape; if it would taste of coal under teeth; if it would disappear, like the *urgency* in his shoulders. “You weren’t even *there*. ”

*Post-Corruption Chuuya*, he concluded — as Mori’s most foolish accomplishment — was a haunted house that even ghosts had packed their bags to leave. Haunted in memory; cracked near the steps. “I got it from the security cameras.”

Chuuya prepared to strike.

The cloth was moved away. Over the *clink!* of glasses, Mori’s face appeared.

“Hello, boys,” He smiled. “Having fun?”

“Would be funnier if you babbled less, Boss,” Dazai admonished, as Chuuya choked on a breath. “We’ve talked about it — *straight to the point*. Mafiosi and otherwise criminally-adorned men don’t care for metaphors.”

The cloth settled again — this time, behind the former doctor’s back, as he did his best to cross his legs and sit between them under that makeshift cage. He blinked, timidly. “You believe I flunked my speech? To think I prepared it so carefully...”

“It was fine, Boss,” Chuuya lied, kicking his knee. “They’re too busy gossiping to pay attention, anyway.”

“Ah, yes,” The glint in Mori’s eyes was a tad too amused. “You two did good, boys. I knew I could entrust the job in your hands. Is it really surprising that the syndicate has been talking?”

“Only bad things, I assume,” Dazai replied.

“It depends on the definition,” he answered. Moving all his attention to the other boy, he added: “*Corruption* has certainly become a public topic — though they lack details. You’re a proper star, Chuuya. There might be ways to quieten the storm down, if you so wish —”

“No need.”

His unmatching eyes were all for Mori — his chin so high, he almost bumped his head against the underside of the table. Dazai laid his head on his hand, and studied the spot his gloved nails were sunk in — just above the knee.

He had bled on him. Dazai couldn't forget.

“It was bound to come up, eventually,” he insisted. Dazai thought he believed it. “It's something we can use. Whispers are hardly ever not useful,” A pause. “No matter how exaggerated they are.”

*Demon Prodigy*, Mori had echoed back at him, the first time someone had hissed it in their presence. A man about to bite the curb — the doctor had been so proud, he had let Dazai do it. *A bit dramatic, don't you agree?*

Satisfaction was a piece of clothing Mori wore rarely, especially if honest. *It drags on the floor*, he had explained. “How wise. Fitting, of course, for the people who saved the organization.”

Dazai tilted his head. “Now, don't be boring.”

“Couldn't have done it without the squad,” Chuuya intervened, not even blinking. Perhaps he truly wanted that Executive position. Perhaps it wasn't even that selfish of a reason, these days.

“Of course,” Mori conceded, nobly. “Once the festivities are done, obviously, we'll have to talk about damage compensation.”

A pause embraced them both. They exchanged a glance. “Damage compensation?”

The Boss' next blink was the fakest expression he had worn in a while. “Certainly. Starting from that trip of yours to the dungeons, we can account for — *Ah*, just a moment,” He extracted a pink notebook — something with Elise's sparkly name all over — from his pocket. “Destruction of property *and* of vehicles, missing reports, indirect demise of our best healing-Ability User, unauthorized break out of a dangerous Ability user, arrest, mass murder of up to *seventy eight* mafiosi, robbery, unwarranted access to hidden data, misplacing of Ability User, secretive investigation in a clear violation of authority orders —“

“Alright,” Chuuya interrupted him, gaping like a fish. “Alright, that's a *gross* misinterpretation of —“

“It was more about things happening around us, than us causing them,” Dazai agreed. “We *didn't* kill *Tsuchiya Mi*, seriously —“

“I was *possessed* — ”

“I only asked to talk with her —“

Mori shut the notebook. “Boys, actions have consequences.”

“*But —*”

“Let me see,” he continued, tapping his chin. “What privilege can we get rid of, this time? Maybe — *talking* privileges?”

“*What?*” they echoed.

“To each other. Specifically in *my* presence.”

Dazai deflated. Chuuya huffed: “That won’t be hard at all.”

“If that is what you say,” Mori smiled a secretive smile. He pushed the tablecloth aside. He didn’t pull them up — but he offered them an unmistakable, gentle look.

They climbed out of the table. The man cleaned invisible dust off their coats; when he laid one hand on each of their shoulders, Dazai thought — *balance*. Just another weight Mori was prepared to delude him into thinking he could share. Mori only touched him when he won.

Dazai, he realized, a bit stupidly, *had to tilt his head back to meet his eyes*. Instincts were fractions of thoughts — to look was to think. *Demon Prodigy* — just young enough that the top of his head barely brushed Mori Ougai’s shoulders.

*Let me crawl out*, he mouthed, like a lithany. His skin had less scars than Chuuya’s; perhaps it lacked a mouth, too. It never answered. *Let me out*.

“Perhaps,” Mori was saying, with something a bit colder between his teeth, “I should trust your judgement. Perhaps there’s a better punishment.”

*No point in a wound*, he insisted.

Dazai wondered where Q was.

“Since your plan had Tsuchiya Mi caught in the crossfire, we shall assume you don’t value our men’s well-being’s as much as you could,” He tapped his chin, too childish for the lack of amusement in his tone — for the lie that only stiffened Chuuya’s shoulders more. “As such, Hospital privileges are to be considered revoked indefinitely.”

*Do you feel his bones, too?*, he thought about tapping on Chuuya’s arm — trace it on his back; blink it through the stubborn light in his eyes. *Don’t gods know when they’re being sacrificed?*

Not so many rules in the Port Mafia, truly — he had learned the most important of them with a new coat on his shoulders, and a man’s blood splattered on stained glass windows.

*It will shift*, the line of Mori’s spine always said. *Do not miss the shift*.

“Yes, Boss,” Chuuya said, head bowed.

Dazai lowered his eyes. “Yes, Boss.”

The quartet of violins on the other side of the room played a death march. It turned into something more cheerful at a mere wave of Kouyou's hand; Dazai, strangely enough, could feel Tanaki's eyes on them.

Imperceptibly, the grasp of Mori's fingers softened. "We will talk about it later. Chuuya, I assume Kouyou had mentioned your incoming tasks?"

Dazai's ears reached forward — *that* was information he had been sneaking around to find for a while. All Chuuya did, though, was offer a nod.

The man mirrored him. "Good. And you two — have you been considering my proposition?"

The letter was still on his desk — unopened, because Dazai knew better than to waste time with the obvious. He had seen the boy's one when he had snuck into his office to nap; had made sure to cut up all the edges, even if it didn't really mean anything.

*I was here*, it would say. *Understand*, Mori had told him, catching him in the middle of raising his scissors, *that they are looking for him*.

*They?*

"We're considering it," Dazai said, eventually, despite the grimace pulling Chuuya's face. "You wouldn't want us to rush the house of cards, yes?"

Mori smiled. "Of course not. Come on, then," He spun them around with ease, fingers still on them — one of the photographers immediately turned. He leaned down, just enough to whisper: "Let's give the hungry wolves what they want, yes? *Mori Corp* is to be rewarded for their help in putting an end to this *tragic* gang violence."

It got a chuckle out of Chuuya.

The flash of the camera went off two times; he felt, more than he saw, Chuuya make a face. Dazai had been taken aback enough not to offer any taunting grin — something to ruin Mori's collection with once again.

"Taken in two more kids, mister Mori?" the photographer joked. He was evidently polite; he didn't utter a word on how weirdly *unfit* all three of them looked under the sunlight.

"Bandages is an oldie, actually. Redhead, though — Your good heart knows no break, does it?"

It got a chuckle out of Dazai, that time.

Mori didn't seem to care. "Are our boys not the future, for how grievous or judicious it might be?" he questioned, smiling in that way of his — a joke at his own expense. "Why shouldn't I show it off?"

His next breath got lost in his lungs.

*Oh*, he thought. *How had he missed it?*

“Sorry for the bother,” Mori said, through the rush in his ears, letting go of them, as soon as the photographer disappeared. “For what’s worth, you two are more than free to go. I know these events aren’t exactly — *entertaining*. ”

Chuuya offered — not a smile, not exactly, but something close enough to it. Dazai felt an unknown urge, as suffocating as it was atrocious, as childish as it was pointless — to *grab* him and his marred bones, if had Arahabaki reached *those*, too — any part of him that was still reachable, that Mori hadn’t touched yet, and *pull* — somewhere, anywhere, forward, *away*. “Alright, Boss. Thank you.”

*What’s the point in a wound?*, Mori insisted. Dazai’s hands were already bloodied.

They bowed their heads again as Mori vanished through the crowd, more instinct than need, more need than choice. Kouyou laughed in the face of a woman who looked just like Beatrice; Tanaki smiled; Noguchi frowned with every word out of his mouth.

Uncovered by the man’s bloodied scarf and sigil coat, every unsubtle eye in the room laid on them.

Chuuya curled an eyebrow.

“Come on,” he muttered. A paragon of careless confidence; he pretended pulling Dazai’s wrist was not selfish in nature — pretended there was nothing to fear from gazes who knew, and nothing to take from the one boy who understood. “Arcade.”

It was somewhere down the tenth flight of stairs — why not the elevator, again? — that he realized he wasn’t being pulled along — just following. He’d been doing it himself — had considered every single possibility, every outcome, but he’d *forgotten* —

It wasn’t snowing anymore.

Nothing could distract him from the black dots of silhouettes in the nearby Church; the shadows of scars on his skin; the fact that he still didn’t know what his *Limbo* was. No one could keep Mori’s hands from rolling his diamonds around — not now that he had proof. Not now that Dazai had given it to him.

*A shame misfortune follows her so earnestly*, a dead woman had told him. Dazai watched the boy’s fingers spasm around his cursed flesh; watched him breathe in like it was blessed. *Enough to meet me*.

“Yes,” he concluded, academically, logically, inevitably. *When in doubt*, he thought, *go back to the start*. “Yes, Arcade.”

There were thirteen metal panels on the roof of his shipping container. The hook for the hangman knot went in the seventh.

There was thought behind it, obviously. The book on suicide Dazai kept under his bed called most attempts clumsy, at best; *lacking forethought*. He wasn't like that. He never sought the end when he wanted it. He waited for his mind to be clear — for the numbers to be set in his mind, for his heartbeat to be neutral — and then he walked off the edge.

Most pressingly, he waited for the fog around him to take a vaguely interesting shape.

The world tended to be blurry, and Yokohama to drool liquid metal into his bones and wait until they solidified, but sometimes — *sometimes*, voices came around about a portion of the glass being wiped clean.

“There’s a rumor,” he explained to the nothingness around him, to the broken traffic lights; preparing a future speech, “Of this one house no one comes close to. Burglars, smugglers — even the Port Mafia. A *zone calde*. But what is everyone be so afraid of?”

No answer came.

“How interesting,” he insisted.

Fixing the stoll under the rope turned out to be the most complicated part. The wheels wouldn't stay still; in the end, he left the container to search for a solution in the mountains of trash surrounding him. Hirose Fumiko was playing from an old record player he'd stolen from Hirotsu's office; he left the door open, so that he could sing along.

[“*Are you sure it's a good idea?*”

*The Arcade was closed, officially, and while Dazai owned Chuuya one seventeenth of his future inheritance, Chuuya would have to find a way to convince every female mafioso under Kouyou's command to at least consider a double suicide with him.*

*They kept a list. Since it would have been empty, otherwise, they had stuck it in the secret door in The Alley. Since it would have been useless, otherwise, the place had been dubbed a meeting spot.*

*Just like Beatrice's office.*

*“Why not?” Chuuya shrugged. Apart from weapons and blood, joystick levers were the most familiar thing his hands were willing to welcome. “You think her vengeful ghost is lingering around? I'll get that wine collection if it's the last thing I do.”*

*He had broken a nail, picking the lock to the shop. It had bled all the way to the edge of his bandages; Dazai longed for the usual neon lights — just to make it seem a little less boring. To have an excuse to stay longer. “Weren't you a proud fighter of underage drinking?”*



*Chuuya's character slammed her hammer onto Dazai's character's face. Dazai reached over to pull his game station's cable out, darkening his screen. Chuuya screamed.*

*He wasn't exactly surprised when the emergency lights of the Arcade turned on, and neither of them claimed that guilt for themselves, however different the reasons might be — by the time Officer Matsuda appeared, disgraceful searching dog in tow and an exasperated arch to his eyebrows, Dazai didn't even whine too much.*

*Given that the Police Station was plenty busy, the eyebags-carrying man sat them down in his office, and didn't even protest too much when they asked for a TV, and a limited edition 101 Dalmatians DVD.]*

Victorious, he extracted his prize: an old box of factory tape. Under the notes of Hirose's oldest song to date, he fixed the stool to the ground. He tried jumping on the seat — miraculously, the tape resisted.

Next, he grabbed a half deteriorated broom — still humming, Dazai swiped the pieces of glass and metal off the corner of the shipping container, waving uselessly at the skeleton of what used to be a camera. He threw the trash out — if he had to go, he'd go inside a clean island in a land of junk.

His preparations came to an end with the current song; Dazai decided the start of the next one would be a good enough omen. *The End* seemed a nice piece of music to go out to.

Swiftly, he climbed to the stool.

He'd removed his shoes — at the very least, he knew his socks weren't dirty enough to leave stains on the leather. It squeaked a bit under his weight, but it held still. Satisfied, he put his head through the hoop.

*[“So,” Dazai started, sitting down on the curb. “You destroyed the syringe, didn't you?”*

*Tsuchiya looked dimmer than usual; it took him a moment to realize it was because she'd dyed her hair again. Gone was the bright green; in its stead was a darker shade — one he vaguely remembered lining the hems of Tsuchiya Mi's doctor coat.*

*She dangled her hands behind her legs, scratching at the concrete. “I did.”*

*There was no regret in her tone; only acceptance.*

*“I assumed you would,” he reassured her. “Grief is always an interesting sight to witness. Those who don't cry and scream usually do worse.”*

*“I don't agree with her desires,” Tsuchiya specified. “I don't think he — the doctor loved us. He wanted her to keep his legacy alive. But she's dead, and I wasn't smart enough to save her. The least I could do was respect her last wishes.”*

*He hummed. “And now the organization has no prominent Ability Users with healing-oriented powers. You do understand how that could be a problem?”*

*"I do," she said, easily. "Toru, he — he begged me not to. He'd never admit it, but he fears you two. He's got a lot of respect for the Boss — he doesn't want to believe you are where you are because of —" She sighed. "He thinks of himself as a terrible being. I don't think he feels ready to face someone who's, presumably, worse."*

*"That's interesting," Dazai stood up. "A bit bothersome, but interesting. I appreciate your honesty. I'm sure your sister would be proud of you."*

*Tsuchiya tightened her lips. She nodded.*

*"Of course," he added, as a second thought. "You and your sister are both morons. Must run in the family or something."*

*With that, he reached for his gun, and shot her.]*

Dazai fixed the hoop around his neck, making sure the bandages and his hair were out of the way. At the door, a malnourished cat had appeared, peaking in curiously. He offered a wave.

"Welcome back," he said, cheerful. "I promise to be more entertaining, this time around."

The cat meowed, slightly uncaring. He bent at the knees a few times, warming his muscles — with a deep breath, he kicked the stool away.

*["Tell me you're kidding," Chuuya stared at the box in his hands. The lights in Matsuda's office were flickering; if he squinted, Dazai thought he could see pictures of Suribachi City on his board.*

*Dazai tapped his fingers on the heavy square of a TV the man had given them, attempting to scratch the cartoonish dogs. "I mean, it was your birthday."*

*"I don't want shit from you," he insisted, terrified. "What's in this? Did you put bees in here and then shake it? A poisonous snake? A set rat trap? Fucking look me in the eyes right now."*

*"It's just a gift. Stop being so dramatic."*

*"You did all the things I just said!"*

*"Which is why doing them again would be absolutely pathetic," He motioned the idea away. "Come on. I put so much thought into it!"*

*Skepticism raised his eyebrows. "Did you slip on dog shit and bump your head?"*

*"Classy," Dazai grunted. "No, but I got to thinking — I mean, I'm the whole reason you're in this organization, correct?"*

*"You're fucking not, though —"*

*"And Mori was the one to give you your disgusting hat as a welcoming pledge — as per tradition, the person who brought you to the Port Mafia should be the one to give it to you,"*

*He sighed. “I needed to fix my mistake. Now, open it.”*

*Chuuya’s face grew redder and redder. Right when he thought rage would make him punch a hole through their screens, alerting the entire Police Station — he took a deep breath. “I’ll kill you,” he muttered, as he tore the package apart. “I’ll kill you. Are there dogs on this wrapping paper —“*

*He fell quiet.*

*“Get it?” Dazai said, several seconds later, when he couldn’t control his excitement anymore. “It’s a dog collar. Because you’re my dog. Clearly. Your old one was destroyed, so now I get to make a joke out of it. Your tacky style needs a more serious intervention to be saved, but this is a good start. Isn’t it absolutely perfect?”*

*No answer appeared.*

*Devoid of any particular expression, Chuuya picked up the black buckle choker, studying it under the fragmented lights of the cartoon. His newly gloved fingers caressed the leather — a strangely simple, strangely delicate touch.*

*“Slug,” Dazai snapped his fingers, impatient. “Hatrack. Petit mafia. Hey. Why do you look so funny?”*

*Chuuya cleared his throat. He’d thought his face had been empty before. Only after he wiped it clean, he realized he had been uncharacteristically blind — had missed something, purely because unfamiliar. He blurted out: “For the last time, you idiot, chokers are not dog collars —“*

*“The shape says something different!”*

*“Are you stupid? Like, seriously? This —“]*

*He tried to, at least.*

*His ringtone echoed against the walls with indomitable insistence. Dazai only tried to ignore it for a few seconds — in a self-fulfilling prophecy, he had inserted the most obnoxious little tune for Mori. It was their shared brand of humor, he assumed: unfunny, and most probably incited towards each other.*

*With a sigh, he jumped down from the stool.*

*He didn’t bother answering the call; busying himself with removing the hangman knot from the ceiling, he let it ring endlessly, trying to ignore the pulse of his heartbeat in the hard skin under his eyes.*

*Silence had returned by the time he was done — when he stepped out of the shipping container, he made sure to turn the record player off.*

*Waiting for him was the cat. With tired hands, Dazai offered him a bow.*

*[“Your condolences will not be appreciated,” Kouyou made sure to tell him, after they had stood next to each other in silence for several eternities. The burnt strand of her hair was brushing her nape. “I would recommend not to offer them.”*

*“Why would I do that?” Dazai replied. “Your beloved has been dead for years.”*

*At their feet, the wind uselessly whipped the tombstone of one Kanechi Miki. The restricted area of the cemetery had once belonged to the Nine Rings — Dazai wouldn’t have bet on it, but he assumed Kouyou might have bought the land.*

*“Her body?” he asked.*

*“In the ocean, of course,” she answered, without missing a beat. “After being thoroughly ruined, as our law demands. I assume she’s resting.”*

*“With him?”*

*Her lips pressed against each other, turning the skin surrounding them white. Rolling her umbrella, unawaresly offering shade to Dazai too — or too aware; or too coward to be; or too marble-made to bother hiding the burnt strand under her ear — she concluded: “I shall hope she’s apologized, if that’s the case.”]*

*The cat didn’t even look at him.*

*[Dazai was a bad person.*

*It was a somewhat comforting thought, despite the circumstances — whenever he managed to tear his eyes away from the bleeding weight on his lap and lay them on the rear view mirror, it seemed graffitied on his forehead; right between the crinkles Chuuya’s hand was too still to erase.*

*“We’re going as fast as we can,” Hirotsu said, at some point, from the passenger seat. Dazai didn’t know the driver. Dazai’s fingers were numb — pressing onto a particularly wide gash in the boy’s sternum, pretending it wasn’t organs pressing against his palm, attempting to slide out of him at every turn of the vehicle.*

*Chuuya’s nose was bleeding into the crook of his elbow. His head kept bumping against the car door; his legs were crooked to fit in the backseats. Dazai was a bad person.*

*His free hand touched the bleeding spiral on his cheek, tracing the matted skin at its edges, unsurprised by the blood that lingered. The warmth was almost painful; his freckles vanished under crimson. He was soaked in it; it seemed to throb against his clothes, like the fluttering hum on Chuuya’s pulse point.*

*He verified it again. Dazai was a bad person — but Mori would get mad, otherwise.*

*The boy coughed.*

*It didn’t tear his eyes open, and it didn’t wake his deliriously mumbling conscience — but it rattled the gash on his sternum, and it rained blood down his chin, entire body spasming*

*against his shattered ribs. Dazai tried to remember what he was supposed to do if a seizure started — tried to remember if holding him so tightly was incorrect.*

*“Hirotsu,” he called, when Chuuya’s eyes rolled back into his skull. “Hirotsu,” Again, even if he didn’t want his help, and didn’t want more human hands on him, because he was foaming at the mouth and Dazai was a bad person — the car had stopped; the man had walked off to reprimand the slow pace of the subordinates preceding them.*

*Dazai met the driver’s eyes in the rear view mirror. Chuuya let out a sound between a scream and an inhale, lungs whistling in their attempt to breathe. His viscera pressed against his palm. Dazai was —*

*You are, he could imagine Chuuya saying. He did often seem to slide through the crests of his brain, brutishly hanging on the sharper edges. Dazai was never scared. He was just — You are, but there’s no one else.*

*The man turned his gaze away from them.]*

“Reason number one,” Dazai began, legs dangling from the side of one of Mori’s office seats. “The betrayal of Executive Kouyou Ozaki.”

The metal curtains had been called away; from the windows, he could see every light of the dormant city. The moon had been doubled; for good measure, he dedicated his attention to the one who wasn’t real — and then, on the sedated child laying on the desk.

Mori hadn’t bothered remaining on his throne, as he worked; he loomed over Q’s sleeping traits, fixing the bandages around the new additions to their arms. They had given him a name, from what Dazai heard — Yokohama’s *Taishan Fujun*.

*How gruesome*, he had blinked, when Dazai had entered his office — little blades in his hands, and a kicking, *shrieking* Q held by the wrist.

Q would understand eventually — Q would *relinquish it*. Perhaps that was the greatest sin.

“She tried to kill you. Correct?”

“Correct,” Mori agreed, plastic gloves on. “Can you give me a scenario?”

Dazai took his time to think — rashness wouldn’t get him anywhere. Not with a man who didn’t appreciate wrong answers.

“According to the database, Executive Kouyou has access to your residence,” he said. “That’s a lie. She does have access to the safe house you keep near the valley, though — I’m assuming you were spending the night there, when she came. You didn’t believe she had turned traitor.”

“Of course,” Mori echoed. The smile curving his mouth was lighter than silence, as threatening as a closed off door. Q didn’t move. “I must have told you this before — but there are two kinds of facts, in this world: the logical, and the illogical ones. I assume Beatrice misunderstood Kouyou’s real nature.”

*Loyal*, Dazai concluded; but then he scratched that thought off. Traitorousness wasn't thin enough to comfortably wriggle through the walls of the woman's blood vessels; she was all one piece, made in marble and jade, and smart enough to know where she belonged.

It wasn't that the idea of escaping had never crossed her mind, after Kanechi's death — that she'd never considered listening to the *whispers*; the hands offering her a crown they'd support her in stealing. But there was *something* weighing her shoulders down — a falling star anchored to her ankles: acceptance.

She *could* have been a traitor. She wasn't naive enough to be.

"I had to find out what was wrong with her," Mori continued, cutting off the last of the bandages. He brushed Q's hair back; took their temperature, heightened by hysteria. "Her apathy immediately took me down the road of an Ability user. When my best efforts failed, I decided to call for help from the person I trust most in the syndicate."

Dazai paused. "I don't remember that."

"You don't," the man echoed. Not a question.

The hand on the child slipped down, digging into the pocket of his coat — he extracted a familiar orange bottle, shaking it. His gaze followed the motion with as much boredom as Mori would never believe; two gloved fingers brushed his chin, tilting his head up.

*I'll be taller*, he vowed. Then he'd kill himself.

"You know how your whining gives me a headache," Dazai shrugged.

Seeing how he was clever — seeing how he was a coward — Mori knew better than to touch him without precautions. He would have never dared to whisper a word against his naked skin — would have never been stupid enough to stand where Dazai's eyes could reach him, unarmed and with his bones brushing the air.

Smile dropped, Mori studied the depth of his pupils. "Passcode of the Port Mafia's emergency armed vault?"

Graciously, he conceded: "7280285E."

"How many cameras are installed in the Hall of Building Three?"

"Thirty two."

"What's your name?"

"Dazai," he responded, almost honest. "Dazai Osamu."

"Not what I meant."

"Shame," There was a starting point in every stare off they shared — the game was understanding who was waiting for who at the finish line. Gelidly, he added: "It's what you

get.”

Mori let go of his chin. “That night, I was lucky enough to turn the camera of your place on. You know — the one you destroyed.”

“I beg for your forgiveness.”

“I think it was one of those poisons you took from the cabinet in December. Sick as you were, it didn’t take much convincing to get you to give me a hand,” His expression turned sour. “I warned you that mixing too many substances wouldn’t help.”

“You’re the one who gave them to me,” he replied.

Polite confusion painted his features. “Did I?”

His mouth opened. *Yes*. Did he? *No*. *Yes*? It closed again. “It was in your clinic,” he said, and it sounded petulant. *Good*. “You should have kept your door closed.”

“Dazai,” Mori said. He knew Dazai wasn’t stupid enough to use actual drugs. *That’s not a nice way to talk about addiction, you know?*, he would have said, had Dazai pointed it out. “I made you a promise, didn’t I?”

*Yes*, he reminded himself, rationally. It was there, with all the other certainties, with the stars and the gun in the lightbulb drawer. Gloved hands and chemical mixes, both on his tongue, both tearing him apart, for radically different reasons. *No*, because he didn’t remember, and no footage or word could be trusted if it didn’t come from Dazai’s own lungs. *Yes*, because Mori always prepared for everything.

*No*, because Mori had said so. *Yes*, because Mori had said *no*.

The man sighed, every inch a worried doctor. “We’ll talk about it later. Facts are, your state certainly gave your torture methods a push. Just as you did in the dungeons, you managed to rip a name away from Kouyou — exactly the name I needed.”

“Beatrice,” he concluded.

“I knew of her,” the man removed his coat; Q disappeared almost completely under its cover, only their cheek pressing against the wood. “I had gathered information on Kouyou long before I made her Executive. Apart from those — less than gentlemanly methods, she had told me all about the girl who’d helped the previous Boss ruin her. I did my research, and the resurrection of the *Nine Rings* turned up.”

“You always knew what the seal was,” Dazai added. To his experience, amusement tasted like blood; he could only assume he was entertained. “And you knew that, if Beatrice had already established who’d receive it in the eventuality of her demise — it *had* to be Kouyou.”

Mori turned again. A shiny new object laid in the white of his gloves, still cracked and still old, but devoid of any blood.

Watching the wristwatch dangle between his fingers, he offered him an apologetic beam. “Oh, worry not. I have no intentions of stumbling down the path of immortality. Kouyou doesn’t either; she entrusted me with this pledge. But you *know* I have a weak spot for antiques.”

“Motivation number one,” Dazai concluded, once again. “The alleged betrayal of Executive Kouyou Ozaki, and what it could do for you.”

“Precisely. Any hypothesis for the second and the third one?”

Dazai leaned his chin on his hand — bored, entranced, longing for a rope, longing to know more about the house no one dared to attack. “Get Chuuya and I to work together.”

“You truly can’t even consider the possibility of your —“ He searched for the words, as if he had not invented them. “*Late entanglement*, let’s call it, being a spontaneous occurrence?”

“I could,” he replied. “Fate is as real as any of us. Not about you, though. You cause things.”

The doctor sighed, leaning on the edge of his desk. “Alright. Guilty as charged. Number three?”

He tapped his fingers on the armrest, squinting at the dirt on his shoes. He should have probably tried to wipe it away, as quietly as possible. Mori didn’t like messes.

“Chuuya,” he spelled out, slowly. It wasn’t any different from any other words; Dazai had been bled on by countless vowels. He wondered which files on the shelves knew all about him. Wondered if the curiosity would pass, like it all did — all but his resilience. “Nakahara Chuuya is, frankly, invaluable.”

Mori hummed, signaling his attention. Not agreement, not disagreement; reality, there on the floor, waiting for their hands to mold it.

“He’s gained appreciation through our more than hostile ranks, and he’s brought prosperity to the organization. That same organization is now fighting on the brink between terror and pride. *He’s ours. He will kill us all,*” he continued, just as neutrally. “His numbers are unprecedented.”

“Except for yours.”

He insisted: “You have been receiving offers, haven’t you? *Especially* now, what with the rumors of what went down in Rengoku. Twice is a pattern. The higher floors — they want him.”

“Naturally.”

“They can’t have him.”

“Because he’s,” Mori tilted his head to the side, “*Invaluable?*”



“You’re not stupid enough to let him go,” he confirmed, blankly. “No matter what they’re offering you. And I’m not that lucky as to have him gone so easily. I assume the *secret mission* you’ve planned for him is your ground test for the Executive seat.”

“A first step of sorts. The Flags vouched for him long before he proved his strength against Verlaine,” the doctor said. “Now that his true potential is being discussed, he will need to bear a heavy crown.”

*He had potential before too*, he thought about tutting. Reversed roles; sometimes, Mori could have stood a lesson or two. *You’re just hungry. He’s just starved.*

Dazai stared at the stains on his soles. “The face of the organization — Kouyou and Lippman’s worthy heir. Touch the Port Mafia, and Ability users will be the last of your problems.”

“Touch the Port Mafia,” Mori specified. “And *gods* will answer.”

“Your latest moulding material. You’re going to give him what he wants, and you’re going to get a disproportionate amount of power back. Correct?”

“Correct. Do you oppose?”

“But to get to this point, you had to realize something,” Dazai continued, pretending he hadn’t heard. Hilarity pulled his face, digging caves in smiling wrinkles at the sides of his eyes. Dangling something he didn’t have in front of him, as if — “*Corruption* was a wild card. It was tested solely during the fight against Verlaine. At the time, it was focused on one specific enemy — someone who bore the same extraordinary power. *Eat, or be eaten*. You needed to put him in a situation where he would have no choice but to lean into the help of Arahabaki.”

“Which meant, obviously, that you needed to be willing to save him,” Mori added. “And Chuuya needed to trust that you would do it. I had my good reasons to believe you would have both done so blindly — past history has proved so. Still, partnership assures a bond.”

“*Temporary forced collaboration*, ” he replied.

“If you refuse my proposition.”

“What makes you think we won’t?”

He smiled. “Call it a hunch. All the same, I believe Chuuya is now *much* more open to the use of *Corruption*, ” Dazai bit his cheek; didn’t speak. “He needed to separate the idea of that power from the memory of his brother; considering his victory, I should hope that step has been taken.”

Dazai remembered the sound of his laughter, on that bloodied field. The way he had gasped as he came down from the seizure — the punch he had shattered the car window with, as if he could have crawled back to Rengoku and knelt by every corpse of theirs he hadn’t meant to create.

Hands crossed, Mori declared: “Chuuya is your responsibility, Dazai.”

He huffed. “Chuuya is his own responsibility. And I don’t envy him one bit, given —“

“Dazai,” His tone took a strange note. Honest and true — he met his eyes with ease, because he had gazed at crueler things. Hardly ever more *intense* ones, though. “He is the strongest weapon this syndicate has ever owned, and will ever own. He might be amongst the most formidable creatures this world has created. He,” He spelled out, “Is your responsibility.”

He took the hit in silence.

He recalled, very privately — quiet enough Mori couldn’t find it in his eyes — how *starvedly* Chuuya had looked at his own bleeding gashes, as the stretcher led him down a corridor Dazai had been kept from.

His pills were still on the desk.

Fondness was as prickly as greed on the man’s tongue, “He’s as soft as the crust of the earth, our Chuuya,” he sighed, affectionate like a miner. “Is he not?”

“Do you know how *similitudes* work?”

“Indeed,” The doctor tapped his fingers on the wood; Dazai followed the *tip tap* as intently as he had the pills. “A very peculiar kind of powerful being.”

“Which is?”

A grin, private and sharp. “The kind that has no aim for that ferocity but the sake of others. He lacks selfishness — Just look at how much blood he let you paint his hands with, all for the sake of the syndicate.”

*Tip tap.* No dust stuck to the tips of his gloves when they separated from the mahogany. The HQs were always too clean. Mori never slipped.

“His selfishness is all but in matters of power, truly,” Mori continued, conversationally. “Only in his private affairs. Curiosity for his origins.”

He wondered where he kept the documents — if they were devastatingly well guarded, or abandoned under a cup of cold coffee. He wondered whom either option was meant to taunt — Chuuya, or him. He wondered where he had gone wrong, exactly, for it to warrant that conversation.

*[Chuuya had a bruise under his right eye.*

*It was vaguely spiral-like, like his scars — but he knew Corruption only tore. The food Matsuda had brought them had already gotten cold, abandoned in half empty take out boxes, just outside the comforting blanket of the man’s desk. Dazai could hear his murmurs into the Station’s phone — low, but not particularly concerned about what they might hear. Whenever the animated dogs on screen got too senselessly boring, Dazai would stare at the line of his shoes, and wonder how it could lack blood.*

*“So,” he asked, once air had an anchor again. The bruise was bluer than his eye. They had sat as distantly as possible, but the press of Chuuya’s naked calf against his was corpse-cold, where his bandages ended. “How does Corruption feel?”*

*The unexplainable burst across the most controlled lines of the boy’s face, pulling on the pinkish skin of his newest scars. He didn’t look sick — not the way Dazai’s eyebags dug into his skull; his eyes watered. His skin was matted in sweat — his eyelashes fluttered too often. Curled on his laps, his gloved fingers kept clawing the empty air — reaching.*

Addiction, Mori liked to sing-song, tapping his side pocket, fingers like police lights — as if Dazai had not been asking for a gentler poison since day one, is not allowed in the Mafia.

No, he considered. Chuuya’s calf plastered itself a bit more firmly against his. His hands, still clawing, turned — reached for his flesh, and pulled themselves away. No, it isn’t.

*“Like nothing at all,” he offered, eyes to the screen.]*

“Curiosity is human,” Dazai offered.

Without missing a beat: “You certainly seem to believe so.”

*Look at that*, she used to say, when Dazai was particularly foolish. He had put his fingers inside Chuuya’s wounded side and felt his blood flow. He has never managed to do that with his own carcass. *Look at the blood on the floor. How can I forget it was there?*

“I would expect him to appreciate you more for it,” Mori commented.

“And you would expect me to use that appreciation,” he guessed, unsurprised and untouched, dangling his legs. *Tip tap*, it went, *tip tap*.

He smiled. “I don’t expect you to do anything at all, Dazai. You’re not a study subject.”

“Only because you’re too scared to put me under tools.”

“Would you let me?”

“I’ve begged you to,” His voice escaped a hint too quickly from his teeth — Dazai felt it bleed down his lips. *Think*, he reminded himself, *always think*. “I have from the very first moment.”

Mori lowered his head, conceding. “But all that loyalty,” he insisted, out of mercy in less than a blink, the *hunger* on his tongue stickier than any dust and any skin and any promise. “It bleeds from him like a wound that refuses to close.”

*You would know*, Dazai thought.

“No point in a wound,” he concluded.

The curve of his lips grew painful. “No, none at all. *Unless*,” he agreed. “But that’s what I’m here for, yes?”

He thought of Chuuya's back — a green leather jacket from those who had fed him first; a tailored suit jacket from those who had made his lungs exhale. Mori's face, ten feet taller. His knees brushing the ground. A fake god's faith in a man who had taken it all from him, and promised him double — purely out of hope the mountain would be too high to remember what he had lost in the climb.

*How, he considered, horribly boring.*

*[“How so very aggravating,” Dazai would sigh, and would whine, and would quietly wonder at his own inability to stop thinking about it, later — monologuing to a driver who only cared about not being killed for the sin of paying attention to him. Mori had made it worthy of capital punishment the first time he had put his hands on his shoulders in public. Dazai had never quite done anything, but they would swear he was to blame for the caution. “That a dog should be loyal to somebody other than their master.”]*

“And our three motivations are done,” He dangled his legs; offered: “Need me to say the fourth one out loud?”

Mori tilted his head. “I never asked you.”

“Asked me what?”

“If you had found a favorite place.”

His face was split apart by a grin. Nothing might ever be quite as numbly insistent; as inevitable. Nothing might ever make him feel smaller. Nothing quite like his age — nothing quite as unconventional for a fifteen years old.

*You know I won't,* he did not say. *If you're going to stutter it out,* she had taught him, *better to say nothing at all.*

“No, you don't *need* to,” the doctor continued, once the silence he had wanted arrived. Dazai was still smiling. He was still mirroring him. If he thought about it too long, he knew, he would notice he could not recall how to breathe. “Still, I have always wanted to hear you talk about it.”

He filled his cheeks with air. He knew the thing braving a marathon in his blood; he knew how to get rid of it.

He blew the air out, studying the barely visible constellations in the sky. He longed for the floor; the roof of any desk, his growing body fighting to fit in a suffocating space with pointy limbs. *Immature*, the man might have said — or maybe not, if he was still a slave to resistance, or entertainment, or the distant look in Dazai's eyes. *Indecorous. Is it the pills again, Dazai?*

A curtain of clouds was preparing to enclose the city — right on time to wash away the blood, Yokohama rain was coming.

Through sleep, Q whined.

Dazai reached forward; pulled their nose.

*I'll die*, he promised, good-naturedly, waving at the crimson rain. He'd told the brother of a postulated god; he'd tell the rain, too. *I'll die soon. I was wrong. There was nothing to be found here.*

A suicidal maniac's promises weren't worth much, but neither were the sky's tears. None of them had anything left to mourn.

"Alright," Dazai said, covering Q's sleeping face too. "Let's talk about the *Book*, then."

**end of act one, scene one.**

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## Chapter End Notes

mori: so how's your search for q going

dazai, locked them in a basement for almost four months: :((

AND SO IT ENDS!! the first part, at least. next up we have the interlude (which you'll see, is more of a timeless character study before we move to part 2 act 1) and after, we have my darling chuuya's pov. this first arc took everything from me — i actually think it might be the arc i've rewritten most of all. i was never really satisfied, specifically because it was the first arc, and i wanted it to be a convincing selling ticket.

i had tons of dante-beatrice-v lore i wanted to get too, but that will have to be saved for stories in the next arc.

now, for this chapter specifically: the words dazai says at the end regarding the "place no one visits" are a reference to *The Day I Picked Up Dazai*, and the way the narrator describes Odasaku's house. we are in fact entering that timeline. this will be fun.

should you not have understood, the finalized version of the plan to defeat/save the Souls hung on the idea that Q could keep them alive a bit longer via the use of their Ability state, and that would give Tsuchiya the time to heal who she needed to heal and leave who she didn't. moreso — ta da! mori knew much more than said all along. so did dazai. that won't be a reoccurring theme or anything ofc...

well!! this is all for now. i'll see you soon for the interlude, and then we get to chuuya. i hope you liked this first arc, and that you'll like the next one even more. if you've read until now and you want to keep reading (or don't) thank you so much. your support is much appreciated.

until next time, keep yourself warm <33

# FACE

## Chapter Summary

*“He was strange, that postman.”*

## Chapter Notes

last dazai chapter in a while! see you at the end :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

## interlude.

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He was strange, that postman.

Not that he *was* a postman, of course. Or, rather — he was, but it hardly sat between the highest points of relevance of his enigma; like a mole or a scar too precise to be inconsequential. Dazai had grown out of puzzles by the first time he was made bleed — he had been somewhat sure to have grown out of peeling people apart, as well.

“I can’t get through him,” he found himself mumbling, so frustrated it bordered *hysteria* — despite the closeness of the four walls, suffocating and wider than most cages Dazai’s mind had offered. The postman didn’t even turn. Like autumn to leaves, he liked to pretend he wasn’t keeping an eye on him. “This guy — He’s a natural airhead.”

The first words he told him, though, were: “I’ll kill you.”

(Amongst the second ones was — Let me die like this. *It seemed to rattle him. Dazai was widely unsurprised. He was only vaguely less so, when the man didn't stop looking at him for it).*

It seemed strangely redundant — the, *keep an eye on him*, part. The postman had him tied up to his cranky, creaking bed — he had stitched his skin back together as if it hadn't been made for the tear. Dazai had lived with Mori — he knew that healing was a cage of its own.

He fed him incandescent food without blowing on the spoon — only staring at him, unblinking, as if any portion of it was dignified. He read him a stupid book, as if he was six and unbloodied, and he didn't even have the grace to be disappointed at the unfinished last chapters. He *won* at poker.

Dazai was absolutely delighted. His fingers, on the other hand, spasmed upon a trigger that wasn't there.

*I'm sorry to inconvenience you*, he might have told him, in different circumstances. Clearly, the man didn't want to deal with a corpse in his house — Dazai truly didn't wish to survive that journey, though. The counterfeit money he had been carrying was abandoned on the man's desk; the lighting-touch of bullets from the gang he had thrown himself in front of still lingered.

It didn't quite hurt anymore. He was almost — *almost* — reluctant to attempt to jump out of the window, when the armed police showed up. He could respect good work.

He wouldn't show it, obviously — he tried it all to tear that breathing illusion apart. He whined so loudly his vocal chords burned with it; kicked his feet so insistently the sheets irrevocably knotted themselves around his calves; threw bowls to the ground, and screamed, and lamented every inch of existence that man offered him.

When that failed, he moved to what the postman referred to as, *strange requests* — for if not exasperation, unsuccessfulness would get to him.

It didn't.

*It was a strange sort of stubbornness*, he reflected, wrapped so tightly in the blanket the man had *picked him up* with he could hardly breathe. All of it was strange, but the man's refusal to let him be the corpse he was meant to be was downright *peculiar*.

He didn't say it out loud — and it was puzzling, almost, given how freely the postman seemed to constantly speak, about him and them and the world and blood — but Dazai knew it, nonetheless, with the intuition that had led him to that trumpet-vines covered apartment in a street no organization dared to bother.

He didn't say it, but Dazai knew — he could have pushed his body in the street. Dazai waited for him to highlight it. *Expect the weight of the things you are given*. A corpse on a public road was somebody else's business; Dazai had seldom not been *somebody else's business*.



That he was not, as of now, was just strange enough to be irritating. *Make up a new death without me in it*, the postman had said. Dazai hadn't been sure what to say. He resolved to get the even stranger man to admit it — resolved to give him a chance to fix that mistake of his, since his poker moves were interesting enough.

He didn't admit it, either.

Dazai switched tactics.

"When my wounds are healed, I will leave," he informed the postman, as superior as someone kept from suicide only by chains on a bed could be. The four walls were suffocating; at night, he memorized their cracks anyway. There was no lock and no key; Dazai didn't want to die where the water could filter in, though. "That's all there is to our relationship, anyway."

The postman didn't even seem to care enough to agree. He didn't deny it, though; only sat at the feet of his — *his*, at that point; *Dazai*, Mori swore, *only gets to keep the things he's bloodied*, and not even for a long enough time for the smell to fade — bed, threw cards between their crossed legs, and blinked owlshly.

Dazai stared.

The postman was not much of a talker.

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Until he was.

Dazai wasn't sure of what flipped the switch. *Before the 48 group came to us*, he would tell the air, in the days following that disappearance of his — when Mori would stick him in his container with no painkillers and piles of blank paper to write down his worst thoughts on, for the sake of a parental approach to mutiny.

*If you had to torture*, some of them would say. The ones that wanted him to be successful would start with — *what is less merciful than death?*

*Before*, certainly — nothing about the day the postman sat on his bed and began *talking* seemed different from the days they had burned through the same way; except a deeper creak of the metal. Dazai faulted the man's determination, and the new wagering weight he brought with him.

“What do you want to bet on?” he asked him, courteously. Perhaps *determination* was the wrong term — the postman didn’t particularly seem to care whether he agreed to it or not. *Acceptance*, then — a hand stretched through the grates, politely waiting to be bitten off. *Thank you for letting me in, still.*

Dazai sniffed. He hadn’t cried yet — he did think it might have gotten him some leverage. The tears didn’t come, though — there was a glass and an umbrella and a punishment. “I have no money.”

“Do you have secrets?”

He thought about it. “I do have those.”

He didn’t need to ask if the postman did, too — he breathed as if his lungs had been molded from the roots of the earth; he carried his skeleton as if the bones would have been worth a fortune on the Black Market. He didn’t *smile*, not quite — but the warmth in his eyes and his slightly tilted upper lip reminded him of rippled waters.

*Touched*, Dazai thought. There were many words to rain on that man. *Touched. Sculpted. Stupid. Cursed.* He looked at the world with the acceptance of someone who would never be a face in the crowd — who had mastered imitation, still.

The struggle of *knowing* didn’t seem to weigh him down. Dazai had never met somebody more at peace in their torment.

Dazai wanted to know.

He lost at cards.

They talked.

He wouldn’t have been able to say about *what* — there were flames in his throat that asked for nothing but to be bright, and Mori might even dare to touch him if he knew, and perhaps he was lucky, truly — that the strange postman was too busy being strange, and being a postman, and tearing Dazai apart with too clean nails; far too busy to destroy the Port Mafia. Dazai had never even *dreamed* of a more disorientating hypnosis — Dazai would have let the syndicate burn for the chance to offer the man some more ashes to discuss upon.

“But,” the postman said. And: “Well.” If he was lucky, he would say — “No, I don’t think so.”

He was a funny man. The first time he said, “Who’s that *Mori* you talked about, again?” Dazai laughed so hard his stitches tore. It didn’t really cause a change in the man’s expression; he got the feeling he started to hold back less thoughts, after it, though.

Fruitless effort. There were no such limitations, and he was as grateful to them as he was for the window near his bed, allowing the moonlight in — a mercy to irrepressibly starved eyes, stealing every word that didn’t slip from the man’s makeshift cot.

Dazai had quick fingers. Selfishly, Dazai knew what winter days were like.

There was no time to rest, as far as Dazai was concerned — there was too much to say, and there was not enough time; he had written the end to that ersatz paradise with his own hands, and his flesh despised him just as heavily as always — and so it healed, and it healed, *and it grew*, stitch after stitch, despite the disapproving glances he offered the wounds whenever the postman unraveled the bandages to check on them.

*Reopen them*, he wanted to beg, each time. He thought he had vocalized it, at least once, nails sinking between closing gaps and whines directed to the gun he *knew* the man owned — but his fever had gotten up again, and he was delicately cruel enough to pretend not to understand.

“You lose again,” he told him. He must have known Dazai detested it as much as he revealed in it; he seemed to know it all, like the darkness under his eyelids. *Were you there when they made the stars temporary?*, he wanted to ask, sometimes, *and did you also think it mean?* — but he refused to offend his humanity like this. “I’m listening.”

He was. He swore not to agree; swore not to understand — Dazai knew he did. Dazai was drunk on being heard, and it seemed more stupid than any rock in his pocket as he jumped over the edge; and he had never quite longed for the sun to rise behind the skyline so *devastatingly*.

*Before, but maybe after*, he would nod, to the thirteen panels, satisfied. *Perhaps from the very first moment; perhaps I was too distrusting to listen. Perhaps there was too much blood.*

Dazai knew better than to care for the ephemeral; knew better than to assume there was no connection between all that *was* ephemeral and all that *had* touched him.

Like all the postman’s solutions, it sounded easy enough to offend — Odasaku didn’t really touch him. It would have kept him from cheating at poker.

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*See*, she told him, once, *this is your hand*.

It sounded less monumental than the shape of her lips begged it to be — it *felt* distinctly less guilty than the bite of her bitten nails on the softest part of his wrist demanded. Dazai knew when he was about to be blamed. He rarely knew what for.

At night, he laid on his side and cradled his palm, and he blamed it — and it was hard to choose which one, truly, because crimes need more than five fingers, and she simply didn’t

have the time to berate both sides of his carcass.

*You take and you take and you steal*, she told him. She never touched him. No one ever would — she swore. *Can you expect them not to take something back?*

Dazai lacked the words; he knew better than to speak when he could feel the letters shatter on his tongue. She viciously disapproved of his lacks. He viciously disapproved of the rising sun behind his window, bathing the line of his palms in a golden shade that had done nothing bad at all.

Dazai lacked the words. Still, he thought — *if I took, where did I put it?*

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The second time Dazai entered Bar Lupin, no one was waiting on the stools.

Terror was a strangely childish flame up and down his tightest veins — it didn't quite fit. He sat in his place, nonetheless, and he spun under the amused eyes of a distracted barkeep, asking for outrageous and more outrageous drinks, and he waited. The bottle of pills in his coat was rattled a bit louder with every turn. There was no space, so Dazai didn't fear.

*No point in a wound*, Mori insisted. And then — *is it the headaches again?*

*Perhaps it's different*, he considered. Mori had taught him logic; Dazai practiced it with the stumbling ease of someone pretending he hadn't showed up to class with pre-existing knowledge. He couldn't be caught — whatever the consequences would have been. He couldn't stop thinking.

So he thought.

*The universe*, for starters. *The oceans*. *The price of milk these days*. The hot metal he had poured down the open veins of a prisoner in the dungeons, watching him squirm and shout and sob, tears landing on his tongue and turning red. The way Madame Tanaki's hands shook. The Great War. The myth of creation. The precise shade of Chuuya's burned eye. The way his hands never flickered before reaching for him.

The four walls where Oda Sakunosuke lived — the sight Dazai must have made for him, bleeding out on his porch and healing in his bed and drinking on the stool next to his. The concept of breathing — the taste of oxygen in a room where the man had exhaled.

Odasaku made no sound as he walked down the stairs.

Dazai hadn't known that about him — he could only assume the hiss of wind making him sit up was instinctual. He could only assume it would have been impolite not to notice his first friend's arrival.

"Hello," He grinned.

Truly an uncharacteristic man — his coat was too non-descriptive, and he had forgotten to shave. He rattled his knuckles on the counter when he sat down, and Dazai memorized the melody, despite knowing it would change; he immediately started talking, like there was nothing Dazai was too clever to be told — nothing Dazai was too inhuman to understand; nothing he was too good to let him long for — and he memorized that too.

*Sorry I doubted you*, he almost said.

"Sorry I'm late," Odasaku said.

*You're real*, Dazai didn't say, well aware that it would be taken for what it was. Perhaps not out loud; perhaps it was in his loosened tongue, and the way he didn't leave until sunrise. "That's fine."

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"Well?" Dazai asked — and it was, in itself, a sin of sorts. Mori would remember it, because Mori remembered every ounce of life he had managed to squeeze from his soaked limbs — dangled over his balcony, like a piece of furniture he didn't know how to throw away; never dried by the sun, like the bloodstains on the dungeons' floor.

It didn't seem too heavy of a price, right at that moment.

But Mori Ougai was, at the end of the day, a predictable being — where the sunlight blinded, and where the moonlight bled, he would perform as the stars had made him to be. So would Dazai, for there was no escaping stardom as a falling being — *but he*, he always remembered, *had at least the grace not to call himself miraculous*.

"Alright," Mori shrugged. The world breathed in. "If you think we need some more goons."

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When he was breathing slow enough to reign his selfishness in, he regretted it.

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Summer had just started, the first time Odasaku pulled him out of the water.

He didn't bring him to Bar Lupin, after, which was certainly a change — Dazai wasn't quite sure their heartline was allowed to beat over the edge of those wooden stairs. The experiment was just successful enough to make him hungrier — they began devouring Yokohama, afterwards.

Odasaku didn't ask about the wet sound his shoes made against the concrete; didn't say a word when Dazai plastered himself against his side, sure not to touch — least it soaked his coat, and it stained his soul, and it *stuck*. *Dazai has a tendency to linger*, Mori liked to say. Nothing was ever quite *warm*, but the man was a blown out fire, and the ashes smelled of shattered darkness.

He bought them canned crab. Dazai insisted on paying. Odasaku let him.

It was only weeks later, amidst a commission the man had to complete for the Mafia, and that a bored Dazai had invited himself along to, that he cleaned the blood on his shoes against the sidewalk and asked: “Why?”

“*Why*, what?” Dazai asked, nudging the corpse. “You know, you’re very lucky I was here — what with your *no killing* policy. Perhaps you should start bringing me along to all your jobs!”

“Wouldn’t that take too much time?” he replied — though it wasn’t exactly a refusal. Odasaku talked like that a lot — a constant possibility. Options they all needed to consider; the best choice for a man who could see the outcome however terrible of a decision it was.

Dazai was just vain enough to know the man enjoyed the double trail of their shoes on the ground — that Dazai didn't have to chase *this*, at the very least.

He shrugged. "I'll just leave *my* job."

Odasaku blinked. Nothing Dazai said ever took him by surprise; Dazai knew he was as starved to understand him as he was, though. Always knocking on his edges; never quite tearing the door open. Dazai had never been handled with more delicacy — had never been treated as a sharp thing, even shattered on the floor. "I don't think Boss would like that."

"Well," Dazai smiled, "One reason more."

He tried again, days later, as they crawled out of the neighborhood sewers, covered in so much mud Dazai could barely see the glint of curiosity in his eyes, as he asked: "What are you even meant to understand, if you're dead?"

It was somewhat exhilarating — that *glint*. It was the precise brand of cruelty he had overseen in the man's silhouette, that day with 48; a posed texture of bloodthirst he had been longing to see again. Odasaku was perfectly capable of being mean; Dazai was perfectly capable of admitting he longed to see a gun in his hands again.

*That was mean*, he considered. He couldn't say, *that's not true*. It wasn't; but it wasn't a lie *enough*.

"What have you understood," he questioned back, rubbing mud across his sleeves — his coat was at home; *because*, he would never tell Mori, not even if he touched, not even if he begged, not even if he died and knotted his scarf around Dazai's shoulders as he decayed, *his coat is always at home when Odasaku is there*. "Since you stopped killing?"

Odasaku thought about it.

He was never rash; he wondered if he knew Dazai had a tendency to carve his words where his hands couldn't rip them away, not even when they were at their emptiest — if he was trying to be a good influence, in that crooked way of his. As if not lighting up his cigarette in their blood-soaked room would have mattered.

*I can't be influenced*, he let him know, as he lit up his own cigarette. *I'm a prodigy, you know*, he added, and Odasaku looked at him as if he was trying to find the ventriloquist, or the murder weapon.

*No*, the man agreed. Dazai knew it was all about lungs and etiquette — every word out of Odasaku's mouth seemed like it should have weighted more than the world, though. *But perhaps you can be saved*.

Neither of them believed it — cancer or existence or even just a coat. Dazai was overjoyed by the man's lack of attempts to hide it.

"That it doesn't really matter," he said.

"What doesn't?"

“Where you are,” It seemed a thought that needed a bit more elaboration; Odasaku spoke like a writer staring down his empty page. “When they ask you about the light you offered, I don’t think they will care if you met it too late.”

Dazai wasn’t quite listening anymore. He wondered if he should have reprimand himself for it. “Look,” he said, eyes wide, pointing at the end of their stretch of sewers. “A snake.”

Later, when he was bandaging the bite the beast had crawled forward to snap on his calf, he laughed at something Dazai had said. He couldn’t really remember what it was — he held onto the sound, though, and wondered if it could be called bright.

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“There’s a life to be lived,” Dazai told him, under the warm lights of the Bar. *This is a quiet place*, Odasaku had told him — a lie meant to guide the wounded animal in. A fortunate coincidence; there was no better place to speak. “I know there is.”

“What kind of life?” Odasaku asked.

Dazai thought about saying it clearly.

“It’s death,” he said, at least, uncertain of whether he did it or not. Understanding was the end of a well he only threw rocks in occasionally; after a while, even the deafest ear would get tired of the echo. Lupin was quiet; the ricochet of Dazai’s loneliness could have broken an eardrum. He remembered piercing a woman’s own, in the dungeons — remembered feeling it pulse on the tip of his index. “It’s the one thing we know, and the one thing we hate.”

“I don’t know. I think we know and hate much more than that.”

“Not as *surely*, ” he insisted. “Nothing is as inevitable, you see? Even the ever rising sun will burn out, some day. Even the most detestable creature on earth, the one you hate the most, will end up in a grave.”

Odasaku hummed. “I doubt we will be here to see it.”

“I won’t. I’ll be long gone.”

“We all will.”



“No,” a less disillusioned mouth would have begged. His Odasaku was a man of bloodied skies; the crinkles on his neck, right over the scars from an attempted beheading, showed it. *Did you fear death when you were young?*, he had asked — *I didn’t care enough to fear many things*, Odasaku had replied. Dazai knew that nobody but him could have grasped the disappointment that was the sunrise, through eyes that couldn’t see it for what it was. “I’m already gone.”

The man studied him.

*All human beings are born with this*, he had told him. *The urge to fear and to scream*, I don’t want to die. *If that is the one thing we all share, how can any less valuable desire we feel ever be satisfied?*

*Is that why you want to die?*

No, Dazai had shrugged. *It is merely how it is. Some things you cannot say.*

*I do not fear it*, he didn’t say. It felt too redundant. It felt too honest to understand, even for the first man to call him his friend. *I wish for it. Am I not already gone?*

“Well,” Odasaku concluded. “One more reason to drink another glass.”

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He mostly thought about it under the sun.

His hands were plenty stained — the blood never stuck under his nails, though, because Mori had a *thing* about cleanness, and the bandages were already pushing it enough. But his hands were so deeply stained they seemed to drip on the floor with every step — he listened to the *tip tap* of the blood drops, and he thought about it.

*When you lose him*, the shadows on his roof let him know, thirteen and uncaring, but as helpful as everything Mori had given him, *know that it was your skin that poisoned him.*

Odasaku didn’t really touch him; it made it hard to cheat at poker — and to get him out of the dangerous situations he kept dragging them to, during commissions that should have been easier than that. It made it harder for Dazai to feel more like him — just a man in a bar, unwilling to curse the innocents for the sole crime of existing near him. Unwilling to cry under the sun, if he could have mustered up enough regret for something he had yet to do.

Odasaku didn’t really touch him.

It was Dazai who doomed them.

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“For God’s *sake*, ” Sakaguchi Ango snapped — a shriek, if one preferred honesty to dignity; just high pitched enough to almost shake the books off his shelves. The notion that he smelled just as much as them didn’t seem to reach him immediately. “Do either of you know anything about *vital space*?”

His nose, at last, scrunched up. Under their blinking, matching gazes, he sniffed his own arms and snapped again.

It was a long lecture; Dazai stopped listening by the third minute, but not exactly out of a lack of entertainment. *Round-Glasses-Guy* — as the back of his mind had registered the *mole-upon-lip* and vaguely mouse-like face — had sold himself with the ink sticking to his palms; debris from letters of forgotten dead ones.

Noble, certainly. A waste of time, even more. Perhaps that was exactly what made it *good* — that he wasn’t doing it for any sensible reason. Dazai was a boy of chess pieces and whines; *if not clever, it should at least be spiteful*. Calling it *moral* may have been too much for anyone crossing those halls — he studied the upward chin of one Sakaguchi Ango, and thought even the Port Mafia had to accept one or two moles of goodness in.

Dazai was hardly the type to sneak into the Archives and befriend the most boring rows of mafiosi; something told him Odasaku wasn’t either. A joint quest, then — out of character. An effort for a man with curiously strange ideas — and after a glass of Lupin’s best, an almost *offensively* free tongue.

There was an ugly thing, and it lived behind the thinnest of Dazai’s eyelashes — it was hungrier with every season he spent ingesting air. It wasn’t terrified; there was no space for it. It was content — and like all that burns, it knew the wind would rise.

It wasn’t quite *jealousy*, no. It was the creak of a wooden stool, always at his right, always known and well kept and held quietly — like a piece of glass he couldn’t afford to replace, from the shattered window of a bitter, blind eye. It was Mori’s stool, spinning and spinning, until he was dragged away and tied to a bed and made to watch fireflies until they died.

*(It wasn’t quite as ugly — that was why it manifested in pettiness, and not in strangely devoid eyes and the gun they just wouldn’t stop leaving in his hands unattended. It was easy, really,*

*to get Ango riled up. The easiest way was standing in the middle of a crowded street in his presence and shout: "I work in organized crime!")*

He expected the seat at his left to leave him starved — Sakaguchi Ango, with his loosened tie but unwrinkled jacket, didn't give it a chance.

The stairs creaked; it echoed. It was summer; Dazai hadn't seen a firefly yet.

"Hello," He grinned.

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*Not yours to have*, she swore, mere days before he killed her. *But all yours to touch*.

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Odasaku's *thing*, he gathered — as he failed not to let his inhumane need to *know* seep through the cracks of his favorite people's distraction — was dragging him around on commissions he *insisted* should have been less boring than all that Dazai's job entailed.

Ango's *thing* was car lifts, apparently.

"I cannot let you out of here on your own with a light heart," he insisted, the first time, dragging him by a belt loop — as if *concern* and *touch* and the *notion* of Dazai's presence as a choice and not a consequence weren't things of a less spectacular world. Neither him nor Odasaku ever touched his skin; but they hung off the more reachable parts of him like they feared him vanishing. He had *attempted* to be polite with him — by the third time Dazai had dragged them into an unplanned shooting, he had decided *brat* was his new favorite word. "You drank more than both of us — *hic!* — combined."

“That’s what you think,” Dazai slurred back, and he willingly stepped on the man’s feet, and pulled on his tie as he stumbled back. “I only digest the toxic and, *or* deadly!”

Dazai didn’t really get drunk — he had learned balance inside Mori’s empty clinic, sneaking in on a night the man was in Tokyo, and calculating the brink not to cross with the diligence of an academic.

He did get *amused*, though — especially by the distinctively *old* and particularly entertaining curses Ango spewed as he dragged him to his car, attempting not to let him face plant on the floor.

Eventually, he ended up carrying him on his shoulder. Odasaku was still there, leaning on the briks by the Bar Lupin entrance, washed by the neon signs like a mirage — so he dangled until all the blood reached his head, and he winked.

Odasaku curled an eyebrows.

Awkwardly, he attempted to wink back.

It took Ango almost *six* well-planned attempts for Dazai to drive them off a cliff, rattling off supposed directions to his living quarters — to realize maybe he wasn’t as drunk as he swore he was.

“No, no, I *am*, ” he assured, slurred and whiny, sliding down the passenger seat, kicking his legs all over. “See? I’m so drunk.”

“You’re a *child*, that's what you are. How does a child have a tolerance?” he rumbled, dragging the ankle he had pushed in his face, moving it just in time to escape a horning vehicle. “*Sorry!*”

“They’re the ones in the wrong lane,” he let him know. He was so drunk with the way the man’s wrist pulsed against his skin, he wasn’t even sure if he was lying.

“What, really?” Ango squinted. He pressed on the horn; leaned out of the window to snap: “*You are very stupid!*”

Dazai laughed.

It became somewhat of a tradition. He didn’t give it a name, in fear of it sticking, and stealing the little motions Ango’s frame went through each time they met — clicking his tongue; studying his pupils; exchanging a look with Odasaku; saying, *Dazai*, in that way of theirs, that didn’t seem to hurry out of their mouth in horror — as if he was taking a never-taken-before decision.

It wasn’t the underside of a table, and it wasn’t a middle stool in the quietest bar in the world, but Dazai learned to exhale on his passenger seat, too — in the back ones, also, when he wanted to be aggravating.

He seldom *not* wanted to. It made Ango very entertaining; it made Odasaku not even blink, which was a challenge of its own.

“Why always the cliffs,” Ango muttered, a night like any other, hands tight around his steering wheel as he drove them away. “How many cliffs can there even be in a city?”

“You don’t have to worry,” Dazai let him know. He was huddled up on his seat, playing with the buttons of the man’s abandoned arm. *Close enough to touch*, he thought, through the haze of alcohol. Ango had been trying to get him to order tomato juice. *Doesn’t mean you should touch*. “I’d let you out, before I drive off. I need someone to pick the flowers for my funeral. Odasaku knows nothing of forget-me-nots.”

Ango didn’t say a word.

He waited. Pulled his buttons.

“What?” His tone was blank; his left lens was dirty. He didn’t stop him, when Dazai removed his glasses to clean them with his tie — he did slow down on the pedal. “Were you expecting me to humor you? I’m not Odasaku.”

Dazai rolled back on his seat; kicked his feet on the dashboard; kicked them down again. “You think he would let me drive it off?”

“Not at all,” Ango scoffed. “I think he would let you drive him all the way to the edge, get you all excited and immature, and *then* wrap you in a blanket to drag you away on the concrete.”

He stared. “He told you about the blanket?”

The man stared back. “He *what?*”

A week later, as they were waiting for him, Odasaku told him: “The barkeep believes you’re working through a meticulously planned route to get rid of Ango.”

He said it tonelessly — dishonest or not, it didn’t seem to matter. Dazai leaned his chin on his hand and drank every drop of his fascinating ease; wondered what it was like to be touched by it all and be devoid of any handprints. If Ango and Odasaku had ever had to answer to perplexed gazes, wondering about the sixteen years old hanging off their appreciation, or if they all knew him by name — if he would grow taller than them, eventually.

*My friend*, he heard Ango say, once, to a tired eyed Archivist.

“What do you think?” Dazai wondered.

Odasaku merely looked back.

The stairs creaked.

“Hello,” they said.

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*You might want to be careful*, Mori told Elise, the first time he introduced her to him. It was less of a handshake-and-bow and more of two rats sizing each other up from opposite ends of a maze; they would end up sharing chips on the clinic bed. She couldn't gulp them down; he couldn't call himself realer than her. *Dazai tends to linger*.

He never got what he meant, not really — he didn't ask for an explanation. As summer brushed on his doorstep, back when only Odasaku was around, Dazai ran through the motions like he always had — pretended not to notice the questioning looks the man sent his way.

"You seem tired," Kouyou told him, instead.

The absence of her pupil, all the way to Europe — one of those facts Dazai kept in the back of his skull, and didn't think about, and didn't *wonder* about; the sun might have been stuck in the sky, but there was still no need to crank his neck back to check — certainly hadn't brought her focus back to Dazai.

*Perhaps*, he considered, *she can't keep quiet in the face of his less dutiful breathing*.

"Did Chuuya tell you about his new training regiment?" he replied, instead. "In motion up until you sent him away. Like the guard dog he is, he's decided to attack me whenever I enter his apartment —"

"You mean, *break into* —"

"— to *test my reflexes* or *keep me vigil* or *make sure I learn something about self defense* if I *have to drown you in acid* for it, *partner* —"

"That's a lie," she insisted, and she fixed a loose end of his eye bandages behind his ear, never touching skin — and Dazai was so used to being touched like he was real, these days, that her nonbeliever fingers almost seemed cruel. She *wasn't*, he knew — she was just drowning in midnight rain. She had nails printed on her arms from an old lesson's corpse; a new grave's one. "Chuuya wouldn't call you *partner*."

"But he really *does* that!" Dazai whined. "See? *See?* Look at these bruises. He put me in a chokehold three times in a single day — he *almost* stuck a knife in my knee," He sighed. He sighed a lot when Chuuya was involved — filled up the room until there was no space for his never-still fingers and the way his eyes liked to call him a liar. "Hitting right at his height."

Kouyou wasn't amused.

She forgot, all the same — or had the grace to pretend to.

To Hirotsu, after stealing his lighter and setting his new car on fire, having made him search for him all over the city, he said: “I have taken up the art of *tip tap*. Do not worry about my absence.”

Tanaki was still quiet.

Nonetheless — perhaps *because* of — when he sat under her desk and played at stealing her heels, he told her tales of his new friends. She listened. Dazai watched her eyebags grow deeper and disappear — a new look everyday. He had told Odasaku about how much blood her dress shirt had been soaked with, that day; had allowed Ango to write one of those mechanical eulogies of his, even if it was for a baby with no black blood.

The voice spread, despite the hungry thing under Dazai’s eyelids — despite the way Mori’s hands crossed on his desk, fingers dangling and nails searching, eyes ranking down his bored features like he was still looking for the gold he was owed.

He’d found it already. He was just scared of it.

The first time he heard a couple of subordinates whisper — *what’s an Executive candidate doing with them?* — Mori smiled, from the other end of his desk, and said: “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, Dazai.”

*Here*, he didn’t say. *Here with me. Here with us. Here with the black blood you swear won’t be enough.*

There was nothing to find in the Port Mafia. Dazai knew. He told it to Odasaku, three days tied in the creaking bed of his room; told it to Ango, a night he was *almost* not entirely faking the drunkenness. *There is nothing to find, and I will lose it all the same.*

*There is nothing to find*, the flickering lights of Bar Lupin reassured him, and Dazai would die in between the black blood puddles of his flagless syndicate.

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Time was running out even as it breathed torturously deep — so deep it was heavier than the summer heat, stretching his limb like a cat under the sun; warmed whether it came from blood or blankets.

Dazai didn’t quite know what *was* at the end; only that he couldn’t wait for it, and that it would have been nice if the chase to the finish line were to *last*.

He dragged Odasaku up and down every road he had learned, and did nothing but marvel when the man revealed new ones he hadn't even suspected existed. He listened to tales of his assassin days with eyes that should have been enough to grant him his redemption — he pulled onto Ango's sleeve when the man hesitated in front of a bloodbath, and pretended he did not have a tendency to damn the better men.

He linked the men's arms with his own, and dragged them down the wooden stairs of the quietest bar on earth, and he breathed.

He watched paper lanterns lit up the sky, on a festival whose name he did not recall — and when the wooden platform shook under their feet, rattled by waves filled in pollution of desires falling from the sky; when he reached out with his fingers to touch the ripples in the water, deaf to Ango's warnings and burned by Odasaku's hands pulling the back of his clothes, Dazai could have almost believed his flesh wasn't soaked in *nothing* — but only loneliness.

"What did you wish for?" he asked, cleaning the ink stains on his fingers on Ango's sleeves. "I saw you write something down. Don't lie."

"Curry," Odasaku offered, obediently.

"*Eh?*" Dazai blinked. "What a strange guy. Ango, you don't happen to have wished for wine? We could make it a picnic."

"A break from you," the man mumbled. "And your snotty fingers. Odasaku, do *not* laugh — yes, that *is* a laugh for you — You're encouraging him —"

They didn't ask Dazai what he'd wished for; he was just superstitious enough to be glad for it. Fate was a web of crystallized tears and whatever intention was left from a careless Creation — it did not despise him, incapable as it was, but it would not put out the fire once Dazai's entire world was devoured by the flames.

*Aren't you hungry?*, they would ask him. He was familiar with their heat; he knew they would not burn him. They only knew how to take that which would leave him the emptiest — they only knew how to *wait* for his hands not to *reach*, but to have grasped.

"Let's come back here, next year," he said.

*Aren't you starving?*

"Spin me too," he ordered, one night, watching Odasaku put down a particularly loud child — not one of his, though; *never*, if there was blood — their tears all gone and their mind still salvageable — a witness to their interrogation of a drunken traitor.

Ango was calling the cleaning squad, phone held between only two fingers, in that way of his — he did nothing but *sigh* when the other man obediently picked him up from behind, and gave his best attempt at spinning his fragile bones. The game was not particularly fun; Dazai felt the man's heart beat against his back and laughed so hard his stomach hurt.



“Tell me more,” he whined to Ango, one night, kicking his stool, almost climbing all over him to sneak a look at the high secrecy documents in his bag. “Tell me more, tell me more, Mori would want me to know, you guys’ jobs are so *fun*, tell me *more* —“

Dazai pulled; Dazai got pulled. Companionship was a crime by unavoidable context; he awaited every occasion to drag the word *friend* out of the two men’s lips, and he sat on the vowels like a swing, dancing along with the wind of their sincerity. My friend, my friend, my *friend*.

*There’s a life, somewhere*, he told Odasaku. He longed for something different; he always would. There was nothing to find in the Port Mafia; he was a fish in a bowl with dying fins, and the water would never be so merciful as to turn its back on him. Nonetheless — there was a *life*, and when the stairs creaked under his shoes and both men offered him a *hello*, Dazai was close enough to touch it.

*Not yours to have*, she would have said. *But all yours to touch. You can only pick one.*

Longing for humanity was a crime by commutative property. For a breath, Dazai had it.

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He didn’t get to keep it.

## Chapter End Notes

hello there! if you’re still reading — damn. i wanted to thank you all for the nice words last chapter, they really painted a big smile on my face! i’m glad you guys are enjoying because i’ve written. well. far more for this than i probably should have had but YOU KNOW.

as you probably will have noticed, some parts of this chapter are heavily referring to “the day i picked up dazai”. if you’re wondering about the time placement of the interlude, know that there will be one at the end of every pov (the intention is to make 3 dazai povs and 3 chuuya povs, one for each year; though they will become shorter by arc because yk. narrative metaphor) and you can sort of see them as character studies that fluctuate in time? vaguely? for example, this one took some stuff from the next arc time, the dragon head conflict — when dazai and oda met ango.

nothing much more to say! i gotta say, this was one of my favorite chapters to write. i really love the lupin trio, and i think they’re some of the most heartbreaking content asagiri has come up with, and i think their relationship with dazai is so very easily — not misunderstood, but more like both lessened and intensified at the same time? by the fandom.

i’ll stop ranting!! i’m very excited for the new chapter/next arc. i feel like writing chuuya is so much fun and so much pain, i can’t wait to show you guys.

thank you so so so much for reading, and for the nice words, and for everything! i hope you continue to enjoy this, and do comment however often you want, it really does make me glad.

see you!!

# IS

## Chapter Summary

*In Charleville-Mézières, a small, irrelevant town in northeastern France, there was a house of earthy bricks and rusty railings — with ivy-intertwined windows and a secret weapon storage, hidden under the welcoming mat. It was registered under a single name: Arthur Rimbaud.*

## Chapter Notes

see you later ;))

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

### *act two*

*[un grand sommeil noir tombe sur ma vie]*

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In Charleville-Mézières, a small, irrelevant town in northeastern France, there was a house of earthy bricks and rusty railings — with ivy-intertwined windows and a secret weapon storage, hidden under the welcoming mat. It was registered under a single name: Arthur Rimbaud.

“Or Paul Verlaine, I suppose,” the landlord had mused, fiddling with the keys. Her French was a warm caress to his ears; her accent had stiffened his shoulders. “That’s the name he wrote in the contract, at least. But he insisted I referred to him as Rimbaud. And then his friend, the one who was always around — *Inconnu*, those two. A cousin, you said?”

Nakahara Chuuya hadn't said a thing.

The question of what the squad the Port Mafia had stanced in that corner of Europe had told the woman to get him that house remained — all he had was Mori's grin and his promises that he'd enjoy his latest mission quite a bit.

There was honor, he supposed, in being assigned overseas at such a young age — there was even more honor in receiving an ex-Executive-turned-traitor's keys for his stay. *Be grateful* — Hirotsu had told him, dragging him to the airport. Chuuya didn't remember the rest.

*“Frère, madam,”* he'd corrected the woman, ignoring the creaking the front door. The sound of money still startled him, at times; no matter the suits in his closet and the yen in his pockets that didn't need to be all scrunched up from a quick escape any longer. “I'm his brother.”

He hadn't spent hours on a plane wondering about what his future residence would look like, but as he stepped through it, the realization that it was exactly what he'd expected it to be was too stubborn to ignore. The walls were a gentle green, the floor wooden; every piece of furniture looked like something out of a museum, or one of those American Christmas movies Doc used to like.

*Fireplaces were a gift of God*, the man would say, sometimes, with that vaguely dreamy expression that made it difficult to understand if he was kidding or not.

The *tick* of a grandfather clock reminded him that it didn't quite matter anymore.

Several hours later, when he was down several layers of clothes and sitting on the ceiling, another female voice broke the quietness. “You must feel better, then, now?”

“I don't feel worse,” was his mumble, dust sticking to his gloves from the flower-shaped chandelier. He turned; offered a bow, as serious as *almost* mockery could be. “Ane-san. At your orders.”

A chuckle came from the front door. All he could see was the white-and-pink hem of her Western dress brushing the floor — the occasional glimpse of sandals; the tip of her umbrella dragging behind her steps.

She came to an alt right where he'd hoped she wouldn't: the bundle of ripped apart curtains and wooden edges from his fury rampage. She surveyed the mess the apartment had been reduced to — the broken furniture, the destroyed plates, the holes in the walls.

A hum. “On your feet, young man.”

Begrudgingly, he stood. When her fan tilted his chin up, he kept his eyes on that one mole she had between her flawlessly plucked eyebrows. *Kisses from Benzaiten*, Yuan would have called it.

*[The first time he met Kouyou Ozaki, she laid the tip of her katana to his neck, vane as a victor, stepped right on the chasm the gravity he called a slave and a friend and a limitation*

*had cracked into the earth, and said — behave].*

“So,” No signs of her chained state from less than two weeks ago showed on the Executive’s face. Recovery was just another *kanzashi* to her — another golden thing she would await admiration for. Only her hair tickled the small of her back, free from its usual decorations — subtly, almost too much to ignore, the long strands covered human nails shaped marks on her upper arms. “Did it make you feel better?”

He was hard pressed to answer. The top of his hat barely reached Kouyou’s shoulders. Out of one of the windows he’d slammed his fist into, the moon shone mockingly back at his silence.

There were pictures in that house. Countless pictures, mostly hidden inside dusty boxes in the one bedroom he’d found — with the two small beds pushed a bit too close, a wardrobe full of clothes he hadn’t been able to tear apart, notebooks on notebooks he couldn’t touch without a heart wrenching *guilt* locking his insides down.

Blonde hair, confused smiles and serious eyes. *You know*, she’d told him, *you truly look alike*.

“Not really,” he said, finally.

Kouyou lowered her fan. Something changed in her posture; an imperceptible shiver of her shoulders. Chuuya had learned this language among too many others — his eyes left her mole and landed on her own; a clear insubordination.

“You will fix this,” she said, a twinkle of hilarity — and it wasn’t a question, but it wasn’t an order either. “How can you not long for a bit of peace, I wonder, after everything?”

“Do you *want* me to implode?” he huffed, hiding the ounce of discomfort under his dirty nails; where the blood and the earth would cover it. They spasmed a single inch, as if offended by their body’s own truth. Chuuya tasted artificial lighting.

Her eyes softened. “Shall I assume I have gained your forgiveness?”

“There was never anything to forgive,” he brushed it off. Concern was a delicate thing, and his hands had never been good at staying still. He tried again: “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That is —” Her mouth curled down. “Debatable.”

“You told me not to blame myself for the information I allowed to get out,” he insisted. “I don’t see why you should be allowed to blame yourself for bringing me to her.”

Quicker than the wind, crisps appeared in the clear waters of her eyes; they were unreachable, but he brushed against them all the same. “Your wisdom is admirable. Where did you learn it?”

“Don’t push it,” he muttered.

*[“How did you do it, anyway?” Chuuya had asked her; in a hospital bed he was already plotting ways to escape from. The question had seemed useless, but somehow necessary.*

*“Do it?” Kouyou had blinked.*

*“Capture me,” he’d clarified. “Do you remember? Did she tell you?”*

*She’d tightened her lips. “Poison.”*

*For some reason, it had taken him by surprise. “Poison?”*

*“To paralyze your muscles and make sure your Ability wouldn’t activate automatically, to defend you,” she’d specified. “Boss has an — inclination, for poisons. I’m sure he could tell you more about it.”]*

Of all the ways he’d imagined he could be dealt with — the theories keeping the Sheep’s eyes open at night, the scenarios he’d hummed as he hid his hands in his pockets — poison seemed too *quiet*. A bit too gentle for a god of destruction. He had always assumed he’d die haunted and devastating — cursed by Arahabaki’s disgust at his lack of foresight.

Maybe that *thing* wouldn’t even let him die. Maybe he was bound to lose every last inch of himself — watch it float away with his blood; leave a pale puppet for Arahabaki to jump on trees and break the ground with.

*Fight me for it*, he dared.

Kouyou’s mirth brought him back. “Assuming you find time, seeing how *busy* you are.”

“You’re the one giving me missions,” Chuuya reminded her, the tiniest bit petulant.

“Now — *Mori*’s the one giving me missions to give *you*.” She fixed his jacket on his shoulders, eyeing the fabric. “You know, France is the perfect place to find a new style. Something more adept to — hypothetical upcoming promotions.”

His ears perched. “So I *was* right. This mission is —“

“This mission is no different from other missions you’ve received,” Kouyou interrupted him, tapping two fingers on his chin. “Be grateful to have been chosen. Establish new deals with companies the *Nine Rings*’ made us betray. Look for possibly interesting recruits. Guide the men that have been given to you wisely.”

Annoyingly enough, the last part of the speech made him flinch. Somewhere inside his duffel bag was his destroyed, overfilled cell phone — Koda was terrified by airplanes; Noguchi had yet to stop huffing about Tsuchiya’s absence — undeterred by Chuuya’s promises that *none of them knew where she was, you need to shut the fuck up*.

There was an entire sky to take in — the same as in Yokohama, but differently framed. If he had cared enough to, Chuuya could have studied his men’s eyes and written down just *who* was waiting for him to tear that new sky apart, as well.

*Voices are more useful than most weapons*, Lippman used to tell him, whenever a new movie had him change his hair. *In bloodied matters or elsewhere*.

*Why are you telling me that*, was usually his reply, a tad too blank.

*Because there's a metaphor*.

No, Iceman would huff. *You just want us to compliment your new hair*.

Mori was plotting something. He hadn't needed Kouyou's smiles to know; hadn't needed to be told why he was being sent away. He knew what they would talk about, back home.

*Absence makes the heart grow fonder!*, the most detested voice in Chuuya's auditory repertoire echoed — a perfect rendition of the one text he'd refused to answer to. *As such, I propose you never return*.

*They eat slugs there, by the way. I'd be careful, if I were you*.

Chuuya turned, leaning down to pick a fallen painting up. The colors were delicate and old — a portrayal of one of the endless near-Paris fields. The protection glass had been cracked by his pointless, still breathing rage; obediently, without wondering to *whom*, he dragged his finger down that earthquake line.

“Don't worry,” he assured, watching particles of dust stuck to his glove. “It'll go like all the other missions have.”

Kouyou enjoyed confidence, so she smiled. Chuuya didn't watch her twirl around the house, uncaringly floating over his messes and dragging her hands up and down fine furniture. On the glass of the painting, his reflection smiled at him.

His mouth stayed still.

Nonetheless, there was pressure on his lips — constant pressure, a wild heartbeat that didn't come from that *thing* he could only suppose he *had*, inside his chest. Ropes pulling the corner of his lips, stretching them out, dripping blood whose taste he could remember too well to pretend he'd dreamed it. In any case, Chuuya didn't dream.

The scars on his reflection blinked at him. Their shape interested him — spirals stabbed by spears; or maybe eyes, or maybe something he wasn't supposed to understand. They bled liquid fire down the glass of the painting, winked savagely at him. *More, more, more*.

*More what?*, he asked. Arahabaki didn't need words, and he didn't care for them in the least. His language was pulse and the sounds inside his hollow bones. *More, more, what more could you ever want?*

It was a complicated thing, realizing the hunger inside you wasn't yours. Explaining it to an eight years old who was always starving had been harder, though. Chuuya had wandered with a tattered military uniform, and he hadn't known what *food* was, but he'd wanted it. He'd been attacked and he'd killed them all, and he'd left less famished.

At that point, if the body and the mind and the hunger had to be shared, they could share the solution as well.

“Ane-san,” he called. He knew that his reflection would be normal, once he returned to it; uninterested, he threw the painting on the ground. “Ane-san, what did Mori do with Verlaine’s body?”

Kouyou paused.

Her profile was his to study, immobilized as she was over a beautifully decorated library. A current of wind ruffled her eyelashes, readjusted her eyes; when she met his gaze, Chuuya felt an uncomfortable need to kneel again.

“Chuuya,” she chirped, not with her Executive voice, not with her *Ane-san* voice. It was the whispers next to his hospital bed, as she tickled his palm and told him about his victories. “Do not ask me again.”

Some lifetimes later, she kissed his forehead and left. The tingle left by her lips was different from the tingle on every inch of his body — but threats couldn’t all look the same. And if some of them were warm — he would take them.

He fixed the mess he’d made. Not all of it — not without pausing to *think* about the things in his hands, throwing them again. Grabbed a pair of scissors, cut off spider webs from the corners of the ceiling. By the time he’d reached the bedroom, his hands had found the pictures again, and his reflection was still grinning in the oval shaped window.

Verlaine was smiling, too.

No teeth and no blood and no honesty; *see, I told you we don’t look alike*. Chuuya dragged his nails down the paper, uselessly. His cell phone was face down on the nightstand, bright with his men’s requests. Kouyou’s scent lingered in the air. The bed was unkempt. His friends were all dead.

*No point in a copy that doesn’t look the same*, Pianoman used to say, bent over a table, studying his counterfeit money like super-notes could stare back. Chuuya had watched him delay projects of weeks, all because he wasn’t satisfied. *If it’s not real, then it should at least be useful*.

Surrounded by a red glow, his fist drew a new hole in the ajar door of the closet. Arahabaki thought about bread — thought about Beatrice’s skin. Cursing all his graves out, he dragged a shirt down.



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**FIVE WEEKS LATER**

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*chapter xi.*

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*Case number: 10034566*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Nakahara C. returned from [...]*

***Report 355B. — Nakahara C.***

***Location: Paris, France.***

***Object: Kajii Motojirō [Affiliations: Maruzen Building Bombing; two years prior Report. Victims: 28.].***

*[...] on the matter of Kajii ~~do you want me to fucking kill you~~ the recruitment of Kajii Motojirō — birth name: Moriyama Motojirō; son of chemical weapon manufactures, ~~yes asshole I do have to write all of this it's literally your evil back story give me the pen,~~ only nineteen when he caused the death of twenty eight people in the terroristic attack to the Maruzen Building ~~yes, god, get off, I do remember it, Yuan and I watched it on a~~*

~~stolen TV — what do you mean “if she enjoyed it?” It’s lemon-shaped bombs, they’re pathetic.~~

~~Following the complicated conflict that led us to establishing contact with the man yes I do have to refer to you impersonally, shut up, we were able to gather some more information on his past two years of lay-low — after being identified and disowned by his parents, no I will not write that they were traitorous slugs eaters, I saw you eat slugs he escaped to Europe, where he set up a business of mercenary weapon fabrication.~~

~~He has accepted to join the ranks of the Port Mafia, promising us unwavering loyalty — granted he will receive absolute protection from the national authorities. You can ask them about the private laboratory yourself, go fuck yourself.~~

~~As for the damages and losses the man’s recruitment caused, my next report will go in more depth about it. If you don’t stop gloating I will defenestrate you a third time. A third time. Do you even understand how insane it is that I had to do it three times? As for now, let it be known up to ten members of the squad will return to Yokohama sooner than first predicted — they fell victims to unexpected bombs.~~

~~No I don’t care if we startled you — No I don’t care if you’re sorry? I had to chase you across the roofs of fucking half of Paris, got myself arrested, cracked a dome at the Louvre, — Give me back that fucking pen or I swear to God I’m leaving you here to the gendarme’s rage —~~

~~In any case, Kajii Motojirō was acquired successfully. Touching on man-power [...]~~

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Yokohama was made for the night.

*It’s easier to steal, and it makes adults stupid,* Chuuya used to explain, wise and self-assured, to the wide eyes that never vanished from his frame — nine and *tall* for his age, and not quite adept to the concept of being *surveilled*, rather than enjoyed.

*Anyway,* Shirase would have muttered, had he voiced that particular discovery, *eyes can do more than one thing.*

Suribachi City had no roofs. It had plastic bags and safety sheets, and, if one was *very* lucky, a loose metal panel from *The End* — the almost affectionate, but always *spat* name the settlement had given to the creation of the crater.

Chuuya used to perch anyway — unable to stay still or on the ground for too long, not when there was a wider view to take in; not when there was a better perspective to *watch out* from. There were better things to spend his memory on — rations and stolen guns and the specific brand of car toys the kids liked; formulas no one had quite told him existed but the gravity around him had taught him; voices from years he did not remember, but *could have* .

There were better things — but it was the way his city looked at night that he had never forgotten.

“Are you *insane*?” Motojirō Kajii hissed, the moment they were reunited at the *Gates* of the Narita Airport again. The midnight crowd was just sluggish enough to swarm them less viciously, on its race to the blurred lights of the exit; Kajii was rattling him. “How many *laws* did that stunt break? How did you not get — *I don’t know* , sucked into the stratosphere? Pants flying off as you scream, *aaaah!* You *know?*”

“If you could stop shaking me like a present,” Chuuya muttered, through gritted teeth and a sore throat.

Despite the stiffness of his limb and the taste of cold air, the *sitting on the plane wing* trick never really got boring — it had stolen his breath when he was nine and stubbornly set on proving Yuan wrong about the texture of the stars; it stole it a bit more whenever he saw the fireflies-littered ground of Yokohama shatter the clouds, pulling at the roots of his lungs like a long forgotten anchor.

*Nothing easier to miss than the ground*, Albatross used to huff, glaring at the infinity over a helicopter window. Direct him a glance; laugh. *Unless it’s you, I suppose.*

“What’s the principle behind it, anyway?” the scientist insisted, working his long legs to catch up with Chuuya’s sudden urgency. He could see the city flicker behind the glass doors and the tired workers; couldn’t shake off the feeling that they looked nothing like the ones he had blinked at for weeks.

“Like, how do you make up for the heavy pressure of air on your squirt body?” His tone would have fit just fine in his so-called, *Scientist Supernova* — a basement littered in projects, chemicals and lemon trees. “How do you keep your feet anchored without pulling the plane down? Shouldn’t the increase of your gravitational mass be unbearable for the wing? *Could* your Ability pull the plane down? Or does being a squirt —“

His head pounded. “I’m *not* a squirt,” Chuuya stepped on his sandaled foot, accelerating at his yelp. “You bowl-looking freak.”

“*Ouch!*” Kajii screamed, on the other side of the *Gates*, ignoring the blinking glances of the crowd. *You’re gonna need to shut the fuck up*, Chuuya had told him, upon their offer to join. *Learn subtlety. In case you missed what it is that we do.* “You could have given me *foot cancer*, you *imbecile!*”

“That’s not a thing!” Chuuya called back, trying to remember that — for a six foot tall man that never took off his goggles and referred to *death* as the *ultimate experiment* — Kajii had a surprisingly acceptable personality, when he wasn’t leaning into his dramatics.

“Something *died* down there, dude! And it’s *not a bone!*”

His phone was vibrating in his pocket — his eyes were drinking in every *kanji* on the directions, every heavy-accented vowel out of the sleepy people he was pushing through. He stalked forward, inhaling.

The wall of Police Officers stopped him.

Their uniforms were matted in sweat, and their ears deaf to the curious crowd’s questioning; Chuuya squinted through the indistinguishable rows of calming arms, attempting to find the beacon of the officers’ concerned mutters — all he found, were a pair of familiarly frowning eyes.

“Here,” Chuuya said, cutting through the flow of Kajii’s incessable whines, throwing him his ringing phone. “Answer that. I’ll be back.”

“*What?*”

A silhouette of dark hair and a white dress vanished through the crowd, tearing her papers out of Officer Matsuda’s hands right as Chuuya stole the man’s report from his hands. “Hey, *you* —” His eyebags-lined gaze found him as he backed away, dossier in hand; he blinked. “Kid. You’re back.”

“What kind of disappearances are we even talking about?” he questioned, eyes on the typed report from the last month’s suspicious activity. The man followed; Chuuya didn’t stop until a pillar was against his back — because he knew how to deal with his type. “Murders? Ransoms?”

“The *young girls and women* kind,” the man replied, attempting to tear the report out of his grasp. “And this is private information.”

“My contacts have been teasing me about this *weird stuff* that’s been happening while I was gone,” he replied, raising his arm higher. “I’m just trying to get some more details before they can offer them.”

Matsuda made a face. “Your contacts.”

“Yes.”

“At the — What was it, *jewelry store?*”

“They *love* some current history. So?”

He managed to wrangle the report out of his grasp, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The officers were still surveying the crowd, diligently searching through bags and hat-wearing women — Matsuda’s breath smelled of coffee, the way it did when he could only afford to visit Suribachi on the weekends.

“Where have you been?” he asked, at last, running his eyes down his frame. “You look fancy. Haven’t seen you around in so long, I almost sent a search party to Mori Corp.”

“Unofficial vacation time,” Chuuya lied. He petted his waistcoat, allowing the man to pull ever-so lightly on the black ribbon under his collar. He couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t worn a jacket of some type over his clothes — the heat had rolled his sleeves up, though, trying to find a match that wouldn’t bother his necessarily gloved hands. “Glad to know you like it.”

“As long as you didn’t steal it. It would certainly be a change.”

“I did take inspiration from a dead man’s closet,” he deadpanned.

An unamused stare. “I tried asking around for you, you know? After that mess — You could have let me know you were leaving the city.”

Chuuya made a face. “Don’t push it.”

“You know, that boy of yours got himself arrested a good *seven* times.”

For a single, absurd moment, spurred by habit and the Suribachi sunshade, he thought he was talking about Shirase. The flash of irritation through his veins corrected him. “He’s not my —“

“He stole your mugshot,” Matsuda said. “I think he made it his lockscreen.”

“That’s great,” he muttered, willing his teeth not to break as they gritted. “Well? What about the disappearances? I don’t have all night.”

The man studied him, teeth munching on a scar on the side of his mouth. He was pretty sure one of the Sheep had given it to him — strangely, he would have also bet it hadn’t been intentional. Despite Chuuya’s nastiest warnings, the youngest kids had a tendency to hang off the *two policemen who brought sweets and Orphanage options*.

*Perhaps*, Chuuya used to consider — but only when he was lucky enough to get an entire night to himself; perched where none of the kids could catch a look at whatever his face was doing — *Perhaps, they would be better off if I let them*.

Inconsequential thinking. In spite of it all — if Chuuya cried wolf, the Sheep would always hide.

“The *Bishop’s Staff*,” Matsuda huffed, once he got tired of Chuuya’s unblinking, waiting stare. His voice had an uncomfortable spot in the deepest roads of his skull — something always wet with the iron-tasting rain of Suribachi City, and lined by the irritating screech of Shirase’s jacket zipper. ““You heard of them?”

His eyebrows’ brushed his hairline. From his experience, and the numerous collaborative missions he had taken part to — members of the *Five Moons* knew better than to specifically target civilians. Under some point of views, they existed specifically for that purpose — keeping the blood, while inevitable, away from the sidewalks.

“It might be nothing,” the man admitted. “I don’t have anything concrete pointing towards them, really — We don’t have enough numbers to consider this an emergency yet. I simply

—“

“Want to be prepared, for once?”

He expected a dirty glance. All he found in the man’s eyes was a contained sort of tiredness.

“I’m glad you’re back, Chuuya,” The touch of his hand pushed his hat further down his head; through the silver of the dangling chain, the air was shattered by the heat, trembling painfully over Officer Matsuda’s most forced smile. “Yokohama doesn’t taste the same without you.”

Something *twisted*, between the bullet scars distraction had stained his sternum with. Clearing his throat scratched it to raw skin; he pulled his hat down, stepping away from his reach. “Yeah, yeah, don’t get too excited about —“

“Yo, *Chuuya!*” Kajii called, tripping over a pair of abandoned suitcases in his hurry to get to him. “Who’s Mimiko, and why is she demanding I cut your balls off for standing her up?”

Chuuya turned to face him so fast his head spun. “*What?*”

“Are you *finally* dating, Chuuya?” Matsuda said, his gasp lined in something too excited to fit with the dried blood stains on his sleeves. “I can hardly believe you — Dear *God*, kid, you would think Murase had taught you better than to stand sweet ladies up —“

“Also, a certain *Okowa?* She’s *begging* you for another chance,” Kajii insisted, as he leaned all his weight on his side, wildly clicking on random buttons of his destroyed phone. A voice — female and distinctively desperate — prayed instinctively through the intercom, ill-fitted over the dangling phone charms. “Broke my eardrums about it, too. Japanese ladies! How I’ve missed them. Seriously, though, what’s this double suicide business they keep mentioning —“

A jolt of electricity straightened his spine.

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot,” Matsuda spoke up, very slowly, as he squinted in Kajii’s direction — the expression of someone *sure* he was supposed to know who was in front of him. “Did you see the fliers yet?”

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Despite the pungent smell of night, the air outside was unbearably, viscidly warm — slowing down every movement and making steps squeak with sweat, as Chuuya stalked to the nearest

*Times And Planes* panel, blinking brightly against the darkness of disappearing cars and aching known skyscrapers.

Through the wet pages of newspapers, only barely hanging to the panel, a distinctively newer flier caught their attention.

“No way!” Kajii roared in laughter. “That’s a funny coincidence. *Oi*, look how many of them — Did they fill up the airport or what?”

*From a biological point of view*, Doc had explained, once, through medical checks Chuuya had offhandedly mentioned never receiving, *Anger is useful. It makes your brain shunt blood away from the guts and towards the muscles, preparing you for a possible physical exertion.*

*So I can fuck shit up when I want to?*, he’d grunted, tired of the lecture that a lecture was *not*, not exactly — because the Flags didn’t work like *that*, but they didn’t exactly know how to work with him either.

*I’m saying getting angry would do you good*, Doc had replied, easily, because he had a tendency for the unexpected. *You should try it, sometimes.*

Endlessly calm, Chuuya reached forward, tearing the flier off the wall.

Kajii’s high-pitched shouts started at some indistinct point, between the first webs of cracks opening under his companion’s steps — spreading towards the rows of black vans on the other side of the parking lot — and the hole the crumpled up flier tore into the nearest wall, shining red as it landed in Chuuya’s hands again, raining debris on their shoes.

“Dude,” the man squealed, attempting to extract the edge of his sandal from a particularly wide crack, “*Dude!* This is public property!”

“You set off lemon bombs at the Louvre,” Chuuya hissed, merciless, tearing open the door of the nearest Port Mafia seal-marked car. “That,” he breathed, almost ripping the flier in his urgency to study it again, “*Motherfucker.*”

Kajii barely managed to land on his seat, before he shut his own door, shaking the whole vehicle. The driver didn’t say a word — cautious eyes followed him through the rear view mirror, though.

“To the Headquarters,” he snapped, voice low. “Thank you. Before I do something I regret.”

“You’re —“ the man started, hesitantly.

“*What?*”

“ — Rengoku, you’re —“

He stiffened.

*Usefulness*, Pianoman tutted — somewhere between his ribs; somewhere under the edges of his hair, right where he still didn’t know if he would let them regrow or keep away from

mirrors. He had always grinned a tad too composesly, for a man with teeth sharper than promises. *In all you hate.*

“Want me to,” Chuuya muttered, tongue between his teeth, “Drive in your stead, or are you going to go?”

Even Kajii had fallen quiet — the line of his shoulders a tad less obnoxious, as he dropped the act just enough to remind the air of his penchant for details. Chuuya didn’t meet his gaze; he kept it in the rear view mirror, watching the driver consider his chances.

“Sir,” he said, eventually, very quiet.

The roundabout out of the Airport and into Yokohama only electrified his fingers again, pulling their rage by the nails. It seemed every flat surface had been plastered in copies of the flier in his hands — so unrealistically *many* of them, he wouldn’t have believed their realness, had Kajii not been gaping at every turn.

Yokohama was darker than ink — the cars slumped forward in a lazy urgency, framed by old flickering lights and new colorful neon signs, shimmering vainly under the first decorations for the summer festivals. It pulsed under his feet, no matter the metal under his soles; it hummed like a heartbeat, embracing him with no request.

*Home*, it promised. The most rest he had ever been allowed. *You’re home.*

It was beautiful enough to settle some missing part of Chuuya’s lungs — his ticking eye made it all blurrier than it should have been.

“I will crush his lungs,” he promised to the paper, his voice unrecognizable to his own ears. “I will pour liquid metal inside those *dirty, disgusting* bones of his — Stick a fucking magnet to the bottom of the bay, and *laugh* as he gets *crushed in a million little pieces*, like the mountain of *horse shit* he is —“

“Chuuya,” Kajii insisted, gulping. “It’s just a dog. You need to breathe, man.”

His car window exploded.

The driver flinched badly enough for the car to *screech* against the concrete. Chuuya didn’t even bother to shake off glass pieces from his lap.

“*Just a dog?*” he spelled out, slowly turning to look at him. “A dog called *Chuuya*? Who’s been,” He didn’t even bother lowering his eyes, “*Missing for almost two months? Wears a black collar, you will probably recognize him by the unbearable smell of sheep excrement. If found, please do not contact me, and gently throw him from the nearest window. Worry not; he’ll grow wings* —“

“I mean, it’s a bit eccentric —“

“It’s *his fault!*” Chuuya snapped, crumpling it up again. “*Him* and his stupid obsession with that lost Arcade game, which I didn’t even *lose*, by the way — A pathetic prank from a busybody who’s got nothing better to do —“



“Who are you even talking about —“

*“That bastard!”* Ignoring the man’s small scream when the shining paper landed on his lap, he leaned forward between the seats. “Can’t you go *faster?* ”

“I would, sir,” the driver assured, as flatly as he could. “Today’s traffic has been slowed down by the accident, though.”

He paused. “Accidents?”

Miraculously on cue, breaking through the soft jazz playing from the car radio, the low voice of a reporter sizzled through statics: “— *believe electrical support should arrive in minutes. As all listeners will know, this will be today’s thirteenth intervention by the technicians, who have not yet found an explanation for the traffic lights frenzies Yokohama has been —*“

“It has caused more than one accident,” the driver summed up, carefully threading through the outskirts of the city. “The streets have been clogged with ambulances since lunchtime.”

“That’s *raw*, ” Kajii whistled, plastering his nose on the car window. “How many victims?”

“Up to forty in the last six hours, sir.”

The man *oh-oh-* ed, excited.

Chuuya plastered his nose against the car window, studying the endless lines of traffic, climbing all the way to the center — dots of bright lights and tired arms, dangling from the windows. “Can the electricity system malfunction on such a wide scale?”

“Apparently. Let’s just hope — ”

He heard the rumble of the motorcycles before he saw them; throwing himself forward, he grabbed the steering wheel from the driver’s hands, vertiginously steering them out of their way. Kajii screeched — the car drew donuts on the road, its lights blinding some upcoming cars, landing them against the nearest bench over the scream of horns.

*“What the fuck!”* Kajii snapped, back on his car door, eyes wider than even his goggles.

*“What the fuck, what the fuck — and I thought French people didn’t know how to — Left!”*

The driver took the steering wheel back, landing them into the main street again, just in time to escape an upcoming ambulance. Chuuya’s head bumped so painfully against the headrest he bit his tongue to blood, cursing out.

Ambulances ran past them, their lights and sirens deafening over Kajii’s French soliloquy; the driver sprinted towards the closest traffic light — stuck blaring off all three of its colors.

*“Ah,”* the man said. “Well.”

Chuuya — whose license had been gifted by Albatross’ drunken hands, under the promise to one day teach him enough to make do — stared at the emergency lights over his head, and asked: “What do you do in this situation?”

“Pray,” he offered.

They slipped down a side road so fast, loose pieces of trash entered through the windows, all of it framed by Kajii’s nauseatingly loud begging — when a familiar flier plastered itself in the middle seat between them, dread filled Chuuya’s lungs.

Upside down vehicles and exasperatingly screaming pedestrians filled his visual field; with no forewarning, he threw himself forward again, reclaiming the steering wheel.

“*Sir!*” the driver stuttered.

“Traffic light,” he snapped. “I need a damn traffic light.”

Kajii laughed, hysterical. “There is certainly *many* —“

“*Closer!*”

His laser-focused intent blurred out most of the protests he received, as the driver obediently drove them close enough to sporadic traffic lights for Chuuya to hang out of his window, studying their flickering, seemingly random rhythm. *Find certainty in proof*, Kouyou always said — so he did not drop back into his seat until the seventh traffic light confirmed his theory.

“Give me that,” he ordered, as Kajii handed over the crumpled flier on the car floor. The habit of keeping a pen up his sleeve came from Doc — the ability not to dig holes in the paper as he wrote down, he hoped, from Lippman. “Fucking *bitch*. What does it say? *B-R-I-D-G-E. Last to reach the* —“

“Chuuya,” Kajii cut through, watching a woman kick the side of her upside down vehicle. “What the fuck is going on.”

“*Green, green*, red, yellow, blue — *what?* There are a shit ton of bridges in this city...”

A motorcycle accelerated in front of them. “*Chuuya!*”

“Bridge, bridge, bridge —” he mumbled, eyes running down the flier in his hands. “*Smell, Nakahara Chuuya, window* —“ He stopped.

Horns blared; the driver stepped on the sidewalk to miss a truck’s unannounced turn at the roundabout. “Is this — an enemy attack, sir?”

“Closest thing,” he snarled. “Wing. *He’ll grow wings* — the *Tsurumi Tsubasa Bridge*. ”

“*What?*” Kajii reached for the flier, the look in his eyes turning serious. “But that’s where —“

“Where you launched your first ever death experiment?” Chuuya crushed the paper in his hands. “Figures. Driver, get us there.”

The *Tsurumi Tsubasa Bridge* — or *Wing Bridge*, as most of the foreign settlement of Suribachi City referred to it — was a cable-stayed bridge in the western side of the Yokohama Bay. According to Albatross' sing-songs, during their bloodied escapes under the bridge, it brushed the length of eight hundred feet.

When their car finally climbed on its blindingly illuminated road, Chuuya set his eyes on the dark waters underneath, washed in emergency lights and the peculiar shade of a city's exasperation.

*Yokohama knows we have a pin for destroying it, Iceman used to say. And it knows we'd die to protect it. Exasperation makes sense. Like a mother with her kids.*

On top of the railing, surrounded by enough concerned, calming-arms-sporting passersby it seemed intentional, a coat-wearing silhouette had his arms spread, facing the void.

“*Shit*, shit, hey, *stop*,” Kajii jolted forward, “Is that guy gonna jump?”

Chuuya breathed out. “If I have any say in it.”

His door was thrown open long before the car had stopped, much to the driver's startled surprise — ignoring the protests from the endless rug of uninterested vehicles running forward, and the blaring horns directed to the parked car of some well-intentioned fools, he ran down the bridge at full speed, flier tight inside his fist.

“Don't you *dare, jackass!*” he screamed, as he pushed his way through the crowd.

The wind cut him into incandescent slices, trying to tear his hat off his head. According to the smile that slowly appeared in front of him, that was part of the plan.

He saw him for less than a blink — a vision of the whitest bandages and the widest smile, not possibly any less bothered by the screams being torn out of the passersby's throats; saw something *different* in his clothes, and thought, delirious, *did he dress up for this shit?*

Merely a blink. With an obnoxious wave of his fingers, Dazai Osamu bowed to the crowd, spine as straight as only Mori's presence made it — and he took a step in the emptiness.

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Chuuya had never feared drowning.

Water and *Upon The Tainted Sorrows* were not quite the most compatible combinations; all he had learned about breaking the surface had never been lit in the sizzling crimson of his Ability. If he squinted, hands severing the storm of bubbles and *burning* with the impact of landing, he swore he could see the reassuring glint of Albatross' braid — the way the fur of his coat used to float, framing a smile that not even the polluted waters could saw.

*If you're leaving with the easy way out*, he would say, soaked shoe blocking his apartment door from being shut, forcing himself in Chuuya's space like a persistent firefly. *Where will you bleed all the excitement out?*

One couldn't see the sea from Suribachi. In Chuuya's memories — or the fragmented glints that passed for it, metal-tasting and rusted — there was a bubbles-less water, blacker than ink, and the cold certainty of not having to do a thing.

Then had come Dante.

*[Suribachi had nothing to drown in but earth. He hadn't realized there was something to fear — not until he had met his reflection through the glass of a tank, and realized he, too, had been dying, once].*

“Let go!” Dazai screeched, throat choked by the deadly grip Chuuya had on his tie collar, dragging him up the cobblestones of the riverbank. They were drenched enough to gain a thousand pounds; even the warm summer air was making his teeth chatter. “Let go, you selfish, tiny, opportunistic *brute!*”

“Selfish,” Chuuya echoed, heaving, by the time his shaking boot managed to land on the concrete. He dropped on all fours, spitting out the disgustingly flavored water of the river. “*Selfish*. I'm actually going to kill you.”

Star fishing under a flickering light pole, all the boy did was kick his legs out, whining.

In the text box labeled *Mackerel* in his phone there were exactly three conversations dating to the time Chuuya had spent in France. A three days belated wish of never-return, promptly answered with a picture of a middle finger; a four hours long, one-topic-focused conversation, sparkled to life by Dazai's, *thoughts on Miso soup?* text — and, lastly, a yet unanswered question: *what did you see in Dante's limbo?*

Chuuya blamed that disintoxication — easier than questioning the panting glance he darted in the boy's direction, dragging it down changes five weeks shouldn't have made *that* evident.

Under purplish eyebags, he sported a new collection of bruises, most of them shaped like the recoil of a gun — all the naked skin offered to the moonlight was a painful shade of sunburn red, particularly vivid over the bridge of his nose. His new arm cast was soaked, signed by handwritings he didn't recognize. His hair had grown too long; he was holding it back with an astonishing number of childish-shaped hair clips.

The gun he kept in the back of his pants had slithered to his side — the metal was stained in recently dried blood.

*Have you lost weight?*, he almost questioned — a clear sign of water in his brain. Shaking his head as roughly as possible, he snapped: “Is your nevrotic ass aware that you caused a city scale emergency to play *charades*? ”

“Technically,” Dazai heaved, slightly dazed eyes to the sky. His face was a known landscape; Chuuya’s skin sizzled where he had touched his naked own, electrified in the numbing silence it had almost learned to *unlearn*. He pretended not to see his side glance to his thumbs’ spasms. “We were playing *Flashing Lights*. ”

“Sure. Yes. Of course. And the fucking fliers?”

He beamed. “Did you like them? I wasn’t informed of your departure until you were already yipping around the *Champs d’Élysées*, so I had to act on your return instead — Took me and Odasaku all night to put them up! I hope you appreciated it.”

Something tickled his stiffened shoulders. A note too sweet on teeth too sharp; ill-fitted warm hands attached to a corpse’s wrists.

*Odasaku?*

“*Well?* ” Dazai insisted. “Did *you*? Did the French air splatter your last brain cell? ”

“*Dude!* ”

Kajii’s lab coat was the brightest thing the water sticking his eyelashes together allowed him to see; he watched him stumble down the hill — the expression widening every inch of his face borderline psychotic.

“What the fuck,” he chanted, the moment his sandals raised a cloud of dust over their bodies. “What the *fuck*. Were you trying to impress me? I already told you, I’ve jumped down my fair share of bridges — That’s what *La Seine* is for! You left the crowd speechless, though! Pretty sure a good number of them cried. The other half is calling an Ambulance, so you may want to —” His smile lit up, upside down and too wide. “Hey. *Hey*, ” His voice lowered in a stage whisper. “Since he’s, like — Suicidal and all. Can you ask your friend if he’d be willing to pose as an experiment for my research of scientific death?”

Dazai sat up quickly enough to scratch his hands. “Are you serious?” he gasped. “You want to kill me?”

“Sure!”

“Painlessly?”

“That —” Kajii cleared his throat. “May vary.”

He clearly didn’t need anything more — he stood up, dragging the scientist further down the riverbank by his scarf, motioning animatedly over the man’s excited skips. Chuuya dropped face first into the earth again, chest heaving, teeth gritted.

“...and it makes sense. right? Because if we assume your Ability allows you not to *die* because of those lemon shaped bombs of yours, then it *means* your bombs should *kill on impact*. I’m assuming we need to consider a window of survival — Ten, fifteen percent? It’s somewhat high, yes, but attempts are the blades of the dragonhearts. If we consider —”

“Do you believe death is inevitable?” Kajii asked, not sparing Chuuya a glance as he climbed to his feet.

Irked, Dazai pulled at the soaked band of his arm cast and huffed: “Obviously.”

“But *why*?”

“Because life is,” he replied, blinking. “And they’re the same.”

“How is life inevitable?”

“Because I’m here, right now,” He brushed the matter off. “Now. About my suicide —”

“Leave the newbie alone,” Chuuya cut through, pulling Dazai back from the belt of his coat, ignoring his yelp to squint at Kajii’s over excited frame. “Sorry about the detour, man. If the driver’s still there, just ask him to drop you off at *Building Three* — Boss got an office for you.”

“*Newbie*?” Kajii echoed, clearly insulted. “I was staging terrorist attacks when you were still in a cradle, you squirt.”

His temples pulsed. “You’re a foot fungus.”

“*Excuse me*?”

From where he was gleefully attempting to tear Chuuya’s shoelaces off, Dazai laughed, delighted. “*Fungus*? Is it because of his stupid hair?”

Chuuya gulped back a, *I know, right?*. Kajii spluttered. “I have been nothing but a *blast* —”

“The only blast you’ve caused,” he let him know, stepping close enough to study his own drenched reflection in his goggles, “Is the one that diverted *ten of my men’s trains* off the rails —”

“*Well*, that was *before* — Once you got me on board, we had *fun* —”

“You waking me up at the crack of dawn to talk about *the way the industry is tainting the true nature of lemons* is no entertainment, believe me on this —”

“And what did *you* give me back?” Kajii insisted, arms flagging around. “Fake stories! Lies over lies! I offered you my most *sincere* retelling, and you kept me up all night to discuss the pet crocodile you had to defeat to join the Mafia —”

“That was a true story,” Chuuya insisted, undeterred. “It’s part of the entrance exam.”

“That *cannot be* part of —“

“If they don’t lock you in with the deadly tiger cubs,” Dazai agreed. “I hear old man Hirotsu had to fight off a whole *bear* when he joined.”

Kajii stared. They held his gaze.

His hands fell to his sides. “I can’t win against a bear,” he murmured, nonsensically.

Climbing to his feet, Dazai patted the side of his arm, encouragingly. “If you give me some more statistics on those bombs of yours, I’ll try to tell Mori to let you off easily. A pack of feral dogs, maybe! You are certainly used to the more canine — *Ouch!*”

“The dogs might mistake his hair for a food bowl,” Chuuya pointed out, fixing his kicking leg back in place. “Unwise.”

“Very European,” Dazai agreed.

“Very Parisian.”

“Terribly terrorist.”

“Agonizingly lemon-like.”

“Alright,” Kajii snapped. “Have I killed you brats’ grandma or something? *Chuuya’s*, maybe, in some weirdly derivative way, but you —“ A strange look pinched his traits, crossing his arms in a very awkward line. “You’re Dazai, aren’t you?”

A mocking bow. “My fame has reached the West! You flatter me. I appreciate you, even if your lemons are slowly growing more and more boring. Either I kill you, or I jump into the river again,” He directed a tempted look to the riverbank.

“As in,” he dared, “Boss’ Dazai?”

His smile didn’t move an inch.

Chuuya stared at the ground.

He had felt *it* before, he considered — eight years old, and waiting for the Sheep to weigh the pros and the cons of keeping the bomb attached to the cables. When Pianoman had welcomed in with a smile and bloodied hands, and he had learned just how relevant being *liked* by those holding the knife was.

It was childish, he reminded himself. He’d never even had parents. He had no reason to whine about not being the poster child.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Dazai said, at last. A broken kaleidoscope; each shard weighted his face down — more than he’d understand if he spent his whole life asking for stories. Somewhere through the razor-sharp glass, resignation. It was gone quicker than Chuuya could wonder. “On a more important business — Chibi, where are my souvenirs?”

His eyes jumped out of their sockets. “You don’t fucking *get* souvenirs, you smelly Mackerel *bastard*—“

Inopportune as an epidemic, Kajii blinked. “Didn’t you buy those little —“

Dazai lit up.

Horns flared wildly. At the beginning of the downhill that led to the riverbank, the Mafia driver dragged his arms around, mouthing some call washed away by the sound of waves. He had a duffel bag in hand — Kajii’s yelp was pitched just high enough to spell out *lemon bombs* and *do not shake*.

“We can talk about that later!” he screamed, scrambling to the car so viciously, he ended up on his knees. “Put those down! Put those *down*! I can’t be arrested not even an hour into the city, it would be *mortifying* —“

No organ music tinged the air darker; the sight of Dazai’s upsetting grin in the corner of his vision did its job well enough.

“No,” Chuuya said, immediately.

“*Chuu-uu-ya*,” he drawled, *slithering* along to the beeline he made for the still-crowded bridge, hands pointedly stuck in his pockets. “Did my dog bring me a *gift*?”

“Kajii is delirious.”

Dazai squinted, clearly aggravated. “I don’t think he is.”

“Then *you’re* delusional.”

He hung off his belt loops, almost tripping him. “Give me my gift.”

“There is *no*,” he insisted. “gift.”

“Give me my gift.”

“There’s no gift.”

“*There is!*”

“There is *not!*”

“*Help!*” Dazai screamed, out of nowhere, loud enough to catch the attention of the people still crying out near the railings. “*Help*, he’s trying to push me! Instigation to suicide! *Instigation* —“

The kick Chuuya directed at him dug a crater into the nearest wall; the boy, on the other hand, managed to slip away from between his legs — filthy fingers stealing his hat in the process.



“France made you slower,” he judged — a certain, unplaceable hint of pettiness in it. He settled the hat on his own soaked air; then tapped two fingers on his forehead. Grinning in the face of a nearby traffic light — and the sound of screeching wheels that followed — he called: “Fetch!”

With makeshift-trumpet squeak, Dazai took off, bolting down the bridge.

“*Dipshit!*” Chuuta screamed. His spine screeched, louder than thunder — and then nothing but the unnatural scarlet of *Tainted* and the black-and-white dot running further and further away filling up his eyes.

He chased.

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The new *Mr. Arcade* was an eighty years old man in an outdated Christmas sweater, whose approaching dementia made it easier to steal Arcade tickets from under his nose. To his merit, he had finally fixed the *Punching God* machine.

[“*What kind of info can he even gather?*” he had whispered, perplexed, as they watched him play bingo on a portable tablet. “*He probably can’t even hear the gossip.*”

“*It’s just a precaution,*” Dazai had insisted. “*I have more efficient methods these days. Made friends with the Intelligence team!*”

That certainly sounds less realistic, *Chuuya hadn’t said.*]

“I’m afraid we lack funds to reward such a devastating victory,” the man stuttered, pushing his wide glasses up a wrinkled nose. The ripped leather ball Chuuya had torn out with an overly prepared fist laid on the counter between them — the mess of Arcade tickets being printed shone under neon lights and playing stations.

“Not enough ink on the printer?” Chuuya guessed, pocketing the overflowing lines of tickets.

“Try not to gloat,” Dazai muttered — still stealing his own share. “Like you didn’t cheat.”

He hadn’t; the other boy had made sure of it, his hand plastered on his nape — clammy from the half an hour long chase around the city, feet scrambling to land on close enough roofs and fingers all scratched from the florist shop they had crashed against.

“I shall have to put this on your tab, kids,” *Mr. Arcade* sighed, eyes comically wide behind the glass. Chuuya silently prayed he didn’t think to check the *Unwelcome List* — they had yet to tear that season’s one to pieces. “We can hardly afford to deal with more reparations, these days. I just heard the restaurant a few blocks from here got stormed over! The kids to blame were banned for life — You don’t want it to happen to you, do you?”

Subtly, Chuuya removed a destroyed piece of bread from the hem of Dazai’s coat.

“Here, take these,” the man handed them the rest of the tickets. “I’m afraid, celebration or not celebration, that we’re out of *Bonus Cards*. You two will have to make do.”

“My next gift was supposed to be locking you up inside the claw machine,” Dazai whined, as he dragged him towards the rows of customers — rows over rows of brats and adults waiting for their turn, immediately parting to let them through.

Chuuya offered him his nastiest glance. The crumpled up flier was still in his pocket; it had survived even the uncomfortable drying of his clothes under the summer air. “*What*, exactly, are you calling a gift?”

Removing his belt from his grasp, the boy twirled, walking backwards to threateningly push his puffed chest against his. “I gave you a city wide emergency, *petit mafia* of mine. Be grateful.”

Retching, he pushed him away, watching the way the lights traveled across the dozens of hairpins pushing his bangs back — flower shaped, rainbow shaped, and one that vaguely resembled a toy crab. *Elise*, he guessed — or just an occasion to have his subordinates in dismay. “Chronic migraines — that’s all your revolting ass gives me. I’m jet-lagged as shit. Can I go home *now*?”

Dazai blinked, innocent. “Are you blaming your inability to beat me at *War God: The Legend* on headaches and jet-lag?”

He spluttered. “I *beat* you at that, what the fuck are you —“

The boy accelerated, sneaking through the crowd with traditional ability and skipping steps, screaming back: “Not if I delete your results!”

He slammed his palm on a nearby machine, hard enough to make the ten years old behind it yelp. “*Fuck you!*”

The low hum of music rumbled under their ruined shoes, following them from playing station to playing station. It was all disorientingly familiar — strangely new under some sharper corners, gathered in the way Dazai said *boku* and not *watashi* as he gloated about a win, and the five inches of height difference that now stood between them.

“I’m astonished you even managed to reach me at all,” Dazai said, seemingly unbothered by the stolen claw-machine toy he had slapped on his face. “It’s like there’s a void facing my eyes —“

Chuuya's fists clenched on his joystick, eyes stubbornly set on the screen. "Shut up."

"Could it perhaps be —"

"If you open your mouth —"

"Did you get *shorter*, Hatrack?"

"Shut up," He seethed, squinting up at the boy's self-assured grin, settled on top of his crossed arms. The machine between them shook with the kick Chuuya directed to it — the other boy bit his tongue to blood, yelping.

"No, you didn't, not at all," Dazai mocked, tongue held between two fingers, words muffled. "I'm just *winning*."

"This isn't a *race*, horse shit!"

He threw his head back to snicker — a tad of blood shone on the very edge of his lips, painted neon green by the lights. Chuuya caught the glint of *something* — he paused.

"What," Dazai was taunting, still, chin up, "Nothing to say about your, *growth spurt that's sure to come*? Should I take this as an admission of loss? Should we call for celebration? Should we go buy some milk?"

Chuuya didn't hear a word; delight arose across his system, lighting it up like fireworks. The music from the speakers turned sweeter. "Are those *braces*, Bandages?"

Silence flattened every muscle of his face.

Abruptly, Dazai slapped both hands on his mouth, dropping his body under the machine.

"They *are*!" His own glee surprised him; he roared out his meanest laugh, climbing over the machine to peek down at his blankest expression. "How hard did Boss even make you bite the curb to have to put you in *braces*? At your *big ass age*?"

"I don't —"

"Then take off your hands."

"Your smell might kill me."

"I don't smell, *you* smell —"

"You're wearing a *waistcoat*! You don't get to judge anyone!"

"*And*?" Chuuya scoffed, crossing his arms, "I look fucking great."

Disgust managed to even drop his hands from his face — just so the boy could direct him his most skeptical glance. "Who lied to you in your childhood and gave you that perfidiously good self-esteem of yours?"

With his visual free, the glint of metal was glaring — the laces were delicate, and the brackets unavoidable between scratched lips; all startlingly disorientating when framed by his bruises and the bump of his gun. So deeply *teenagerish* Chuuya nearly couldn't smell the blood.

“Poor dental care and such,” Dazai insisted, undeterred, swatting at his hands as he held his head still, observing the new piece. “Are among the global top causes of painful deaths, which would be *all* but in line with my suicide plans —“

“Yes, yes,” Chuuya hushed.

As a sole petty response — given that the last time they had dragged the guns out, they had been kicked out for three weeks — he got mercilessly defeated at *Smash Smash!*.

“Did you eat snails in France?”

He peeked over the edge of the disc battle table, making a face. “*Bleah.*”

The boy's fingers tapped the glass wall. *Did you climb the Tour Eiffel with that L-E-M-O-N Guy?*

*No, idiot*, he sighed, kicking the disc to the other side with enough might to land it on the floor. “But I *did* crack a window at the Louvre.”

“And they didn't kill you?” Dazai huffed. “What does a mafioso need to do to be ended?”

“Don't use me as an experiment,” Chuuya warned him. “I'll kill you. Has Ane-san found out about Ace's visits to the *Pomegranate* yet?”

“I do have a plan to casually let them bump against each other,” he replied.

“Q?”

The machine's *ping!* signaled his victory.

Dazai's face did nothing in particular — the crinkles by his eyes, carved a bit deeper with each mocking smile he offered nobody at all, seemed to frown. “Working.”

He rolled the disc between his fingers. *Not complicated*, he considered, with only a hint of selfishness. *No need to make it such.*

“I wanted to say goodbye before I left,” he offered, pathetically unnecessary. “I couldn't find them anywhere.”

At that, Dazai's shoulders stiffened.

France had been different. Even through its blood and gunpowder, smelling the same whether it was Japan or the other end of the globe — anything bright enough to be *known* had been easily swallowed by the silence of Rimbaud's villa. Day after day, his stay had taken the

semblances of a candlelight vigil he felt no need to mourn for — like sleeping next to a grave whose flowers he'd poisoned himself.

Poison tended to spread. Only his bones were taken aback by Dazai's: "Was your murderous brother's bed comfortable, or did the guilt harden the mattress?"

The joystick creaked. He directed all of the venom pooling in his eyes to the blinding lights of the screen. Dazai never did anything without forethought.

*More*, Arahaki hummed.

"Who's Odasaku?" he asked.

Where he had expected storm, the polluted sky in Dazai's sole eye seemed to clear.

"My best friend," he said, in wonder, as if he had found a way to communicate the feeling of moonlight. Delicate enough to fracture his ribcage. Brighter than the most colorful hair pins pressing his bangs into place. "He's my best friend."

Chuuya curled an eyebrow before his brain could call it *wise*. "Did those attempts of yours start giving you hallucinations, at last?"

His glare was sharp. "Odasaku is real."

"And he's your best friend."

"He is."

"*You* made a friend. A superlative one."

"Do you need me to spell it out? I thought Kouyou was done with her lessons."

"You don't make friends."

"He's the best man in the syndicate," Dazai's voice was a screeching engine, tumbling down streets Chuuya didn't know how to navigate. It wasn't the *sincerity* in it that took him by surprise — it was the open-wound bleeding yearning intertwined with it. "And the deadliest. I don't want you near him."

Chuuya scoffed, eyes falling back to the screen. "Who the fuck wants to be around your hallucinations."

"He's *not* an hallucination!" he snapped. It startled him enough to land his character into the flaming floor underneath it; Chuuya stared. "He's *real*, and he's my best friend, and I don't want *you* around *him* — Pathetically stupid as you are, he might just reconsider his good opinion of me."

His tone — he *knew* that tone. The whiney childishness, the sharper letters, the rust at the very ends that was all but childlike.

Anger was a deaf wave inside his skull, eroding bone walls until it could scritch at his brain. *Smash Smash!* was still playing on their screens. Chuuya had just wanted his hat back. “What the fuck is your problem?” he snarled.

“The wonders of your voice set me off once again, it would seem,” Dazai replied. The curve of his mouth was dry enough to burn through the ice in his veins. “Is that a *French accent* I hear? How scandalous,” His eyes roamed down his body. “Really going for that Verlaine look, aren’t we?”

The embers hissed. “Shut up.”

“Or is it Rimbaud?”

“Dazai —“

“Between a rock and a hard place.”

Chuuya’s gloves screeched — his nails pulling against the leather. “You’re a piece of shit.”

“And you suck at *Smash Smash!*,” Dazai replied, honestly. Without lowering his gaze he sunk his index on the buttons — another game lost was added to his collection. “Were French video games easier? It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Would you fucking *stop*,” he snapped, disbelieving, “Talking *about France?*”

Dazai hummed, widening his eyes. It was a strangely innocent expression, meant to look so — a stranger to the excitement he’d worn as Chuuya floated upside down in front of him, watching him struggle to jump from roof to roof. “And here I thought I was making you feel at home.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Chuuya insisted, exasperated. “Where the — *hey!* Where the fuck do you think you’re —“

“I’m bored of you,” the boy answered, easily enough. He sneaked through the crowd and the machines with a composure that got people to move for him, waving a dismissing hand in the air, refusing to even turn to look at him. “I’d forgotten how easily it happens. Bye!”

Speechless, Chuuya was left to stare at the glass door closing behind him.

Promptly, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out with mechanical motions, staring wordlessly at the new text on the display.

*They’re repainting your walls, by the way. Find some other dog house to sleep in for a few days. Hope the kernel finds you and castrates you.*

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Hikari's fur was matted in blood.

"Hey there," Chuuya murmured, kneeling on the cobblestones before the wooden entrance bridge. Moonlight washed over the artificial rivers. Much like her dog's name, Kouyou liked beautiful things — and yet, she knew how to admit that most beauty didn't sleep with the *Night Wardens* and their gunpowder. "Where's your Mom, princess?"

The dog drooled on the ground, sharp fangs fighting bravely against the instinct to bite at his caressing hands. Arahabaki had corrupted all living creatures before it had corrupted Chuuya himself — much like Kouyou, her pet was too stubborn to get on with the agenda.

*Just another thing I ripped off from where it is sunnier*, he had once seen her write, on the closest thing to a diary a woman like her could have.

"I know, I know, I've been gone," Chuuya ruffled the fur behind her ears, carefully avoiding meeting her cobalt, slightly scarred eyes. She had been saved from a bad situation; Kouyou had been punished severely for bringing her in. "I'll bring you one of those squeaky toys, *ah?*"

Over the stone pavilion on the other side of the garden, a man screamed, choking on the blood bubbling inside his throat.

"There she is," he concluded.

Under the flowers-decored roof, a man in the *Bishop Staff's* traditional mantle was bleeding out on one of the carved seats from the Executives' breakfast spot — one of his eyeballs tickling his cheek, merely hanging from a nerve.

Kouyou dragged the edge of her blade up the mess of gashes on his clavicles; he sobbed, snot and tears mixing down his chin, landing on the hems of her sleeping gown. She had her hair down; the burned strand at the dead center of the curtain was far too short to belong to Kanechi only.

Chuuya bowed. "Ane-san."

"*Shh*," she warned — dazed, down the silver shadows of her cheekbones. "Look closely, now, little god."

The man retched, all liquid crimson, his cries unheard by the whispers Kouyou was sliding up his wretched skin, lips brushing his cheeks. She never as much *tortured* as she dragged on pain — the last sip of water left to die in the sun, its glass creaking a bit more with each maddening moment of abandonment.

“Say,” she asked, right as the climax of his suffering shone brighter than the festive lanterns of her garden. She had dragged him to the temple, in January — had made him kneel and wish for the good of the syndicate, certain that he would have had even if she hadn’t intertwined their kimono sleeves. “What are you people doing to those girls?”

Chuuya tasted blood.

*[Nakahara Chuuya did not dream.*

*He thought he heard their voices sometimes, though, sharp around edges he didn’t have anymore — not a dream, not a memory; perhaps a phantom wound. Little god, they said, little miracle. Turn the percentage up. Careful, always, no matter if it was numbers and lines and not quite Ichor. That’s our little god you’re tearing apart.*

*Chuuya had been human up to the point of it being irrelevant — Chuuya had been destruction itself until he had begun to wonder what the non-relevant felt like. Chuuya had been seven, and he hadn’t quite wanted to starve. Chuuya was sixteen, and he knew better.]*

Hikari nudged his calf. He blinked, right in time to watch her cuddle up at the decaying feet of the new corpse, fangs sinking in the putrid flesh of his calves.

Kouyou lowered her katana. “Shame.”

Then, lighting quick, she dragged the blade across the man’s throat, decapitating him.

“Got nothing out of him?” Chuuya asked, the moment the head stopped rolling down the marble of the pavilion, landing through the rushing waves of an artificial river. “Seems like you’ve been here for a while.”

“Some unimportant location,” she replied, flippantly, wiping her blade with a handkerchief — waving at some unmoving guards near the gates, beckoning them to the decapitated body. “A few details on the Bishop Staff’s latest deals. Mori will certainly be glad,” She scoffed, tucking an invisible strand of hair behind her ear. *They burned it off of me*, she had once explained. “Nothing on the matters that are truly bugging *me*.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow, studying the blood staining the marble, as two servants dragged the body out of the way. The eyes of one of them — a girl not much older, lips *Pomegranate* red — followed him intensely; when he met them, they lowered hastily.

“Executives,” she murmured, respectful.

He made a face. “Oh, I’m not —“

Katana sliding pointlessly across the floor, Kouyou called his attention. Pleasant, she tapped two fingers under her chin.

The servants left. Chuuya shut his mouth.

Her smile bloomed — belated, like the silver flowers intertwined with the sharp corners of her *villa*. Hikari snaked her muzzle under the palm of her free hand; mischievous, the



Executive's tapping fingers settled under his own chin, raising it all by themselves.

"One word," she encouraged. The first hand she had offered him, fifteen and mistrusting — a game of mind-reading; an occasion to walk to the same conclusion without both growing irritated with the other's posture or posturing.

An old game. "Voices," he offered, raising one hand to spell out the *kanji* in the air.

"Wasted," she mirrored.

"Stupid."

"I prefer the term *unwise*."

"Obviously," he huffed. "Ane-san."

Warmth was a strange thing. His skin had always been cold with borderline starvation; the younger Sheep had used to groan about it, lamenting his inability to soften the harshest winter days. The tips of Kouyou's fingers, still stained in fresh enough blood for it to *stick*, weren't fire — merely embers, brushing tentatively around edges she only needed sharper.

[Here, *she had told him, offering him a hand. The grass was soaked in blood. Dazai's coat was a black stain, and he was discussing percentages with Mori. Verlaine's body was nowhere to be found. He hadn't even known he was digging, looking for it, until her fingers had closed around his bleeding nails.*

Here, little god. *Her temple was bleeding. She had merely fought for the right to keep him where he wanted to be.* Let's go home].

"Welcome home," she told him, grip sliding down to his shoulder. The summer sun had given her freckles. Chuuya dreamed of being tall enough to look her right in the eyes.

"I missed it," he offered. *I missed every inch of your face.*

She offered him her arm. "Come. I may just have a *welcome back* surprise for you."

Their steps were equally silent along the cobblestones that lead to the rows of black SUVs at her service, right behind the gates — Hikari barked her discontentment at their abandonment; but she stayed where she was, licking the blood from the floor of the Pavillion.

"Recruit 678?" Kouyou asked, a single nail tracing the naked skin of the fingers Chuuya had anchored around her arm — as if marveling at the new style of gloves. "Your letters seemed somewhat concerned."

"Kajii's a bother, but he will be loyal," he assured, flipantly, kicking the wooden heels of her sandals. "Leaving Japan had been a mere necessity; he feels no regret for his wrongdoings."

"That is certainly convenient," The lifeless eyes of the decapitated head stared at them from the river; Chuuya watched them change colors, sharpen — amber and blue, framed by

reddish curls and spiral-shaped scars. He stared. “Any particular suggestions on how to assure us his most efficient collaboration?”

It took his lips a moment to separate. “Keep an eye on the *Shadow Blade*. They have a twenty thousand yen bounty on him; he would work just fine between their manufacturer rows. And keep an eye on Kajii’s big mouth,” He made a face. “You wrote the *Special Division* has been snooping?”

She sighed. “Somewhat. This whole ordeal of girls vanishing — it alerted them. As obsessive as Boss can be about the *Ability Permit*, he *does* have a point. One would finally allow us some breathing room,” A glance. “As of now, the last thing we need is big mouths.”

“Kajii trusts me,” Chuuya replied. “I’ll deal with him,” He blinked; relaxed his grip around her arm. “I mean — If that’s alright with you, Ane-san.”

“Ane-san *that*, Ane-san *this*, ” Amusement curled her lips upwards; she nudged his shoes back, raining an appreciative look down his new clothes. “Command suits you just fine. Perhaps you *can* be trusted with your own decision. How surprising — Your gift will fit just fine.”

He frowned. “About that, what do you —“

“Oh,” she interrupted him, undeterred, as her cheerful gaze settled on the driver hurrying to open the car door for them. “Here he is.”

Chuuya’s double-take almost nauseated him, as startled as it was. The man’s shirt was the first thing he noticed — yellow, startlingly gleeful amidst the rusty statues and bloodied footsteps at the entrance; reading, in a cartoonish font, *Sea You Later, Alligator*. Its owner’s curls had been turned into a military cut; a gauze covered an entire side of his face, hiding a scar — he knew — shaped like the underside of an escaping shoe.

He gasped, biting down a grin. “You *fucker* — You said you were bedridden!”

V smiled, timid. “Well, I *was*, until Hikari had no one to take her out on walks.”

“It has been a terribly busy week,” Kouyou sighed, sliding inside the car without a thought — winking at him. “*Virgil* here has been *so* useful.”

“Recovery is a process of many steps,” the ex- *Soul* insisted, as if he had read it somewhere — one of the brochures at the Mafia’s Hospital where Chuuya had left him, before France, maybe. “The *zombie soldier* — as you said — was getting bored of staying put, anyway.”

*[The arguments against and for V’s life — once the man had been extracted from the rubble left behind by Corruption’s merciless rave, one eye almost torn out and grief-slack, unresisting hands — had been plenty and undecided. Some thought his Ability might be useful enough to threaten into joining, rather than executing — despite what the reports had already offered.]*

*Kouyou had vouched for his survival — which he doubted the man would forget. Chuuya, after an entire afternoon sitting at his bedside — watching him stumble between emptily insulting the memory of his only two friends, in the way of survivors, and admitting Dido, his Ability, wouldn't be able to keep Arahabaki in check — had decided to do the same.*

*“It was only a theory,” Chuuya had assured, in the face of his apologies. He had despised the man the entire time the Soul clutch had been there; now — watching him pretend not to mourn his loved ones in the face of Mori's offers — he could only let him breathe.*

*“I'm sorry,” the man had insisted, still. His genuine honesty hadn't exactly tasted like guilt — it had been interesting enough to make Chuuya linger.*

*“I'm not,” Dazai had replied, grinning].*

“So,” Chuuya questioned. “Virgil?”

“Just a name,” He shrugged. “I'm attached to the letter. I picked it myself!”

He seemed strangely proud. Through the lowered car window, Kouyou batted her eyelashes, making the man blush. “About time, yes? Chuuya, get in. Virgil's gonna drive us to your surprise.”

“If that's alright with you,” the man hurried to add — a strangely tense wording for, *If you can forgive me.*

Idly, he wondered what the two of them might have bonded about. If they sat in Kouyou's infinite library and exchanged stories about the way Beatrice's lips curved when she lied. “It's all good,” Chuuya said, finally. “You'll be fine, here. Recover the time lost.”

“The time *dead*,” Virgil insisted, smiling, settling in the driver's seat — no mind for his half blinded face. “A tale for the enemies, yes? They'll threaten to kill me — I'll tell them, *oh, not again*. And then put the gun skills to good use. The ones I don't exactly remember acquiring.”

Chuuya snorted. “As long as they're still there, man.”

“Oh, yes,” he promised, too serious. Some of the fractured pieces of vases around the entrance seemed to shake with the memory.

Yokohama sprinted beside him once again, behind a dirtier glass, as Kouyou crossed her legs on her seat, — a childish, strangely non-composed show; her body tilted towards him, hands playing with the sides of his neck ribbon — questioning him on his months gone with more openness than possibly traceable letters had allowed.

“The men Mori gave you,” she said, once she considered herself satisfied with his stumbling descriptions of the Parisian gardens. “How did they behave?”

“They obeyed,” he offered, curtly.

*But.* Kouyou glanced in Virgil's direction — the man was singing along to the radio. It was a good song, even if not Hirose. "One word."

Chuuya watched a couple of kids chase each other around rusty swings in a park — their parents, a few steps away, were hugging, a bottle of Champagne between their chests. "Afraid."

The moon was reflected in her eyes; second irises, curling into silver shapes. There was a song, he thought, humming along to the radio. A song from *before*. Something about eating the moon whole and breathing it out. "Tell me."

*Tell me.*

*How?*, he wondered — the way Elise asked about the taste of candies he bought for her. He did not hate having eyes on him. He never had. What could there be, if not observation? Idly floating in the darkness — one more leaf in the endless lake, one more rock down the bay. One more child they had stopped hanging searching fliers for.

Chuuya had always supported efficiency.

He did not hate the way his gloves squelched against his skin when blood seeped in. He did not hate the look in the eyes of men who were older, who were stronger, who were taller — who would lose. *Don't make the monster mad.*

"Noguchi Toru is a rare exception," he said, instead. "It's not fear with him. My authority is not a concept he particularly approves of. Most of the others were there, that night," *That night*, he thought, *what do you remember?* Pain and white noises and hands and eyes and silence. "They've accepted a sixteen years old is ordering them around. But power is harder to trust."

Kouyou hummed. She tightened the knot around his neck — moved his dangling chain to the other side of his hat, like graduates in those old American movies Yuan had liked. "And how are you using this terror to your advantage?"

He studied Virgil's fingers, tapping on his steering wheel. "Still figuring that part out."

Another hum, a bit more pragmatic. Not approval, not disappointment. It was all different, those days; secrets weren't secrets anymore. The hisses, the cracks; he had let them keep him awake alone, night after night, until they had started lulling him to sleep instead — and Arahaki had been his, and he had been Arahaki's.

*Closure isn't meant to be life-changing*, Pianoman had told him, once. Chuuya couldn't even remember in what regards. The blindness of that statement had gripped his arteries tight, as he sat on the floor, holding a corpse that looked just like him, only — *nice*.

Wrong term, maybe. But he had looked so *nice* — normal. Heavy with things Chuuya didn't know; lighter than whatever Murase had babbled about as he choked on blood.

"What was that shit about the cat in the box?" he asked, suddenly.

Kouyou paused. “Cat in the box?”

“The philosophy stuff,” he insisted. He met Virgil’s perplexed eyes in the rear view mirror. “You gave me that book. Every possibility exists until we open the box,” Chuuya cleared his throat. “Whatever. I’ll get the situation under control. They can shit their pants around me all they want. Boss is gonna send them off to their old lords and ladies soon enough.”

She kept strangely quiet.

He stared. “Ane-san.”

“Don’t ask.”

“But —“

“Have you met with Boss yet?” she asked.

“No, of course. I came straight to you.”

*That* managed to soften her features; preen and pearls, sharpening her smile. She reached forward — pulled a growing strand of hair from what had been his ponytail, before he had cut it off in Albatross’ haunted, too quiet bathroom. Burned it too, for them. “My loyal subordinate. Dishonest too, apparently.”

Chuuya winced. “I did go home to leave my suitcase.”

“Liar. Again.”

“I’m painting my apartment. Technically, I’m staying at Albatross’ — Fumes. You know.”

Not a word.

“I did,” He choked on the bad taste of the words; scratched dirt from his shoe — an old habit. “I was *coerced* into seeing the bastard.”

“That is what I assumed,” Kouyou’s smile was a pained thing. Her favorite piece of jewelry, ruined by blood she had splattered herself. The bundle of *don’t-know-what-to-do-with-you* she felt for Dazai was the one unbalanced thing about her. “Considering the frenzy of the city.”

His ears burned for no reason. “You saw the traffic lights.”

“I did see the traffic lights,” she confirmed. “I did see the fliers. I did see the news about two short silhouettes destroying two markets, one small restaurant, and snapping five cables of the Tsurumi Tsubasa Bridge. *Mysteriously*.”

From the driver seat, Virgil hid a snort with a coughing fit. Chuuya’s hand spasmed. “On my honor and hat, Ane-san, it was that *shitty* —“

“I don’t doubt it. Still —“

“He stopped the city,” he begged. “He stopped the *fucking city*. People died. You know why? He wanted to play *video games*. No, worse than that. He wanted to commit suicide by lemon bomb. By *lemon bomb*.”

“Certainly characteristic. But —“

“And then — *then*, he made me chase him around the city, like I’m some damn babysitter — And then he just got up and *left*, and I had to pay for both our rounds at the Arcade, and he didn’t even bother telling me who I should call to know when my apartment will be —“

“I get it,” Kouyou interrupted him, only the tiniest hint exasperated. “No offense, Chuuya, but I’m not quite in the mood for one of your demon child rants.”

“*Rants*? I don’t *rant* —“

“His temper tantrum was to be expected, I suppose. He has been... moping.”

Chuuya stared, vaguely disgusted. “Dazai Osamu doesn’t *mope*.” He *whined*, at most — faker than the flowers in Rimbaud’s apartment. It lowered stupid people’s guards.

It was agonizingly thin — the line between the gleam in his eye when he won at *Smash Smash!* and the petulant cadence he took with mafiosi who wouldn’t immediately lower their guns. Chuuya was all for letting him roam aimlessly, acting like his age, for once — but he had never been stupid.

She shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Well — Perhaps better.”

“I have no idea of whatever the fuck goes on in that fish head of his.”

“Of course you don’t,” Kouyou patted his head, patronizing. “He’s been weirder than usual. I thought it might have something to do with your absence —“

“If you mean *happy as a clam* —“

“He disappeared for a whole week, a few days after you left.”

Chuuya sunk a bit lower down his seat, eyes set on the flickering lights of some Casino of their property. They were nearing the area the Flags had preferred to hang around — thousands of strays and lost kids; good cigarettes. “Did he tell people they were going to play a *nice round of hide and seek* and then vanished to China?”

“I believe he only did that with you. When he reappeared, he was more bandaged up than usual, and blabbering something about —“

“A best friend?” he guessed.

The Executive’s face did something both very complex and sophisticated — a choreography Chuuya had learned in passing, watching her judge passerby behind blood-stained fingers.

“Oda Sakunosuke is — certainly an interesting choice.”

“What were you expecting? That he would be braiding hair with Elise until forty?”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied. “Nobody expects Dazai to make it to forty.”

Virgil snorted. Kouyou studied her nails.

The leather of the seatbelt pressed against his chin. Chuuya wondered why the woman hadn’t said anything about his posture yet. Chuuya thought about a crab-shaped hairpin — a thin, soaked body covered in gasoline, watching flames approach with something akin to wonder.

“Suppose,” he said, eventually. *Words are a waste of time*, Shirase would moan. Iceman, too, but for fairly different reasons. Chuuya didn’t know anything about etiquette. He never knew when staying quiet would mean something.

He didn’t speak again, until Virgil parked the SUVs in an illuminated alley near the center of the city.

Bricks appeared at the edge of his vision. The ground sizzled under his shoes, and it was more *known* than even clouds under his fingerless gloves; Chuuya stilled.

“They finished a week or two ago,” Kouyou was saying, somewhere behind him, leaning against the car. Her voice was muffled; a careful thing against the most cracked of surfaces. “I thought you might appreciate it more in person, rather than written.”

Two stores of red, un-rusted metal, lined in dark stone and neon signs. The windows had been freshly wiped — behind them, inside the bar, he could see a mumbling crowd, throwing their heads back to drink and laugh and *breathe*, either unaware or uncaring of dancing on a grave.

A finished work he had promised no one but himself. Stolen tombstones couldn’t answer.

“I hear you used to come around here with old friends,” Virgil spoke up, somewhere to his left. Chuuya wondered if *Tainted* was acting up; if he had created the circle of space around him all by himself. *Touchy subject?*, Albatross used to joke, whenever he shrugged his hands off of him. *Get it? Because touchy?* “They serve great whiskey.”

Chuuya couldn’t speak.

*It won’t bring them back*, Mori had told him, eons ago. *Warned* him, perhaps. *I’m not an idiot*, he could have barked. *Why not?* All he had needed was honesty; the idea had settled strangely on thieving hands.

*It won’t — but you’re a good friend.*

*[Since the first time he had heard the words Port Mafia, Chuuya had thought about killing Mori Ougai four times. The first three had their roots. That had been the latest of them].*

Hands on his shoulders, from behind; then elbows, the rush of fabric like waves inside his ears, *touchy*, he thought, *touchy subject*. Kouyou leaned her chin on her crossed arms; leaned her skull against his, as if rattling it would let him exhale. “Chuuya.”

Shadows danced behind the neon signs, their hands leaving traces on the glass. At the pool table, somebody did an unexpected feat. On newly built pavement, Verlaine's European leather shoes walked through blood puddles, and Chuuya stepped on what he *knew* had to be Doc's liver, and he stole Albatross' chain for himself.

He cleared his throat.

"Can we stay here a bit?" he asked, emptily.

She laid something on his shoulders; a coat. "They found this in the backroom," she said, very quietly. Chuuya couldn't lower his eyes from the twirling golden neon, curling into known words and mirroring a polluted skyline, and *his fault, his*, and he would have recognized the touch of Pianoman's coat anywhere. "Of course we can stay, Chuuya."

Quietly, uncaring of it all, the lights of the *Old World* buzzed.

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*Sacrilegious* was the first word Chuuya had ever learned to read in a more sophisticated form of *kanjis*.

It had been a warning, carved into the old metal roof of some destroyed shop in Suribachi — perhaps the remnant of some tourist trap near the military base, selling warnings about one of the temples or capitalizing on faith. The surface had been reflective.

Arahabaki wasn't a god, despite the voices haunting the streets of the crater. He had mused on telling everyone, sometimes — ruining the ghost stories the Sheep told around the fire; ruining the lives of people attempting to make money off cameras-carrying visitors.

Chuuya wasn't holy. He didn't know if he needed it, to be a living heretic.

"And now Kajii thinks he's a foot fungus," he concluded, dangling his legs from the top of one of his stolen tombstones. Albatross would have asked for the tallest of the five; so, amongst the pieces of faded rock — names intelligible, but dates of death and birth still somewhat visible; the shade of a tree raining like a threat — Chuuya had claimed the smallest of them. "Not from France. But yeah. France was — something."

No answer. Chuuya had yet to pick up that particular brand of delusion.



Rimbaud's makeshift grave — unvisited since Lippman's body had rolled out of his partner's car, because Chuuya was *mature*, but not enough not to be petty — had been nothing more than a ruined piece of rock. For the Flags, he had selected something better — stone whiter than rice, masterfully crafted.

The Flags hadn't been traitors, obviously. The Flags had lived and died for the organization. The Flags would probably not approve of Chuuya going against the oldest Port Mafia tradition in their name.

*Fuck your opinion*, he had screamed, only once, Beatrice's best wine in hand, kicking the graves like they had personally reprimanded him. *Fuck the Port Mafia*, he could have added, had he been some months younger and had some less bruises on his knees. Chuuya wasn't fond of lying. Chuuya knew the dead never forgave.

*Sacrilegious*, he thought. He wondered if these tombstones had someone who cared for them, when Chuuya wasn't around — or if he had a penchant for finding the abandoned.

"Doc would have liked it," he mused. "You kept saying your United States have no culture. Paris was a treasure hunt. There was this one painting we had to steal — I think a doctor was in it."

*They rebuilt the Old World*, he tried to say.

"I'll do some rounds with the motorcycle by tomorrow," he added, kicking the grave again. "I assume it's not good, abandoning it like that for this long. I'll see what I can do. Sorry."

*They rebuilt the Old World*, he insisted.

A lazy bird cleaned its beak against Iceman's grave. Pianoman's coat was a new weight around his shoulders, sweaty in that weather — heavier than the leather jackets he had always worn. Uncertain. At the end of the Yokohama Cemetery, the sun would rise in an hour.

*They rebuilt the Old World*, he swore. *What do I do with it?* He jumped down from the tombstone. *They rebuilt the Old World, and you aren't there.*

Chuuya brushed dust off his clothes. As he passed, he patted each of the tombstones, the way Shirase did to him after a good job. "Be good, you bastards. See you in two days."

Nobody was there to marvel at his feet landing on electric wires on the way home. He hummed some French song that Kajii had stuck in his head; switched to Hirose Fumiko; recited the *gravitational torque and potential energy due to non-uniform fields and mass moments equations* law upside down.

Yokohama smelled different, he thought — different from anything the world had to offer. It stuck to his skin like a magnet. It called something Chuuya hadn't even known could leave his flesh, before a few months ago — asked the thing somebody else had forced in his veins to be angry.

Chuuya was a host and a guest and an owner — he ought to at least call his rage his own.

*You should try it, sometimes.*

The dark buildings of his apartment complex appeared like a mirage. On the glass doors of the entrance, blood flickered brighter than the upcoming sunset.

He stopped.

Crimson trails chased each other down the surface, landing on the concrete in a quiet, gentle *tip tap*. The smell soaked his nostrils; his shoes walked right to the edge of that scarlet puddle, hands stuck in his pockets, coat sliding down one of his shoulders.

*Animal blood*, he knew, immediately — not certain of how. A long way from drying; they hadn't thought he would be back so soon, or they had *hoped* he would. He dipped his finger in one of the letters scribbled on the glass; licked it clean.

Something crawling up and down his spine preened. Through the blood, his reflection smiled in Arahabaki's skin, scars widening around a grin he wasn't wearing.

*Apart from my poor dreams*, the shaky handwriting read, *nothing interests me*.

Belatedly, the taste of blood settled on his tongue. There was no sensible reason why he should have recognized which animal it belonged to. There was no world where he didn't.

Chuuya set his jaw.

He kicked the doors open.

Scrubbing the blood off with a stolen entrance rug was a dirty job, but he did it silently, until his eyes started blinking. By the time the glass was void of blood, and the rug hidden under the garbage cans outside the gates, all he could think of was the futon by Albatross' water mattress.

He knocked his hands on his own door on his way up, longing for the endless storage of headache pills in his cabinets — most of them stolen from Hirotsu's car one lift after the other.

Chuuya entered Albatross' apartment — and he didn't flinch, and he didn't call out to his friend either; and it cost him nothing, because that was how moving on was meant to go — drowning in darkness and the crystal sound of the mirrorball dangling. The ground didn't shake under his feet; it had been months since the last unrealistically-timed party to stain that wall paper in neon drinks.

*Have one*, Albatross used to drawl, — chains dangling like the sound of warmth itself; eyes glimmering like the roofs in Suribachi City in the summer — once his kicks to the roof gave up on their quest, and his feet dragged him to his door. *Stay a bit. Don't be boring. Don't tell the housekeeper. Stay with me*. Chuuya suspected that had always been the aim. Chuuya hadn't even screamed as he watched him die.

His next breath was too quick. *Misstep*.

He leaned his back against the door, letting it click shut. Closed his eyes. Sneaked his fingers under the choker, massaging his sore nape.

The coat fell, pooling at his feet.

His eyelids were yanked apart.

A fluid motion made his hand snatch one of his knives from his waistcoat — he threw it to the wall on the other side of the dining room, eyes sharpening against the darkness. On the window seal, Ōmu screeched his heart out — the knife never landed.

Fingers closed against his choker, squeezing the air out of his throat with a pull. “*You —!*”

Chuuya grabbed the attacker’s arm at the first, distracted opening, as they stumblingly danced to the kitchen — a misstep against the counter; the sharp bump of bones against Albatross’ marble — and twisted it behind the intruder’s back.

The sound his head made against the counter made him wince as well — Chuuya climbed over his struggling figure, sinking one knee in the thigh spot Kouyou had taught him hurt *more* — and when he stole the intruder’s gun, gritting his teeth against the ricochet of punches into his ribcage, he used it to knock his own stolen knife off his hand — and then pin its fingers to the marble, mouth laying on the side of his throat.

“Too slow,” he snapped, gulping down the racing heartbeat in the body trapped between his legs. His hat had flown off — possibly the whole point. “And you need to start fucking using your legs.”

He directed a *gravity-lightened* bullet to the light switch. The trapped attacker whined, struck mercilessly by the suddenness of the bright lights.

“I learned all my welcoming manners from you. Stop being annoyed,” Dazai huffed, blank-faced. His heels did something strange; Chuuya’s gloves slid down the sweat-covered marble — he landed on the floor with a yelp. “I even took my shoes off.”

Sure he had — they were scattered near the entrance, probably *not* the result of their squabble. His coat was abandoned over Ōmu’s cage. Chuuya felt every bone in his body readjust, sharply.

“Get out of my apartment.”

“Albatross’ apartment,” the boy replied, as he limped off the counter — something strangely different. From the floor, Chuuya glared until his head pulsed.

“Where the fuck is your arm cast?”

Dazai grabbed an abandoned fork from the counter, clinking it against the blade of his knife — now recovered from the wall where he had stuck it. The squares of light painted his face in shades of obnoxious Dadaism. “What arm cast?”

“I will incinerate you.”

“It was due for removal today,” Shrugging, he pocketed *Chuuya*’s knife.

“In the middle of the *night*?”

Dazai leaned over one of the neon couches on the other side of the room; proudly, he showed off his newfound crutch, settling it under his arm — dragging his new leg cast. “Chibi, please. We’ve got hard working doctors in the Port Mafia.”

“Our Hospital access has been revoked,” he insisted. “How did you break your leg?”

“I broke my leg?” he blinked.

Something inside him snapped. He climbed to his feet fast enough to startle Ōmu into a new song — grabbed ahold of the mountain of food-shaped pillows on the nearest couch, one after the other, uselessly throwing them, watching *Tainted* disappear at the first contact with their target. “Out — of — my — apartment —“

“Albatross’ —“

“*Out!*”

“France made you inconceivably rude, other than stupid,” Dazai pouted, unconcerned, surrounded by a growing pile of pillows. He dropped onto a stool. “You knew you’d find me here. Quit it.”

Chuuya threw all the pillows left. He flexed empty hands in the air. He watched Dazai drag his nails down the carving Doc had left on the counter with one of his scalpels, and saw red.

He breathed in.

“The smell of your nasty bandages fucking saddled the hallway,” he spat, eventually. The door of the fridge was almost torn out of its hinges by his white-knuckled grip; he slammed a beer on the counter, and hoped it would break. “And you put itching dust on my fucking doorknob.”

“Not my fault if sentimentalism is more than predictable,” the boy replied. One of his hair pins — silver, shaped like half a moon — had slid down his fringe in the fight; it was hit by the light with the same irritating precision as his braces.

““You done with pranks yet?”

“For now. Promise.”

He huffed. “Yeah. Which number?”

Dazai thought about it. “Six, I believe,” He gingerly reached over, wrapping lazy fingers around Chuuya’s beer without a care for his attempt to cut his thumb off for it. “Your windows are offensively easy to pick, did you know? Once, Albatross and I bumped against each other on our breaking-in way here —“

“*What?*”

“— And he insisted you *refuse* to change the locks. He stole one of my bobby pins. Or I let him. I can’t recall, really. Is your idiocy another genetic mutation, or —”

Chuuya felt something weight down the tips of his nails — the uncomfortable shape of his friends’ names in Dazai’s throat; the luminescent certainty that the people he loved had had a life outside of his visual field. Eyes on the ceiling, he offered: “It’s my reverse psychology technique to get you just bored enough to jump.”

“Tempting,” He half-bowed, mocking. Chuuya wondered where all that bleeding rage from the Arcade had gone. “But I’m here on official business. Mori wants to see us both tomorrow.”

He frowned. “Ane-san didn’t tell me.”

“A spontaneous thing,” Dazai replied, vague, shaking some pills from Chuuya’s muscle pain stash into his palm. “It’s our yearly evaluation in the syndicate — You could call it. Mori will talk big and boring words. *Acquiring an Ability Permit is an unprecedented* —”

“For the last time,” Chuuya cut through, stealing his beer back, “You don’t sound like him.”

“I assume he’ll want an answer.”

He pressed his chin against the cold neck of the bottle. “And we have one?”

Dazai slid down from his stool.

Mild curiosity was part of the reason why he let him remove the beer from his fingers, his own crutch forgotten against the counter. The other part was Chuuya’s cursed distaste for his bandages — the way all the bone-deep *scrutiny* of his rapacious void seemed to be concentrated into a single focus — an eye he had no excuse not to meet.

*Partners*, he’d said.

Kouyou’s penchant to drag him to weekend ballet shows allowed his mind to recognize the pose it was being forced into — Chuuya’s hand flew to the sweat-matted fabric on Dazai’s hip, and, in the face of his fingers clutching his hand, he did nothing more than curl an eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” he said. His naked skin pressed against the fingerless side of his gloves; the silence crawling all over his skull seemed louder than a gunshot. “Do we?”

Ōmu screeched, sleepy. It wasn’t quite the right music; despite being in position, they didn’t dance. *Partners*, he’d said. Chuuya felt it tight in his veins — the weight of a cloudy sky. *Are you holding it, or am I?* “I asked first,” he scoffed.

“I’m younger,” Dazai replied, amidst a senseless hum — not a song of Hirose’s; not some devil-may-care nursery rhyme on suicide; only a melody. “Be a good senpai.”

“I wish you were dead.”

“Same here.”

“When the hell’s your birthday, anyway?”

“Who knows,” Despite not leading, Dazai dragged them into a simple twirl, the tip of his shoe scratching against the parquet. *Maybe*, Chuuya considered, *somebody should just stop the sky from falling*. He kept his eyes on the fingers holding his hand, the disorientating rush of stillness. It had been utterly lonely — touching him for the first time. A devastating relief. The horrifying rage of being robbed — being told oxygen was as toxic as his need for it.

*If you could choose quietness, nobody would ever ask him, would you?*

He watched one of his nails — sharp and unmerciful and bitten off only on one side; ‘cause Mori cared about those things — trace the edge of a spiral scar from the window of the glove. He let go. “You haven’t answered.”

He studied the pale skin of his *Corruption* scars, and wondered which question he was even referring to.

The metal structure of the closest neon couch shrieked under Dazai’s weight. *Partners*, he’d said, and Chuuya worked alone, because no one else had the tools or the gal or the *need* — not when he was there. He threw himself after him, spine unlocking, bone by bone. He had yet to exhale. He willed his shoulders to breathe in some more.

“This is your fault,” he informed him, eyes on the myriad of Lippman posters on the ceiling.

“This is Mori’s fault,” Dazai corrected him, face against the couch seat. “As most things in the world. Even the most simpleton of all the simpletons in the Mafia knows that. France made you forgetful.”

He closed his eyes.

Would Albatross be mad they were there? He could have asked at the cemetery, he supposed — one more question to go unanswered; but that would matter less, because said out loud.

It felt unfair. Staining his tacky floor and his stupid statues with their faults. Chuuya was not good with percentages that didn’t involve jewelry; the blame on their shoulders was equal and different. That apartment wouldn’t be empty if they didn’t exist. Chuuya would still be —

It was tiring, the realization — there were things he would never stop faulting the body next to him. There was a green leather jacket in his closet. There were debts, pushing and pulling and tending the thread barely keeping them chained, and neither of them would ever attempt to repay them. *You took everything from me. I wouldn’t get it back, if I could. I miss it and I don’t want it anymore. Am I allowed?*

Chuuya slid down the couch. Abruptly, he grabbed Dazai’s casted leg, pulling it to his lap.

“That’s rude,” Dazai commented, face still pressed against the pillows. He studied the scribbled *kanjis* at the base of the cast — a perfect reflection of the ones from his arm cast. *Get better*; it read; like a question mark was supposed to be there.

He picked up a marker from the boy’s pants pocket, where he knew he’d find it. Dazai let him write in silence; eventually, he asked: “Is it *Mackerel*?”

“I don’t do things twice. Did you break in to search for your alleged souvenir?”

“I *knew* you’d taken it with you,” the boy accused, kicking towards his shoulder. “Is it Hirose’s *Partners in Crime*?”

Chuuya closed the marker. He laid back against the armrest; traced the fireflies surrounding Lippman’s frame in an action movie posted. “The first day they basically locked me home. There was this landlord — Anna — and she *begged* me to help her clean up the house. It smelled like shit and ghosts in there. I only received orders at night, so getting used to the rhythm wasn’t difficult. The car that brought me to Paris every time had this weird — *shit* on the dashboard, like, a chick dancing, but it had a fucking jingle, right? It was so annoying.”

Dazai didn’t say a word.

“We had to clean up the situation with *Le Directeur*, and threatening them into payment was *unfortunately* against Ane-san’s orders — So I spent an entire week locked inside this studio — and it was shrunkier than Madame Tanaki’s poststation, by the way — with five European assholes, discussing payments while they asked me if I actually knew how to fucking write.”

Muffled by pillows: “Did you kill at least one of them?”

“No,” he huffed. “But I did call him an old fart. Searched up the French equivalent. And — There were these blueish trees outside the window, and these robins kept chirping all day long, and I noticed it was stressing them out — so I started imitating them behind their back. And then, when we went to lunch — there was this fancy place that offered these *illegal* cookies, they were *that* good — one of the jackasses pulled a gun on Koda, *sure* he was to blame.”

*Did you punch him?*, he was expecting. Instead: “What kind of cookies?”

When he opened his eyes, liquid gold was streaming inside the room, shattering every shiny shard of the chandelier. The Switzern clock on the wall *cuckoo-ed* at ten o’clock. Ōmu was ruffling his feathers, humming nonsensically under his breath.

His mouth felt drier than August days in Suribachi City; he stumbled to sit upright, pushing the cast on his legs off.

Dazai wasn’t sleeping — shoulders tense with consciousness, but curled inward with the slight surprise of *having* slept. Still, he stayed with his face in the pillow, huddled under the silence of the first morning.

For good measure, Chuuya pressed his thumb against the creases between his eyebrows.

He stood with a grunt, back on fire, and spat out some hair, making his way to the bathroom. Familiar motions rained down his body with ease and relief; he studied the unavoidable spasms of his fingers as he submerged under the water of the bathtub — the motions slower, maybe even *kinder*, under that glass-like pressure.

Bubbles twirled in front of his eyes. His lungs had grown tired of their stolen air. Chuuya had survived harsher winter days. He curled up, knees to his chest, and felt nothing but the grieving silence of that floating nothingness.

His head broke the surface. He reached over and threw up into the toilet.

*Great*, he thought, nonsensically.

The mixture of sticky crimson and pasty yellow dragged a grunt out of his mouth; he flushed the residuals of poisons with one annoyed hand, struggling to his feet. He stuck his head under the faucet until his hair was soaked, and did nothing more than breathe in, staring at Albatross' animal-shaped soap collection.

“God,” he concluded, so fond it nauseated him. “You had issues.”

*And you don't?*, the man would have spat.

*No*, Chuuya wouldn't have said. *No, I'm not that ungrateful.*

The elephant soap simply stared back.

Silence still filled the apartment when he stepped out, leaving wet footsteps on his wake. Dazai was nowhere to be found; neither was his crutch, or Albatross' chocolate stash. Scrubbing the water out of his hair with a towel, Chuuya leaned against the kitchen sink — and then he stared, petrified, at the black stains left on the towel.

Quicker than a breath, he snapped his head to the nearest mirror.

*“Dazai, you son of a —!”*

## Chapter End Notes

kouyou, talking to the french housekeeper: he's just going through a teenage phase

chuuya: [slowly munching through all of rimlaine's furniture as a coping mechanism]



and here's chuuya!! the next ten chapters (nine? i guess?) are gonna be fun. i'm very excited for them! a bit nervous, too, given that it's a pov switch and it's the first time you guys read how i write chuuya — but i do hope it didn't sound too OOC in anyway.

talking about that! i want to thank you guys for all the support in the past week in particular, you guys have been so incredibly and sweetly nice seriously. i've been re reading the comments obsessively lmao, they really gave me the strenght to write more (and i've officially only three chapters left to write of this! ye!)

about the chapter, some stuff to highlight:

the quote at the start of the act (*un grand sommeil noir tombe sur ma vie*) comes from the first two verses of Paul Verlaine's poem, "*un grand sommeil noir*" which, by the way, i really relate to verlaine's equivalent to corruption, so do check it out! this part in particular can be translated (and forgive my rusty french, i don't speak it often) as "a grand, dark slumber/falls on my life"

then, the "boku-watashi" passage from dazai that you see chuuya comment on at the arcade is actually something odasaku himself notices at the end of "the day i picked up dazai". it's an observation on a choice of maturity that dazai seems to go through during that novel, and that of course is partly to blame on what meeting oda did to dazai

"Apart from my poor dreams, the shaky handwriting read, nothing interests me": another quote, this time directly from nakahara chuuya himself!

and two things i wanted to highlight: number one, chuuya is gonna go through some "learn to be resistant to poison" trials this arc. i do want to highlight it, just in case someone might be squeamish about it. and then, because i don't think i've ever talked about this in the first part — the "burning hair" tradition i've given in the pm, for one someone loved dies or is lost. i can't wait to do more on that :))

anyway — as always, thank you so much for reading. really, i can't thank you enough for the nice words and just how much you've been appreciating this story. i saw some of you binged ten chapters in one day, which is absolutely dedicated!! i hope you'll like the next ones even more

stay warm and see you soon!!

# TOO

## Chapter Summary

*“Then,” Hirotsu crossed his hands at the small of his back, curling an eyebrow at the two silhouettes kneeling in front of him. “Who wants to start explaining the crater on the twelfth floor?”*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end :))

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xii.*

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*Case number: 77975564*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. were summoned by the Executives,  
in the name of [...]*

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“Then,” Hirotsu crossed his hands at the small of his back. Curling an eyebrow at the two boys kneeling in front of him, he questioned: “Who wants to start explaining the crater on the twelfth floor?”

A beat.

Chuuya’s mouth tore itself apart right as Dazai’s own did, between sharp teeth and knuckles white on the carpets; though, the unrelented stream of words coming out of them — intertwining nonsensically; jumping all over each other in a mess of syllables — bore no further meaning than its brain-scratching sound.

“— if *he* hadn’t —“

“— absolutely no need to cover it in it —“

“— broken the tubatures *again* —“

“— dye my fucking hair —“

“— could I know filling his office with fish would stain the entire floor —“

“— taped his furniture to the ceiling —“

“— simpleton little fool —“

“— fucking bastard stupid —“

“— broke seventeen windows with his stupid baby fingers —“

Hirotsu raised a hand.

“Alright,” he concluded. “Let’s say blame is irrelevant. Just tell me where you put the missing bombs, and we can be done with this.”

Leaning against the doorframe of the man’s office — a square of distinctively well organized space, with pale walls covered from head to foot in maps and reports, and wide windows painting the souvenir statues on his desk golden — Kajii crossed his arms, peeved. “My missing bombs, thank you very much.”

“I’m merely concerned with who might be tasked to take Dazai’s furniture off the ceiling —“

“Fucker will probably leave it like that,” he interrupted. “Some stupid rant about how *it’ll make hanging myself easier*. ”

Gaping like a fish, Dazai covered his mouth with his hands, obnoxious. Slight trails of smoke rose from his shoulders — the result of the small hand grenade Chuuya had situated near his favorite secret entrance. He had remnants of ceiling, fish parts and water from the broken emergency sprinkles in his hair, amongst the hair clips — a strange mirror to how he had looked all those months ago, muttering the word *partnership* for the first time. “How did you know that.”

Chuuya huffed, crossing his legs. *Tainted* raised him a few inches off the floor, allowing him to glare up at the Commander. “You two need to stop acting like these are your first questions.”

Hirotsu blinked — very pointedly ignoring the tufts of black hair rendering Chuuya’s head an unlikely dirty broom. “Perhaps you decided you wanted a change of style.”

“You look ugly as shit,” Kajii offered, thumbs up. “But I support whatever crazy teenage fit you’re going through.”

The snort out of Dazai’s mouth echoed.

Over the lines of his fingerless gloves, the tips of his fingers grew hysterically red — then paled. “You think,” Chuuya hissed, “That I *purposefully* dyed my hair the color of the shit that’s in Madame Tanaki’s chimney?”

“The word you’re looking for is coal,” the Commander let him know, helpfully.

Hirotsu Ryuro was a question mark.

He had despised him for the single fault of bringing a *tolerable* Ability in his settlement — then, he had despised him for bringing Dazai along; the most aggravating omen from a blank-faced messenger. *Then*, he had despised him for putting his hands on their shoulders — for offering input, for stopping him from ripping the boy’s face apart, and for having the gall to attempt to reach them during *Run from the handler*.

The word *handler* always left a rotten taste in his mouth. Mori’s caution made sense; it didn’t mean he had to like it. It didn’t *mean* — he had reminded himself, as the man dragged him off Dazai’s ceiling — he had to like *him*.

*But trustable*, his good sense whispered. It had Pianoman’s cadence. *From a distance*.

“I truly believe it kind of fits you —“

“Sure it does.”

“It’s certainly a change,” he insisted.

“It’s fine,” Chuuya directed a glare to the other boy’s shaking shoulders. Kajii was biting his lips to raw skin. “It’ll match the black eye I’ll give him just fine.”

Sun filtered through the windows, without an inch of breeze filtering in to save them from the scorching heat. If it had been a few months ago, he would have been following Lippman around, hiding in the nearest alley when a fan appeared to ask for an autograph.

“Remember when I joined, and this *clown*,” The name sliced his tongue, “Passed out weekly *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletters?”

A sigh. “Still my greatest project.”

“I heard about that!” Kajii intervened, too excited. “I subscribed to it just this morning.”

Hirotsu’s pause was heavy. He glanced in Dazai’s unconcerned direction. “You — are aware that those newsletters never stopped, yes?”

“This week’s one had your dog flier!”

“I couldn’t just let it go to waste,” Dazai noted.

Chuuya’s gloves creaked. “I know.”

“Last week’s number included several pictures of you trying to climb out of the river.”

“Grandpa.”

“Did you enjoy France, then?”

“Remember when he spread the voice that I had fucking Athlete’s Foot and people started changing hallways when they bumped against me?”

Hirotsu dragged his hands down his face. “Vaguely. I shall hope *Le Directeur* accepted our conditions with little complaints?”

“*Remember*,” he insisted, “When he left a message written in blood on the walls of my office — telling me to buy him lunch?”

“Not really,” the man admitted. “But I do recall you chasing him down the hallway while he sported several packets of noodles in his hair. And ruining my new suit.”

“The noodles were a miscalculation,” Dazai offered, brushing the matter away.

“Facts are,” Chuuya snapped. “He aims to get me to lose my fucking mind. He’d thoroughly enjoy me chasing him around with a military rifle. He’s fucked in the head. You don’t get revenge on Dazai by losing your focus. You *plan*. I have up to two hundred and fifty recent methods —“

“Try not to strain your only brain cell.”

“No offense, dude,” Kajii intervened, “But your plans usually suck.”

“*Excuse me* —“

“And you boys’ plan,” Hirotsu echoed, foot tapping the ground, “Was to sow terror all over the Headquarters? We’ve got dead fish in the vents. Floor twelfth will have to be closed — and you two are *banned from it*. The fire sprinkles are broken, half of the desks are on fire — you *are* aware the damages funds are —”

“Not my problem,” Chuuya shrugged. “I also put a minor bomb in his office.”

“Chuuya.”

“A *minor* bomb.”

Dazai reached up, studying his nails, and grabbed his glowing wrist. He tumbled to the floor with a yelp.

Before he could climb to his feet and sink his nails in his already bruised skin, the boy had already made a run for it, ripping his hat off in the meantime — almost pushing Kajii to the ground in his effort to drag his crutches into the hallway, throwing his whole body inside the elevator.

“*Chuuya!*” he screamed, loud enough to call the attention of every nearby mafioso, as the doors closed. “Did you *seriously* dye your hair to copy me? *That’s so lame!*”

Goggles knotted with the red thread on Hirotsu’s walls, Kajii let out a panicked screech, as if dangling on the verge of the destroyed twelfth floor. Hirotsu’s defeat was already seeping through his teeth — still, he tried: “Chuuya, *don’t* —“

Stepping on Kajii’s abdomen in his rush out, Chuuya dashed so hard into the hallway that his shoulder crashed against the wall, leaving a small crater in the shape of his side.

“*Hey!*” Kajii called, “*Gravity*, dude!”

His feet halted by the upcoming elevator, taunted by Dazai’s cheeks and mocking tongue, plastered on the glass walls of his own. Chuuya pretended not to feel the way his spine stiffened at the mere *thought* of getting inside — he sprinted for the stairs. *It’s just walls*, he spat, though his lips stayed pressed close enough to pale. Yokohama had a smell no one else could taste. It called the things in his blood like magnets. Dante and his *Limbo* had been dead for months, anyway. *It’s just* —

“Last to get to the meeting room has to tell Tanaki he broke her favorite vase!” the boy called, when the elevator passed one of the open panels.

“*You broke her favorite vase?*”

“That’s to be seen!”

Chuuya ran faster than he ever had. The hallways were haunted by sunlight; cleaned up in the way of a distant night — the stench of blood only a suggestion. The mafiosi he bumped against kept their eyes on the floor.

*Discomfort is a gift*, Mori had told him, once, as they strolled down the gardens. Nobody wanted to be in the same hallway as Dazai when he recharged his gun; nobody wanted to walk in front of Chuuya when *Tainted* glowed. Mori's scarf had been dragging across the grass, drawing rivers of blood under his steps. *Isn't it hard, talking with people who insist on meeting your eyes?*

The meeting room was mere floors under the highest one. By the time his shoes landed with a *crack!* at the edge of the hallway, even his well trained lungs were straining against his ribcage. He had no time to slow down — the elevator doors' *ding!* broke through the silence, slamming Dazai's body against his own.

"Give my hat back!" Chuuya ordered.

"It makes you look stupid!" he screeched. A butterfly-shaped pin was hanging from his bangs. "I can't be seen around a wannabe detective!"

Clutters of crutches and too hard skulls echoed off the walls, hands kicking and slapping and reaching for the misplaced hat. Midday rays rained through the windows, startlingly bright against Dazai's sunburned skin — a distraughtly childish enough sight to almost halt him to a stop, when his bony knees kicked him in the forehead.

A sharp cough interrupted then.

"Well," The Colonel's hands were crossed at the small of his back — eyeing the mess of their bodies with flat distaste. Utterly toneless, he offered. "At the very least, our most promising recruits do *not* lack understanding of punctuality."

Despite his months of revenge crusade, he still donned a faded military uniform, shredded to borderline non-wearability. His bridled hair hadn't grown an inch — or maybe he had found time to cut it between one kill and the other. Minimally unfairly, Chuuya hated him on sight.

Stories about him didn't lack in number — unavoidable procedure to become an Executive. *He collected medals the way some mafiosi did with blood. He'd killed men by liquefying their bones until only their vocal chords were left on the ground to scream. He vividly disliked children.*

Chuuya owned a single worthy memory of him — a flash of him turning the ground under Verlaine's feet to emerald quicksands. The only words he had ever said directly to his face were a boredly observant — *too much power is never an advantage.*

"I'm always punctual," Dazai made sure to say, greve.

The Colonel curled an eyebrow. He had a piece of dried fish on his shoulder. Chuuya wasn't sure if he wanted to let him know. "Certainly," he commented, skeptical.

They climbed to their feet, moving into a compact resistance, a good distance from the Colonel's unmalleable shoulders. Hirotsu's disapproving glance — the man now perched at the edge of the stairs — assured him it didn't quite look like a defensive stance. More like the opposite.

"I'm always punctual," Dazai insisted. A bluish stain was rapidly forming around his eye; the mackerel-shaped bruises down his own jaw pulsed. "It's Boss who lives according to Elise's playtime."

A hazardous declaration to spit in front of an Executive. Chuuya watched the man squint.

Elise was an open secret. Kouyou's pointed glances and time had settled that truth between his hands — the wiped-clean expressions most mafiosi wore when they stumbled on Mori's path. *No questions*, was procedure. A matter of Abilities.

Other options came to mind. Chuuya had watched Mori twirl Elise's curls between fingers and concluded — *unlikely*.

Not because he considered Mori Ougai particularly right in the head — only because he wouldn't gain anything from it. He had never looked hungry for something that wasn't a wasn't already in his palm — warm and bloody and resinous, ready to feed any mouth but his own. The Sheep had never been as kind to him as they were when he refused his monthly rations.

*That's how you rule*, he'd told him, under the tainted windows. *You don't wish for more than what's yours to take*.

"Boss is already inside," the Colonel said, at last. He was an irkingly tall man; even Dazai had to tilt his head to meet his stone eyes. "We were waiting for you. The Headquarters have certainly had an *exciting* morning," He blinked at them with the texture of someone who knew exactly who to blame. "We have much to discuss."

"Great," he made a face. Dazai passed him his hat, sighing; offhandedly, he remembered the snapped cables from the bridge. "Not ominous or anything. After you."

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It took Dazai kicking him in the back of the knees, to notice he was scratching his forearms to blood.



“Ane-san said you’re not to crack the tiles,” he reminded him, low, pretending not to feel the weight of the Executives’ stares. Perhaps it wasn’t pretense — perhaps he was too used to walking to the back of Mori’s throne, glanced at like every trouble of the world had arisen from a flutter of his eyelashes. “I assume staining them in blood is the same.”

“That’s not even nearly similar,” Chuuya replied, staring forward.

Dazai glared at him. Slowly, he lowered his sole eye to the naked tips of his fingerless gloves. “Not quite *you* to be nervous.”

“I’m not.”

“You aren’t,” he confirmed. “Then what? Theorizing the removal of your forearms to add onto your height?”

He halted the motion of his fingers — sunk the pads in the whitish lines up his skin, turning a vicious pink under the crimson neon lights of the meeting room. He looked at them; pulled at the scars until the spirals looked like smiles.

The walk to the table seemed never ending. Low murmurs filled the room; Ace’s irritated, louder tone. Projected in the air between the seats, the *Bishop’s Staff* symbol shone a merciless purple. He offered: “Remember when Tanaki brought that stuffed chicken from her ex-husband’s birthday party, and we waited so long to eat it that it just exploded all over Ace’s office?”

Dazai’s expression was almost concerned.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Chuuya snapped. “I’m trying to build a metaphor.”

“Yes, yes. Go on. You’re a stuffed chicken.”

He seethed. “Well, I’m not going on *now*.”

“Don’t be childish —“

“Fuck you.”

“I’m telling you, what about the stuffed chicken —“

“I’ll stuffed chicken *your* ass.”

Dazai’s fingers flexed around nothing, like choking hands. “That’s not even — that doesn’t make any sense. Are you —“

“Boys,” Mori spoke up, endlessly pleasant. It sizzled weirdly against Chuuya’s eyes, too used to his lines of ink and messages through the encrypted line — pungent with the reminder that Yokohama had its own devil. “There you are.”

It was night in the meeting room.

The floor to ceiling windows had been caged behind metal walls, squeezing the warmth out until the last drop of sunlight. The sole piece of furniture was the endless wooden table at the center of the room, surrounded by five gold-lined throne-like seats — only one of them empty. A frameless candelabra ruled the table, ghostly.

Neon tubes sneaked across the roof, smearing light of a burning kind of red that set the thing under Chuuya's skin off. *Suffocating* would have been a good way to describe the room — he assumed that had been the point.

“Come on,” Mori encouraged. “With me.”

When they passed by the empty seat at his left, he pretended not to see Dazai's eyes flare.

*You will stay, if you wish to know*, Mori had never told him. The view had done it for him — the pile of papers on a table carved with more money than Chuuya had ever held in his hands. *Is that not familiar?*

“ — with *Le Directeur* was fundamental, but the losses the boys' *accident* in Rengoku caused are not to be ignored,” Ace was saying, fiddling with some emeralds. With the way he was ignoring their presence behind the Boss' seat, they might as well have been invisible. “We're already suffering a shortage of men. Are we ready to risk another — unfortunate mistake?”

“The unpredictability of his power is exactly *why* we're suggesting its study,” Kouyou replied, ever so composed. Hirotsu had situated himself behind her seat — another allowance from Mori, in an effort to quieten whispers about her alleged betrayal. “Shall I remind you — *we* don't even know the full scope of his Ability, *per* Boss' own orders.”

*I am deeply thankful to him*, she'd written, in one of her letters. *It takes cleverness, to forgive and trust from the highest seat. You and I, we were meant to be dead traitors walking. You should understand this.*

*Be grateful, Chuuya.*

“We did lose a great number of men, but the boys' plan guaranteed we wouldn't lose *all* of them,” She kept her eyes on the Boss. “Involving Q and Doctor Tsuchiya was an undoubtedly convoluted move, but it saved more than half of my subordinates.”

“And yourself,” the Colonel pointed out, polishing one of his medals.

Kouyou raised her chin, idly sweeping her fan. “Indeed. I would be a priceless asset to lose.”

The Colonel and Ace exchanged a *glance* — something wordless but unmistakable, like the dirtiest whispers of the lowerest ranks. The woman's smile didn't waver — but it grew tighter.

“More of an asset than either of you *lazy* —” Chuuya muttered.

“Be quiet, Chuuya,” Kouyou said.

“But —”

Her glance was icy. He fumed, eyes on the ceiling.

A smile was carved into Mori's face.

It was the first time he saw him up close, since returning. He hadn't changed much — he never seemed to. Statuary in all that was needed to be recognized; chameleonic in all he didn't need others to understand. Chuuya had received a single letter from him, in his time away.

*Corruption*, he had asked, files and pictures from Rengoku stuffed inside the envelope. *What did it feel like, this time around?*

At a Boss-shoulders' distance from him, Dazai pinched his thigh, aggravated. Chuuya's nails tore themselves off his own arm.

"Indeed," the doctor agreed. "Priceless."

Dazai snorted, fiddling with his exaggerated number of hairpins. Boredom was clearly sinking its teeth in his bandaged calves, given the rhythmic stepping on Chuuya's own shoes. He recalled their first official meeting together — the *Ninety-nine Hangman's Knot* rendition he'd erupted in when Ace had opened his mouth.

"Dazai's plans have undoubtedly come to positive fruition," the Colonel continued. There was something distinctively mean in the glint of his eyes; but frozen over, like the circle-sculpted Hell from Lippman's library. Left to grow where it was coldest. "And the *Nine Rings* couldn't have been defeated without Nakahara, from what I've been told. Nonetheless, we cannot *only* rejoice in the spilled blood."

"Certainly an interesting reprimand for the Port Mafia," Kouyou considered. "Spilled blood is meant to be a positive result."

"Giving more responsibility and power to such wild cards —"

"*Wild cards?*" Chuuya echoed.

"Nobody has ever referred to me as *wild*," Dazai mused. "I *have* been called a savage, though. Is that same thing?"

"These *wild cards* saved the —"

"Boys," Mori called, still smiling placidly.

"They have dealt with thirty three missions during the conflict," Kouyou insisted. "Not one of them brought dissatisfactory results."

Ace raised his eyebrows. "Such competent bloodthirst at such a young age is — concerning, I would say."

"Or promising," the former doctor replied. He turned just enough to wink in his direction; Chuuya had the feeling he was missing half of the joke. "I always confuse the two."

“Our Executive agrees with me,” the woman concluded, nodding towards the empty seat. Chuuya’s ears reached, stilling. “He has already informed me and the Boss of his approval for the strengthening of Chuuya’s position.”

“What?” he questioned, pretending not to notice the itching burn of his forearms. The feeling of being watched wasn’t quite new — the feeling of being *tested* either, be it black waters or monthly rations or locked up baby pictures. The feeling of being given *something* — its weight ten lifetimes heavier than a slice of bread or a place at a pool table — was. “What do you mean?”

Jewels tight between his fingers, Ace waved the matter away. “Nothing that concerns you.”

Chuuya stared. “It *obviously* seems to —“

“Chuuya,” Kouyou insisted. It scratched his skin harder than his nails could have; from his side, he swore Dazai’s eye surveyed the spams of his fingers. “Please.”

“But why would the secret Executive —“

“Did he say anything about Dazai?” the Colonel teased, slicing through his words with the ease of someone who hadn’t been listening.

“Oh,” Dazai intervened, blinking. “Thank you for your concern on my behalf.”

“I’m merely wondering. You two do seem to make a pair, these days.”

“Not all beggars can be choosers.”

His eyebrow curled. Chuuya couldn’t find the taunt between the carefulness; couldn’t find the respect between the mistrust. “And what are *you* begging for, Demon Prodigy?”

A strangely childish smile stretched Dazai’s cheeks. His shoe pressed harder down Chuuya’s own — the only sincerity raining from him. He opened his mouth to speak; Mori raised a hand.

“Dazai,” he called.

“I’m simply answering a question. *You* called *us* here, Mori, you know?”

“Seems like this could have been an email,” Chuuya heard himself mutter, distantly.

“And Chuuya *hates* emails,” Dazai noted.

“If all you wanted was an excuse to discuss whether we’re too bloodthirsty to keep around or not —“

“You are,” the Colonel answered, easily. “It remains to be seen whether we’ll decide not to care.”

“It does, doesn’t it,” Dazai agreed, pensively.

Kouyou cleared her throat, pointedly laying her hands on the table — unarmed; wrists to the air. *Don't give them a reason to fear*, she had told him, walking next to him between the men's lowered gazes. *Let them believe they're fearing for no reason at all*. “Do any of us presume to challenge Boss' desires regarding them?”

“It's still a competition,” the man insisted, fingers clenched around his medals. Chuuya dragged his tongue down his teeth; *attempted* to promise himself he couldn't taste iron. “The most capable option should be picked. Knowledge can come in many shapes, but we do have *requisites* — knowledge in battle strategy; knowledge of victory outside of what an easily violent power can bring —”

Every bone in Chuuya's spine seemed to grow sharper — their bite excruciating, over the need to keep his shoulders taller than the back of the Boss' seat. “You want to say that to my face?”

The Colonel didn't even turn. “Knowledge in fighting techniques; knowledge in the handling of men —“

“*Oi*,” Even the waves of Dazai's amusement couldn't deafen the rush inside his ears. Chuuya thought of what it felt like to be nullified; of how easily Shirase had put a knife between his ribs. He thought of how Rengoku had felt, past the broken bones — where it was warm enough to burn; where it burned enough to restart a heart he didn't dare to hope for. “I'm talking to you, asshole —“

“Knowledge in the shiny machinations of ruling,” the Colonel insisted, undeterred. “Most importantly, knowledge in the Port Mafia's ways.”

Kouyou's smile turned sour at the edges. “I rather believe Chuuya's affinity in that matter has already been vouched for.”

The man scoffed. “The men love and trust those who would die for them. It doesn't mean martyrs would make good leaders.”

“The Flags,” she offered, and it fell on the table like a last breath — and suddenly, Chuuya couldn't hear a thing outside the whisper of his blood, climbing to his head, higher and higher, and *higher and higher*; tighter than a last word he couldn't make true. “Among the first of them. The most vocal, too — are you willing to sit at this table and call them *martyrs*, Colonel? What should you say they died for?”

“You picked the wrong example.”

“Did I?”

“Rather,” the man said, blanker than the sky. He shaped letters around what Chuuya's world had been until it hadn't — because *us kids get it unfair*, Shirase had sworn, and, *you will get us all killed*, “Considering just *who* is to blame for bringing the cause for their own demise inside our borders —“

“That's enough,” Hirotsu intervened.

“ — and just *who* might end up being the cause of *more* of our men’s demise,” he insisted, over a voice that couldn’t be whispered — a *more*, and *more*; and what *more* could it *not* want, given all it had lost, “Considered everyone at this table seems to have decided some lives are *expandable* in the name of fueling a power none of you *understands* — “

Something popped in his ears.

Chuuya registered it all in parts, coming down from the high, edges and corners blurred. The crater under his feet, stopping right where Mori’s seat began. The trails of warmth chasing each other down his wrists, wetting the edges of his gloves until they were soaked. The bloodless tips of his fingers, held in a merciless grip by Dazai’s own hand — ripped off the scratches he had torn open in his arms; shutting off the last traces of *Tainted*.

*Whatever’s more logical*, he told himself.

Drops of blood landed on his shoes. When he unclenched his jaw, teeth creaking in the effort, he tasted it on his tongue. He reminded himself his glee was his own — until it became hunger.

The room was staring.

Dazai squeezed the life out of his fingers — once; twice. He pried his own away.

“Possibilities,” Ace bit into the silence, as if a point had been proven, “For many, countless reasons — are meant to start at a *fair point*.”

Chuuya felt lightheaded with something too bitter to be anger. He dropped his hands to his sides. He stepped away from the crater.

“I ask you to keep the Flags out of this,” he told no one at all, eyes forward. In his peripheral vision, the Colonel set his jaw.

Mori tapped his fingers on the desk, assorted — running nails down dusty skulls, trying to pick the one that would talk the least in his palm.

“I doubt the boys’ accomplishments need to be discussed any further,” he said, finally. It seemed to unlock something in the room — all the shoulders fell. Hirotsu and Kouyou’s eyes stayed on him. Dazai stayed staring at the ceiling. “Boring reports and futile matters. Chuuya’s trip to Europe has been extremely beneficial. We covered our traces in the Black Market; gained fallen channels and a sought after recruit. And Dazai’s work on our channel has sped up our recovery of roughly three, four years.”

The curve of his mouth grew an inch more benevolent. “Naturally, we shouldn’t forget the other recruit Dazai brought to us. What was his name again, Dazai?”

Ace snorted, hiding it under a jeweled hand — Kouyou was quicker to put her fan in front of her mouth. Dazai didn’t squirm, tilting his head from one side to the other. “You’re so hard of hearing, sometimes, Boss. It’s Oda,” A pause. Chuuya darted a look at his face, at last — all he saw was glass, hiding a marble wall. “For you.”

“Ah, yes,” Mori’s smile was too heavy for the lightness it offered. “I recall. I admire your will to make friends, Dazai,” The neon red lights painted his gloves; blood, but not quite. “You have a duty towards the ones you bring in the shadows. Your fault and your merit. Yes?”

“Yes, Boss,” Dazai said, almost without petulance.

Satisfied, Mori turned to his Executives again. “I understand not everyone in this room will agree with my proposal. Nonetheless, if you won’t despise me for it — I’d like to hear their answer.”

Chuuya’s fingers curled into nothing, naked tips tracing velvet motifs on the back of his chair. Through the glacial silence, he settled his nails on Dazai’s hip, grazing his dress shirt.

If he hadn’t felt him stiffen, he wouldn’t have known; his face stayed impassive — mildly aggravated, despite the unwavering glances raining on them, behind Mori’s most pleasant smile. As subtle as possible, he traced: *I knew A-C-E didn’t want us there.*

*No*, Dazai tapped, on the naked square of his gloves. Chuuya’s blood had stained the wrists of his dress shirt. One of his hairpins had scratched his ear. He needed to cut his hair; Chuuya needed to wipe his arms somewhere. *Jewel rivalry. Your fault.*

*But the C-O-L-O-N-E-L?*

*Has a recruit he wants in the seat*, was his answer. *Preparing him for months now.*

*Who?*

*Your N-O-G-U-C-H-I.*

Chuuya’s head snapped to him.

“We still have a long list of troubles in need of being solved, after the *Nine Rings*’ mess,” Mori continued, unconcerned by the quiet. “Recruitment, regrouping — the other organizations need to understand a new attack wouldn’t be a wise idea. Our boys’ instances of collaborations have been nothing short of divine fuels, right?” He directed his vacant grin to the table. Kouyou was still staring at him. “They might as well use it to restore the organization. By the end of it, I will appoint one of them as Executive.”

“And this collaboration,” Kouyou echoed, with the tone of someone swallowing bitterness in pieces. “What would it entail, precisely?”

Mori hummed. “That remains to be seen. I’m certain, given their history — and property damage reports — that the competition will work out just splendidly. That is — if they’ll accept my offer.” Even the lights appeared dimmer; uselessly, he attempted to convince himself that the red blossoming on the table wasn’t gore. “Otherwise — well. I do wonder how long it might take them to be considered for the Executive seat.”

Dazai’s amusement was sharper than the edges of the candelabra. He unclipped a moon-shaped hair clip — laid his hand on the back of Mori’s seat.

“I must add,” Mori dared, “Dazai will maintain command over the *Secret Force*. Which means — Chuuya will need some side hustle,” He directed him an apologetic grin. “His ruling over the jewelry market was revoked during the conflict. I have received some proposals. Our Hirotsu, for starters, offered to welcome him as one of the three ancient commanders of the *Black Lizards*. ”

Dazai’s foot-tapping paused. Stunned, Chuuya met the man’s unwavering gaze, behind the crown of Kouyou’s hair.

“Then there’s the Colonel.”

Chuuya’s attention was stolen. The once-soldier, though, didn’t waste any time looking at him. “He also proposed to let him join his squad,” Kouyou let out a sound — something vaguely *offended*; vaguely perplexed. Chuuya couldn’t stop staring; couldn’t stop hearing his voice curl around his words — *the cause of their demise*. “The Colonel’s Ability is somewhat similar to his own. He believes he could help him learn some...” Mori searched. “I believe he called it *control*. ”

Pointedly, the Colonel glanced down at the shattered tiles under his feet. His eyes made their unhesitant way to his arms; Dazai’s sudden, long suffering sigh called his attention away: “Is this a dog auction, or what? All over a little gravity?”

Annoyance pulsed under his skin. Thicker, slithering through tighter veins, a mouthwatering suggestion. “My Ability is perfectly —“

“And then, obviously,” Mori interrupted, “Kouyou has been very clear with her desire to keep you as her subordinate, Chuuya.”

There was nothing to think about. “I’ll do it.”

Kouyou’s grin appeared slowly; but it was hardly hidden by her fan. “It would be interesting, though,” Mori considered, idly, with a hint of tease. “To see you working with them.”

“Weren’t we discussing him working with *me*?” Dazai jumped in, clearing his throat. His shoe was stubbornly stuck over his own. Chuuya kicked; he didn’t even wince. “This is starting to *actually* sound like a dog auction, Mori.”

“I’ll be happy to work alongside them on a few occasions,” Chuuya offered, over the bad taste it left. “If it would satisfy you. Boss.”

“It would,” the man admitted. “But we’ll discuss it later. This is my offer.”

A beat.

The Colonel was the first to speak up. “Does that mean the fifth Executive seat has been ruled out permanently?”

The Boss’ surprise was evident. “No, not at all. It *is* a battle between the two of them, isn’t it? Conflicts rarely end with no devastation on both sides. Should someone appear in the



meantime, and should they prove themselves worthy of the title — well. I suppose the boys will have to wait until at least one of us falls by the hands of serpents and poison, yes?”

Silence was quick to linger, at that.

“Alright,” Dazai spoke up. “We’ll do it.”

His last nerve snapped, right along to a corvine strand tikling his nose. “You don’t speak for me, you —“

“You were taking so long, though. *Slug.*”

“You don’t even know if I —“

“Boys,” Mori called, delicately. “Remember your other revoked privilege?”

Their mouths closed.

“That’s better,” the man sighed. He offered a friendly smile to Chuuya — a, *I know how it is, trust me*, that ran across his bones like nails on chalk. He was spinning them across his palm — frustrating, but breathtaking to watch. “I assume Dazai was right, though? You agree?”

*No*, he said, honestly, in the privacy of his mind. He’d wanted the Executive position for the sake of documents — he’d wanted it because there had to be a *point*. *No, I don’t want his hand-me-downs any longer.*

“We’ll do it,” Chuuya concluded, curtly.

A breath went through the room; he failed to understand who’d let it out. Mori’s smile was borderline sincere, this time, and ten times more dangerous for it. “Wonderful news. We should get to planning, then, shouldn’t we?”

“Something interesting,” Dazai sighed.

“Boss,” Kouyou bowed her head.

“Boss,” said Ace and the Colonel.

The sky slept on Chuuya’s nape, gentler than those caging walls. It bled down his arms; at last, he wiped them on the abandoned sleeve of Dazai’s coat, and watched him stare at him as he did it — *victorious*, somehow. He remembered, distantly, flying for the first time. “Boss.”

*You ought to be angry*, Adam had written, on the one month anniversary of the end. *I cannot understand it. But you ought to, if it lets you breathe.*

Mori relaxed against his seat, once again awkward. “By the way, Chuuya. Forgive me the curiosity,” Next to him, Dazai’s lit up. “How come you went with a hair change?”

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The underground parking lot rested at the very edge of Yokohama, under a rural area any and all gangs of the city had utilized at least once — be it to train, be it to hide, be it to fight.

Nowadays, its empty center was haunted by a ten feet tall mountain of *Souls*’ corpses.

“Dear,” Tanaki whispered, like an exhale. It wasn’t quite horror; something more like *wonder*, lined by the knowledge of having to find it sicker than her brain demanded. Her scar glimmered the same silver of her hair, under the flickering lights. “The smell is certainly something.”

Chuuya grunted his agreement. It was just overwhelmingly pungent enough to become a background. Nauseating at the edges — bitter like vomit and feces near the center, plagued by the ghost of dried viscera and decaying skin.

Or so they told him.

“Suribachi was worse in the summer,” he offered, hands deep in his pockets. Empty eyes were settled all over; some of them removed from their sockets, dangling by nerves. The *Souls* had kept on walking even mutilated; the hill of death could have been one of those *Inferno* frescoes Kouyou had wanted to decorate her living room with. “They never really got rid of the skeletons from *The End*.”

“And this?” she questioned, unable to look away.

Chuuya kicked the ground. “A warning,” Near one of the entrances, a small group bearing the *Hounds*’ jackets stared speechlessly at the exhibition. It had been stuck there for almost two months. “Dazai’s idea.”

“Of course,” Tanaki stuttered. She held her fingers tighter; remembered, at some point, that she had been there for almost forty years. Seen worse, perhaps. Seen too much of it. “Of course,” she repeated, straightening.

He crouched down. Watched a femur that wasn’t connected to anything at all. Watched the reddened skin around the scars on his arms — and *tried* to remember what that bloodied, suffocating air in Rengoku had felt like. The temptation of a burning flame, he thought — as monumental as the inconsequential need to verify if it stung. Being told divinity existed, being promised it could kill, and being stuck where it could only bleed him out. Arahabaki was no enemy — but something closer.

He bit down a smile of scorn.

“Darling,” Tanaki called.

“Ma’am.”

Her glance was reproachful.

Chuuya let his eyes run down the death-grip her hand had on the vacant space of her overgrown shirt. She hadn’t thrown away her pregnancy clothes yet; the night before he had left, he had overheard her stutter her way through a panic attack at Kouyou’s suggestion to do so.

*Alright*, she had reassured her, eventually. Held her hands. Chuuya hadn’t touched her in months. *Alright. We shall keep them close.*

*There was a corner of his skull*, he had explained, to the empty rooms of his apartment in France, *that had been carved from the same rock Rimbaud’s tombstone rested upon.*

It had been there long before he’d met the man — but every carefully molded item he’d forced inside it had been washed in a different light, recently. Every thought about what Shirase might be doing in London; every instinctual turn to find one of the Flags in the seat next to him; every shuddering fit his fingers went through when he got too close to a light socket — when thunder gathered in sky.

Tanaki fit in there to a fault.

“Do you think the city will be safe, these next few months?”

The question made him blink. “As safe as it always is, I assume. Why do you ask?”

“I’m thinking of —” Tanaki cleared her throat; tore her eyes away from the mountain of corpses, as if not wanting to be rude. “Well. I was thinking about inviting my children to the city for the summer. It might be a good time to — talk.”

Chuuya stared. “Shit, Tanaki.”

“Language.”

“Didn’t you say you haven’t talked with them in more than —”

“Ten years, yes,” She studied the tattooed lines up her arms, intertwining with well-disguised scars. Chuuya wondered if that had been the point. “I thought, given the situation — I mean. I shouldn’t miss more than I have, yes? They haven’t answered yet, but —” She deflated. “Who knows if they will.”

From the top of the mountain, an almost severed head was finally released from the bones holding it to the neck. It rolled down floors of open chests and broken legs — landed on the floor with a squelch and a flicker of the lights.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sincerely, hands deep in his pockets. He tried to remind himself that honesty needed no anger.

Her smile was tight. Chuuya's skin remembered the feeling of her viscera through his fingers only vaguely — how *sticky* they'd been; how easy. "It's not your fault."

He kept his eyes on the decapitated head — the dried puddle of blood reaching the columns they had leaned on. It wasn't quite alive enough to offer a reflection. Chuuya knew how pathetically desperate he had looked, through the reflection on the eyes of a corpse that looked like him.

*I don't remember it*, he mused about telling her. A few months ago, perhaps, he might have — might have used it as a way to shrug responsibility off his shoulders, and land it on her bloodied skin. *I don't remember any of it. I can't forget it's mine.*

"It isn't your fault," he echoed, because at least one of them had to be weighed down by sincerity. "If they answer, they do. If they don't, that's on them."

"Maybe," she agreed. Her hands wrapped around her belly with an absence that told him she had *forgotten* — again. Quiet, where he wouldn't disturb, he tasted vomit. "They deserve better than a woman who abandoned them for an inch of power at the ends of the ethical plane. But a mother loves, Chuuya. She can't help it. I would be kinder if I could — but I can't."

A revolting kind of jealousy crawled in the deepest pits of his guts.

*Shut up*, he thought, needing it not to be his own — in that slightly headache-inducing way that made his voice echo across his skull; as if thoughts could reach what *might* be poison in his blood, or a bundle of power between his ribs. *Shut up, look at what you've done.*

No answer came. Despite his bones' oldest beliefs, Chuuya was still the only one to share his spine.

*Prove it to me*, he heard himself drawl. The arena was empty. He was being taunted by the thorns on the doors. *It's just a few words. It's just a string of codes in your veins.*

"That's alright," he offered, staring at the ground. He didn't move when she made her way to the corpses — didn't question her refusal to cover her mouth and nose, despite the retching. He didn't *flinch* when she picked up a gun and started shooting at the long dead — *again and again*, expression as placid as when talking of summer trips. "There's no need to be kind."

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Greyish stone walls and dirty windows filled his eyes at the first street turn, rusty gates leading to the entrance acting like the cherry on top of that lower-city cake.

*Wild Geese Orphanage*, the sign read.

The genuinely cheerful voices coming from the house never lacked to surprise him — though, as for any facade owned by the Port Mafia, the current of tension underlining every sound under the sun wasn't easy to miss. *Things that belong to us*, Albatross liked to say, *tend to belong to the night*.

A small hand attempted to reach for his back pocket.

"Sayuri," he reprimanded, his warning grip around her wrist enough to make her drop the wallet, "Old newsflash: you could just *ask*."

The girl looked younger than she was — she lacked three front teeth, and wore pastel hair ties in two brown buns bigger than her face. "Can I *haf* your wallet, Hat Sir?"

"It's Chuuya," he huffed, in a tone he had *studied* — sculpted until it was the exact opposite of the one people had spat at him when he was her age. It was a lost battle — in all the months he had visited the Orphanage, she had never called him anything but *that*. "And *no*."

Her face fell.

"Take these, though," He extracted more bills than he would probably make for another three weeks, and handed them to the gaping child.

"What do I even do with this?" she almost whispered, panicking.

"Hell, brat, I don't know," Chuuya whispered back. "Pay your taxes."

"And you keep telling me you're not one of the *Seven Lucky Gods*?" she insulted, deadly serious. "My big sister told me *all* about them," Then, with the tone of someone who had heard something that sounded cool to say, but who hadn't exactly understood it: "I'm *onto* you."

Hilarity burned his throat. It didn't feel all that good. "Wrong god, I keep telling you."

"Liar."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"I'm taller than you."

Sayuri blinked, perplexed. "And?"

He made a face. "Listen, where's Koda?"

She grabbed his hands, after stuffing the countless bills down the second-hand red dress she was wearing. “I’ll take you to him, Hat Sir!” Her seriousness was no joke; if a child could be professional, she fit the description. Chuuya had yet to figure out if she was pulling his nose about the whole *becoming a seal trainer* thing. “And *then* you can give luck to Momo as well.”

The deafening embrace of dozens of children laughing and living pushed his lungs against his ribs, as the door was torn open. *The Port Mafia*, Mori had always said, smile resinous, *did not deal in child trafficking*.

*[Which, Chuuya knew, didn’t mean no one in the Poet Mafia dealt with it. People were the one goods the syndicate refused to openly trade — but that definition hardly covered closing an eye on convenient money introits. Still — he had watched Mori order Sama to crash a man’s skull against the edge of his desk, after humming at reports that spoke of human trafficking cases. Still — he had watched him keep the reports.]*

There are no good people in this world, *Kouyou had explained, once*. You just stand with those who look like they sleep at night. /

The smell of dust and homemade meals clogged his nostrils, pulling at the tips of his fingers. He imagined he would have ended up somewhere just like that place, had those police chases in Suribachi City gained any results. It was a metaphor of sorts, he supposed — for Detective Murase to have been reduced to nothing more than a man bleeding out on the ground.

The last door they reached, past the stairs, was slightly ajar. Sayuri was quick to push two sticky fingers to his lips, signaling to keep quiet. She disappeared down the stairs faster than he could protest against, pushing him towards the door as a last goodbye.

“Great,” Noguchi Toru said, quiet enough to be polite — *unenthusiastically* so. “The shorter half of the psychos is back.”

A kid was sleeping on one of the bunk beds scattered around the room, round face caressed by the sunlight streaming from crooked windows. His blond curls and freckles were a perfect mirror of the man sitting at the edge of his bed, tracing paths on his forehead. Koda didn’t raise his head — but he directed a pointed finger to the two silhouettes dangling their feet from the facing bunk bed.

Noguchi grunted; Tsuchiya slapped his arm.

“What,” the man muttered. It had been a while since he had looked at him with *that* kind of disdain — it pulled the fishbone tattoo on his cheek. “It’s true.”

Chuuya prepared to snap. A second look at Tsuchiya froze him in place.

Her green hair had been shaved on one side; surgical scars climbed all the way up her forehead, pinkish webs that all collided into one dead end — her missing right eye, and the broken eyelids sewed upon the cave, surrounded by a ring of bruises.

Bullet wound.

Tsuchiya offered a smile. Nothing about it was friendly; if anything, it was more respectful than she had ever dared. “Sir. Was Europe fun?”

The door closed. On the bed, Koda gulped. “What happened to you?”

Noguchi’s drawl could have been a laugh, if it hadn’t smelled so thickly of rage. He blamed himself for the surprise it caused him; almost two months of collaboration had attuned him to — not the man’s *respect*, but at least a semblance of it. “As if you don’t know?”

He squinted. “I *don’t*, jackass, or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Toru,” Tsuchiya insisted, smile tight. “I don’t need your antagonism. Grow the fuck up.”

“*Grow up?*”

“Guys,” Koda stuttered. “Please. Uchiyama is sleeping.”

“No, I want to hear it,” Chuuya replied, taking a step forward. “I *told you* I didn’t know why she wasn’t allowed to come with us. If you have shit to say, spit it out.”

“Chuuya —“

“Your *partner*,” Noguchi spat out, jumping down from the bunk bed. “Thought it a good idea to put a *fucking bullet in her head*. She almost *died*. And you want me to believe he didn’t tell you? You’re the only one he deems *worthy* of his half assed explanations!”

“Toru,” Tsuchiya blurted out. “Toru, come on, you know why he did it —“

He laughed, disbelieving. “As if we’re not filled to the brim with Ability users? You were keeping a promise. Isn’t our code centered around honor — the importance of deals?”

Chuuya put the pieces together, one by one — felt them thump heavily against his head. “You told Dazai you destroyed your sister’s tools.”

She didn’t answer, eyes on the floor.

“You *destroyed* your sister’s tools?” he insisted. Mori’s funerary declaration in the meeting room made sense, suddenly — the *urgency*. “Are you *mental*, Tsuchiya? You just took and deprived the organization of —“

“She had made a goddamn —“ Noguchi growled.

“You aren’t *listening*,” Chuuya snapped. Koda sighed. “Do you understand just how many of our men will die because of this? You want me to believe *Doctor Tsuchiya* would have wanted this?”

“You didn’t know my sister,” the woman murmured, weakly.

“This *isn’t* about your sister, Tsuchiya,” he swore, stunned. “This is about my men, and your companions, and — Rengoku would have ended to *shit* if not for those tools.”

“That’s why I waited,” she said. “It was already going against my sister’s wishes, but I — I didn’t want all that blood in my hands.”

“And what — it just doesn’t matter, from now on? Don’t you dare act naive when —“

“We have doctors,” Noguchi intervened, halfway to him, taller than Chuuya’s neck could comfortably bear. “We have fucking Ability Users of all kinds. The Mafia code —“

“The Mafia code talks about *survival*, in every and all conditions possible,” he interrupted him. He traced the scars on Tsuchiya’s face — imagined, almost too easily, the bored expression Dazai would have been wearing as he punished her. “You want me to blame the bastard? These sorts of decisions affect the syndicate. We don’t get to make them. *You* don’t get to make them. You’re lucky he didn’t put that bullet in your —“

His back was slammed against the wall.

Chuuya only met the *ire* in Noguchi’s eyes for a moment — his fists burned crimson between their bodies, and the knuckles that hit the side of his face sunk so deep he thought he brushed bone.

On Koda’s bed, a child whined.

“Put your hands on me again,” Chuuya warned, somberly. The hit was ricocheting all over his skeleton — the sizzling blood on his knuckles hissed like the wind, twirling around him with the glee of laughter. “You’ll regret using those tools to save me.”

The room was a snapshot — Koda, curved over his waking brother’s body; Tsuchiya, hands raised in an intervention she wouldn’t act upon. Eyes on Noguchi — crushed against a destroyed bunk bed, breathing half as harshly as Chuuya was.

“I’ll kill you,” he swore, climbing to his feet. His eyes were stuck to the glow of his hands — like the complicated, blurry gaze he had worn in Rengoku, as Dazai dragged Chuuya away from his own destruction site. “I’ll slaughter both of you. Albatross was fucking *wrong* about you.”

Mercilessly, the creaking door was slammed behind him.

The sound stuck in Chuuya’s throat didn’t quite feel like his own. It stung — easy and direct; nothing more than a fact; nothing more than the tape keeping a wall of pictures in a chaotic dinner room intact. He stared at the ground, and he attempted to remember not to break his own teeth.

*Alright*, he told himself. It came a bit late; bad reception and the smell of blood. *Alright*.

The silence burned the room, reflecting embers on Koda’s pained face and Tsuchiya’s lowered head. “He has his reasons to protect me,” she said, quietly. “And I had my reasons to do it.”

Abruptly, Chuuya felt more tired than he had any right to. “People always do.”



“I accepted the consequences — I was ready to be executed,” She frowned at the ground. “I’m not sure why Dazai decided not to do it.”

Chuuya *knew*, though. He didn’t know if it was because he understood — or because he’d been twisted enough to approve; or because he’d been dissecting and rebuilding every reachable inch of Dazai’s psyche ever since they’d met. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

*You got rid of our best solution. You’ll be the first to test out the consequences.*

He tightened his lips, staring at the ceiling. “I get that you feel guilty about your sister’s death, Tsuchiya. I *understand*. In other circumstances, I would admire your stubbornness.”

Her scorn was evident. “No, you wouldn’t.”

Chuuya thought of the shape Rimbaud’s corpse had left in the concrete. *He did it for a friend*, he had reprimanded Dazai. *He did it for* — “I would.”

She hesitated; jaw setting. He took a breath. “You shouldn’t have done it.”

A bow. “I apologize for the trouble my choices will bring,” she spelled out, easily. “I won’t tell you I regret them, though. I never will.”

“I was here to offer all of you something,” Chuuya huffed. “Doubt Noguchi will agree, now.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Tsuchiya promised. “He doesn’t need to bear my faults. I can’t promise he’ll accept to work with Dazai, though.”

“And you?” he asked. “You would?”

A flash lit her only eye up — if he hadn’t grown up around it, perhaps, he wouldn’t have recognized it as briskly as he did. But fear was everywhere in every place he’d ever called home; whether he’d put it there or he’d pushed it down his organs until it wasn’t visible anymore.

Still, she stood straight. “If necessary, sir.”

The click of the door behind her was gentler. Judging by the tense lines of Koda’s back, hushing his brother from fully waking up, it didn’t quite feel as such.

“Sorry,” he muttered, tersely. “Hope he didn’t wake up.”

“Ah, it takes *m-more* than that, to get Uchi to abandon his dreamland,” Koda reassured him, offering him an awkward smile.

“He missed you much?”

“Refused to even speak to me, when I came back,” he sighed. Only affection moved his hands through his golden locks. “Little pest.”

Uchiyama was several years younger than his older brother. To Chuuya's knowledge, he'd been living at the Orphanage since Koda had enlisted, seven years ago. He didn't know what had happened to their parents; all he knew was that Koda had left for the quickest way to make money.

*I had always been good with a rifle*, he'd told him. Joining the Port Mafia had either been bad luck or great one — that, Koda had never told him.

"I'm s-s— *I apologize*," he added, nodding towards the destroyed bunk bed. "But you'll have to pay for that."

"Yeah — Yeah, of course, man."

"And you'll have to settle to talk to dear old me."

Chuuya huffed, stalking his way to the nightstand, leaning against its sharp edge. "How unfortunate. I'm still gonna need you to spill your guts on Noguchi, though."

Koda made a face. "Always him. You used to want to talk with *me*. These days, I have to read that *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter, if I hope to hear from you."

He massaged his nose. "Are you aware Noguchi is the Colonel's pet project for Executive position?"

His wince was full body, and the red that bloomed on his cheeks managed to hide even the freckles. They were darker and more insistent than Chuuya's own, but they cursed him with a softness that refused to appear on Chuuya. On him, they just looked like more scars.

"I like the hair, by the way," Koda said, at last.

"No, you don't."

"I didn't know if you knew," He scratched his Port Mafia tattoo, right under his throat. "And I know you want the position, so I thought... I *m-mea* —" He made a face.

Chuuya waited, patiently, keeping his eyes where Koda wouldn't feel them like a weight. He'd learned in time — as tentatively as someone who was used to stomping on cracked ground could — that the man didn't need to be told what he already knew. He'd talk. He just needed a bit of time to.

"We needed to work together, in France," Koda said, some muttering later. "You were under Boss' orders. I was just trying to —"

"To keep the hostility contained," he concluded, curling one eyebrow. "Bet Noguchi knows, though, doesn't he?"

His blush deepened. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't *sir* me, right now. Give me answers instead."

“What do you want to know?”

He crossed his legs, studying the reddened tip of Uchiyama’s nose. “I thought he’d worked under Albatross.”

“Albatross started out under the Colonel, too,” the man reminded him. “I think he considered him a teacher of sorts. He must have sent Noguchi to train under him for a while. The Colonel must have seen — *something* in him.”

“You’re with the Colonel too,” Chuuya considered. “And you’re ten times better with a rifle than he’ll ever be.”

Koda snapped his tongue, the way he did to prepare for a long speech. “I don’t think the Colonel likes soldiers much. There’s *m* — a lot of them, in the syndicate. Dishonorably discharged. It’s rare for them to end under his command.”

“And you?”

“Like you said,” He shrugged. “I’m good with a rifle. But Noguchi — you know how he is. The men like him. I’m not saying he’d be a better fit, but the *C-Colonel* believes he can make him one.”

It wasn’t unusual. While Kouyou had never necessarily tried to groom him into an Executive, it had only been because Chuuya himself was set on that goal. Dazai’s was both Mori’s pet project and the person he wanted least on that throne — they had found their balance on their own.

Wanting the fifth Executive to be unavoidably tied to themselves was a good strategy; one that would assure them at least one ally at the table. Still, sculpting and fretting over entire classrooms of mafiosi, trying to find who’d fit the seat better — it was dangerous. In the Sheep, it would have been the *A formula* for a civil war.

“I think,” Chuuya concluded, “That I will work with the Colonel.”

Koda blinked. “He *offered*?”

“Perhaps he’s looking for another champion. I have no intention of becoming the shithead’s puppet, but if I can keep his attention off Noguchi — Boss wants me to try, anyway.”

“But then —” The man frowned. Chuuya recalled the first time he had laid his eyes on him — a large-scale infiltration, under the fireworks-rained sky of a nearby festival. A silhouette, crunched under a bench with his hands clenched over his ears, murmuring *something*. “What did you want to offer us?”

Later, he had found out that *something* had been military commands for mines emergency. In a blink, under the edge of his clawed-at shirt, he had seen the faded mark of the prior Boss’ tattoo — a tear falling from heathers. He had been alive during the *Crimson Rain* season — Chuuya had kept him alive, still, and he had been his friend, to the best of his traitorous abilities and past mistakes.

*The problem with touch*, he considered, *was that it bore no understanding of past examples.*

“Six people,” he said. “Executive Kouyou wants me to gather a squad of my own. *A better challenge than mere subordinates*, she said.”

“Me,” Koda guessed. “Tsuchiya. Noguchi. If you still want them.”

“Noguchi was a good card in France,” he huffed. “But for him to come around, he needs to relax his fucking grip on Tsuchiya.”

“He’s a bit — *intense* about her.”

“Are they together or what?”

“Oh, no,” Koda was quick to shake his head. “Not at all. I don’t know much about Noguchi’s past, but he had a big family. Yukio is like his little sister. *T-Te* — *bad* things happened to him, and now he’s a bit — overprotective. She was the one to bring him into the organization, you know?”

Chuuya leaned his head on the wall, counting spider webs on the ceiling. The wood dug into his scalp — if he tried hard enough, he could pretend to be back in this or that abandoned house in Suribachi, waiting for Yuan to steal stuff she *wanted* from dusty, makeshift households.

“Tsuchiya shouldn’t have destroyed the tools,” he offered.

Koda tightened his lips. “We swore our loyalty to the organization. I understand her *g-grief*. Her sister was all she had, and she wanted her last wish to be fulfilled. But she deprived the syndicate of a weapon. I — truly did believe Dazai would execute her.”

“Punishments have no reason to exist, if they can’t teach a lesson,” Chuuya replied. “The bastard knows this. Killing her would have been another story for the men to chit chat about for a few days, and then it would have been forgotten. Now she’s a reminder. For both herself and everyone else. She *will* be targeted.”

“And you want her in your squad, still?”

“Her Ability might be useful. Maybe she can redeem herself, or something.”

It didn’t look like Koda believed his words. Tsuchiya had made a selfish choice. She’d lost an eye for it. For some reason, Chuuya didn’t want her to lose more.

“And the other three?” Koda asked, finally.

“One of them already agreed,” he said. “Or he will, anyway. I’m sure. I think you’ll like him. As for the other two —” He snapped the hem of his glove against his skin. “No one comes to mind. But I’ll find them.”

Koda grinned. “*O-Of* course you will. You know, most people are *dying* to work with the man behind *The Rengoku Massacre*.”

“And the others are pissing their pants about the possibility,” he grunted. “Works great for an ego.”

The man opened his mouth to retort; before he could, a voice echoed from behind the door, screeching out a deafening: *Koda!*

With stunning strength, the door of the room was almost torn off the hinges — successfully managing to tear Uchiyama’s eyelids apart, at last. Sayuri was standing with her feet wide and hands on her hips. “The *thif* got in the kitchen again!”

“*Thif?*” Uchiyama echoed, sleepy.

Koda sighed, standing up. “I’ll come down to check in a minute, darling. Make sure the doors are locked, yes?”

“A thief?” Chuuya asked, once she vanished down the stairs. “One of the kids is stealing food?”

“Not one of ours,” Koda replied, picking Uchiyama up. Head on his shoulder and eyelids heavy, the kid waved at him. A bit awkwardly, he nodded back. “Someone keeps sneaking in. We’ve only seen a bit — it’s a girl, I think. Small, *f-f* — quick, good at what she does. The patrons would prefer not to involve the police, seeing how she’s clearly taking to eat, and — you’ve heard about the disappearances. It feels like the wrong moment to refuse a young girl some help.”

“Make sure not to be around, if they do call the cops,” he reminded him.

The man rolled his eyes. “Some subtlety.”

“We’re in our territory,” he huffed. “And *I*, thank you very much, am an honest employee in a jewelry store downtown.”

“And Chuuya — *please*, ” Koda added, hand on the doorframe, lowering his voice. “If you could refrain from encouraging Sayuri’s stealing tendencies.”

He blew air out. Uchiyama giggled, staring at him with eyes wider than the moon. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Chuuya.”

“If anything, I’ve been telling her to *ask* — “

“I’ll talk to Noguchi and Tsuchiya,” Koda called, ignoring him, as he went down the stairs. “Try to find two less *p-problematic* people for the empty seats, would you?”

Chuuya only felt them following him after thirty three seconds had passed. Consequently, amused — he let them.

The road was quiet. Strays crossed the street with more insistence than cats, carefully eyeing the homeless men piled up next to closed shops, as if hunger might make them do something they wouldn't dare under the sunlight.

Hands in his pockets, he traced shadows with the tips of his boot, dragging his hands down the shattered curve of his phone screen. The charms got caught between his fingers — Kouyou's reprimands echoed in his ear; the tone she wore when he squinted at pricey shampoos. *If I didn't need to reach you, I would encourage you to not even own one. You treat that phone disgracefully.*

He hummed.

The hands appeared in a blink — around his wrist, around his middle, over his choker line.

*Four men*, he counted, quickly, allowing them to manhandle him into the nearest alley. All older than him — in typical Port Mafia attire. No guns.

“—tight,” one of them grunted, pulling his hair to snap his head back. The cold edge of a blade tickled his Adam's apple. “The fucker lives longer than cats, they say.”

“Are you sure he's the right one?” The one doing his best to dislocate his shoulder scoffed. “First he lies about those prissy Sheep, now about his talent. Not that much of a *damn god* is —“

Chuuya snorted.

As one, that eight-hands machine petrified.

*Tainted* came alive with a sibyllic whisper. It spread from every inch of his skin, wrapping around the blade on his neck and the hands touching his skin like a snake intent on strangling.

“*Get a—*“

Curses exploded from the men's mouths as they dropped to the ground, shattering the bones of their knees and hands against the breaches their newly gained weight opened on the sidewalk. He cracked his neck; spat blood near the head of the man whose gasping cries were growing louder.

Crouching down, he laid his hand on his buzzed hair. “Wasn’t the *Nine Rings Conflict* enough entertainment, dipshits? You guys needed some Port Mafia on Port Mafia violence?”

*First he lies about the Sheep, then —*

He frowned.

The man’s lips parted, drooling a mixture of blood and spit on the ground. Deciding to forget it, Chuuya pushed his head down with crimson fingers, leaving him to his fractured nose and the pool of blood spreading under him.

“I’m assuming this is about Rengoku,” he said, unimpressed, as he climbed to his feet. Crawling limbs and pathetic whines; nails sinking in the concrete, as if it might push them up. For good measure, he stepped on one of their forearms, snapping the bone. “Some, *he’s too dangerous to keep around* ideal, I’m guessing?” he continued. “Tough shit. You’re not the first miserable nobodies I hear this from.”

Leaning the heel of his shoe against the head of the man who had choked him, he mused: “If you’re so scared of the big bad *god* you say I am, what makes you think four of you shit born worms would manage to bring *me* down?”

Through the whimpers, he heard them apologize profusely. The broken clock of his phone turned to midnight. Chuuya kicked their skulls in.

Kajii was exactly where he knew he would find him — the excitement sparkling through his eyes when Chuuya had mentioned the *Old World* had been impossible to miss. Stepping on the tiles somehow didn’t crack the earth open in two; not even the sight of the playing gangs in the pool area managed to to curse his spine, snapping it via some karmic ricochet.

The *Old World* looked the same — lights and drinks and sounds and everything but the blood, slippery and new and too late. The bell on the door ringed the same; when Chuuya walked in, no chorus of voices screamed his name.

*Alright*, he told himself. There was only so much someone could bleed. *Alright*.

*Be grateful*, Kouyou reminded him.

“I’ll let you know, I’m fucking *Mafia!*” a voice screeched. “Have been for *two whole days!*”

The sound of glass breaking rattled the entire room. Over the first row of tables, it seemed, Kajii was getting his ass handed back to him.

Chuuya stared at the ceiling. Making his way to the circle of the makeshift fighting right, he sighed: “Alright, that’s enough.”

It wasn’t the first time something of that nature occurred — Kajii’s idea of a celebration involved a bar fight, and Kajii’s idea of commiseration involved a bar fight, and Kajii’s idea of an *evening* involved a bar fight.

He grasped the leather jackets of the duo attempting to kick his face in, washing them in a red glow that made most bystanders turn back to their business. When he dropped them on the other side of the ground, he made sure not to let their intensified weight ruin the new tiles.

“I was handling them,” Kajii slurred. Blood flooded down his nose and from a split lip — he used it, very rationally, to draw stilyzed lemons on the floor. “All over some *money*?”

“You’re so stupid it’s alarming,” Chuuya decided. He glanced over to the duo. “Forgive the mess. He’s not the sharpest blade around.”

“He broke a wine bottle on my brother’s head!” the woman snapped, fruitlessly struggling against the invisible weight pushing her down.

“Fucker,” said brother mumbled, drenched to the bone. “I even bought him a drink.”

They were clearly twins, but if asked, he wouldn’t have been able to pinpoint *what* made them so similar — apart from the same shock of silver hair, a shade darker than Shirase’s was; longer on the man’s than on his sister’s military cut. Where he was thin and tall, she was bulky under black clothes — but something in their gazes was utterly *matching*.

“You two remind me of someone,” he crunched down, ignoring Kajii’s protests and, *man, you won’t even help me?* “When did you join?”

“Give me back my money and *maybe* I’ll tell you,” the woman grunted. “And get this — this *thing* off of me!”

“It’s an Ability, idiot,” her brother said.

“I’ll murder you next, ” she warned, glaring at Kajii’s moaning figure between Chuuya’s legs. His eyes were too busy to care — he leaned down, picking up the man’s weapon from under the back of his jacket.

“An Howa Type 20,” He spun it around his fingers. “Nice rifles. The GSS used these, up until some weeks before the *Nine Rings* conflict. You must have changed sides pretty recently.”

The twins exchanged a gaze. “What’s to you?”

“Nothing much,” Chuuya shrugged. “But you were with them when they formed an alliance with the Sheep, weren’t you?”

Lighting up with understanding, both their faces were quick to fall — recognition pulling their jaws to the wine-splattered ground.

He flipped the rifle, snapping his tongue. “Yes. I remember you. You were with the other helmeted bastards enjoying the show, when I got stabbed.”

“The fallen King of the Sheep,” the woman concluded, carefully. He brushed his *Tainted* off, scratching the tip of his shoe against the floor. “I suppose that’s a worn out title, though. The *Gravity Manipulator* has other nicknames, these days.”



“Do I?” he wondered. He threw the gun on the floor, after stealing the bullets and slipping them in his pockets. “Some examples?” He paused. “Possibly not from the *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter.”

Another look. The joke, it seemed, hadn’t landed. “Do I seriously have to buy you guys alcohol? Talk about *Pirate Honor*; ah, *GSSes*?”

“Better *GSSes* than the *Bishop’s Staff*,” the brother said, nonsensically.

“*Chuuya*,” Kajii groaned. “I think my ass is broken.”

With vertiginous ease, the murder attempt ended up with the four of them at the counter — chugging drinks and dripping blood down their clothes. Chuuya could get behind it. At least, they went straight to facts.

“I didn’t *mean* to break it on you,” Kajii swore, holding onto Kure Kenta’s hand, tearful. If he remembered his broken knuckles had been caused by the man’s sharp jaw, he didn’t show it. “Really! All that alcohol, wasted — if it had been wine —”

“Take that back,” Chuuya hissed, behind the edge of his glass. “You put lemonade in *vodka*. That’s fucking shit.”

“Don’t judge it until you try.”

“I’ll judge *you*. ”

“You think *Max Thank* or whatever his name is, is a valiant role model —“

Chuuya spluttered. “It’s *Max Planck* — and he discovered *Planck’s constant*, literally? It laid the foundation for the quantum theory —“

“Physics nerd.”

“Fucking *chemistry* nerd?”

Rin, the sister, cleared her throat. She was sipping her scotch, studying Chuuya a bit too cautiously to be drunk. Her brother’s head, on the other hand, was against the table. “We joined some months ago. Neither one of us has any taste for traitorousness.”

“Didn’t you betray the *GSS* to join?” Chuuya commented.

“No,” her brother muttered. “We were *kicked out*. Like pathetic little worms.”

“Talk for yourself,” Rin slapped the back of his head. “Personally, I think *they’re* the worms.”

“What did they do to you?”

“Started paying us less than what we were owed,” she spat out. “Have been doing this to most of the men, for months. No booze, no drugs, no money, no anything. People won’t work

for *nothing*. Their funds went to shit after the unlucky bet they made on the Sheep. Executive Kouyou took us in.”

Chuuya blinked. “You’re her subordinates? How come I never saw you around?”

“Must have run in different circles.”

“We were avoiding you,” Kenta offered.

“Nice,” he muttered.

“Well, can you *blame us*?” the man slurred, meeting Kajii’s eyes with drunken vigor. The Ability User was more than happy to support him, nodding energetically. “Imagine you — *hic!* — imagine you ruined the life of this *guy*, who’s super powerful — and then you find out he’s got *masses annihilation powers*, too?”

The leather of his gloves screeched around the neck of his glass.

“Yeah!” Kajii turned a half-lidded, betrayed look on Chuuya. “Man, why didn’t you tell me you were a whole natural catastrophe? You could have — you could have *incinerated me*.”

Chuuya downed his glass in one gulp. When he slammed it down, Rin was the only one not startled. “I still could, fucker.”

Kajii and Kento had seemingly decided that murmuring about the pros and cons of lemonade would be a good enough pastime. Maybe the silence was just in his mind; in the tight space between one rib and the other. An empty injection on his veins, with bubbles of oxygen forming under his skin and preparing to put him down.

“You do know they’ve been talking, right?”

He snorted. “As obsessed with gossip as the Mafia might be, they’re *not* good at whispering.”

“It’s good, you know?” Rin offered, behind the rim of her beer. “For them to fear you. You led the Sheep. You must know.”

“The Sheep weren’t —“

“What happened to them, anyway?”

“Greedy brats,” her brother added, eyes going off in opposite directions. “I’d be surprised if they’re still kicking it.”

Chuuya stared down his empty glass.

A familiar buzz drowned the alcohol haze; a question he’d heard many times, but only in corners of his skull, bumping and bouncing — never sticking around. Now that it was there, a withering creature to blink at, he wondered what Arahabaki would think of tearing it apart.

*Shirase*, he thought. Shirase was supposed to be closure, wasn't he?

He was safe in London, off to reclaim a crown Chuuya had never asked for; and he didn't *hate him*, and maybe he blamed him — but that was another matter, wasn't it? That was *closure*. A green jacket to the flames.

“Katsuki is probably a soldier,” he said finally. He wasn't quite drunk. He'd never allowed himself to try, not with the Sheep; the first time had been with the Flags. They'd refused to tell him the forgotten outcome; Iceman swore Chuuya had picked a fight about, *you dislike me, don't you?* “He'd — gotten himself some fake documents, just in case. He's always been tall. Tall fucker.”

“How old is he?” Rin asked, frowning.

Chuuya scratched his ear. He used to know this stuff. “Thirteen this year, I think?”

Ino was nine, and smaller than even Chuuya had been at her age. She had whispered to the GSS shooter next to her to aim for his forehead. She was good with a knife. She had a pretty face. He wondered which one of the two options would win; if she would end up like old Mina, one of the girls who'd welcomed Chuuya, taken by those white vans he had been too young to chase.

And then — Mitsuo, with his sign language that he'd mostly made up himself. Kyuo, who never quite understood how to use a gun, because he didn't *need to*. Fumiko and Aimi, the twins, who had liked his Ability the most. Momo, Arata, Michiko, and Saburo, and Kohaku, and Yoshito.

The silk veils in some wooden boxes in the lower levels of the crater, the lack of experience, of age, of *everything*. Chuuya had needed to remind some of them to *eat*.

And Yuan — *Yuan*, he mused, like an afterthought. Yuan had been good at running.

“So, dead, I assume,” he concluded, a bit angry, but not exactly sure of the target. Dazai, maybe, for his machinations. Or Mori, for offering something he wanted. Rimbaud, for not dying when Verlaine had killed him. “Most of them. I know they didn't regroup, so — I hope they are, at least.”

“You *hope*?” Kajii murmured, cheek against the sticky wood of the table.

“Not the worst thing that could happen to a child with no resources. Especially if they GSS want revenge for the failed alliance,” Chuuya stared at the glass in front of him — a bit blurry. He couldn't recall how many times it had been refilled. “I'll put a bullet in their heads myself, if it keeps them from —”

He trailed off.

“You cared about them,” Rin commented. “They didn't fear you.”

Chuuya shrugged.

“Wasn’t that the problem?”

The Sheep had never been scared of him. They’d had no reason to. He hadn’t wanted them to. Fear had arisen only at the very last moment — with a bloodied knife, and the knowledge that going back was no longer an option.

*Will he kill us*, he’d seen them think, seen them *panic*, seen them wonder. *Will he kill us, now that we don’t have the right to cry in his bed?*

But Chuuya was one of them. He’d been picked up from a bed of pitch and cockroaches, had been fed and clothed by them — had *sworn*, at eight years old, that nothing he might ever desire would ever be more important than keeping that house of cards still. Chuuya has wanted their asphyxiating embrace and their sucking claws — and he’d wanted them to leave him dry and boneless, if it would keep them alive.

Lippman had called it — *get over the tiny assholes, can you?* Doc had said — *a part of you feels like you were the one doing the betrayal, does it not?*

Chuuya had gathered their ripped limbs all on his own, before the cleaning squad had arrived at the *Old World*.

“*Nah*, ” he concluded, watching one of the barkeep refill his glass. “The problem was me.”

Chuuya didn’t want to be feared. He didn’t want to be Verlaine, striding through the world with empty eyes and a hunger for something that he couldn’t have. He didn’t want to be Dazai. He had nothing to prove — no one to beat. The body he’d held in his arms, whose eyes he had shared, was gone.

“And shitty Dazai, too,” he added, some moments later. “It’s *always* shitty Dazai’s fault.”

“Boss’ freak?” Kento blurted out.

He frowned at his glass. Indistinguishable, through the reddish haze, was the unknown land of the boy’s face, the caves and the bruises — even harder to climb over and struggle through and *see* than usual. *As in, Boss’ Dazai?*

Treacherous hypocrite until the very end, he concluded: “Fuck off.”

The rest of the night was a blur.

He thought, *the Flags would have loved this*.

In typical *Old World* fashion, two more fights started before the end of the evening. They refrained from doing more than look during the first one; by the time the second group jumped on each other, Chuuya’s guts were warm enough with wine to make him climb onto Kajii’s shoulder, as Rin and Kento mirrored them, barking along. He thought, *the Flags would have loved this*.

*The Flags would have loved this*. Sometimes after Chuuya and Rin tied their arm wrestling competition, Kento ended up challenging him to a drinking duel. Enthusiastic enough about

that first night, even the barkeeps crowded near the counter, chanting a litany of *Chug! Chug! Chug!* that spun faster than a washing machine through his ears. He thought, *the Flags* —

*This*, he thought — the bar, the music, the games, breathing and drinking and *existing* —

It was only when a small group of mafiosi had to drag Chuuya inside from the sidewalk — where he had begun viciously smashing street lights — that one of the barkeeps grabbed the back of his choker, pulling him over the counter.

“That’s quite enough,” Dazai Osamu said, behind an offensively fake pair of mustaches. “I’ve been feeding you water for half an hour. It was very entertaining! *Chug chug*, et cetera. You do recall we share a damages costs account, yes?”

Chuuya stared, dumbfounded.

*Dazai*, his brain attempted to connect. *Mustache*. It wasn’t even brown. Dazai in a fake mustache, standing over the passed-out body of a barkeeper. He reached for Rin’s glass of wine; he watched the boy move it away. *Dazai*. The mustache was *blond*. Dazai in a flag-shaped hairpin. The Flags would have loved watching him live to sixteen. The sound of pool games. He liked pool. He did not like Dazai. He reached for Rin’s glass of wine.

The boy slapped it away. “Are you stupid?”

“*No way*,” Kajii whispered, hidden under his stoll. His wide eyes were settled on the newcomer, fogging up his goggles with horror. “No way, Chuuya, *Chuuya* — we’re being attacked by the Port Mafia.”

Frustration veiled in his throat, stinging his eyes with unexplained tears. He slapped Dazai away, uselessly; gesticulated to the entirety of the bar. “You *idiot*,” he almost shouted, “You are Port Mafia, *je ne peux pas continuer à t'expliquer* —“

The man’s hands searched under his coat, desperately intent. “I’ve got my bombs right here, Boss, *n'ayez pas peur*, I’ve got them right *here* —“

Dazai jumped over the counter. He pulled him towards the exit, uncaring of choking him by the grip on his choker. He sighed: “I’m afraid suicide by explosion has recently been ruled out. Onto the next!”

*I don’t wanna leave*, he thought about screaming — it got stuck somewhere in his throat. Albatross was usually louder when he dragged him out — all dangling chains and singing songs. He would be disappointed. He wouldn’t give a shit. He was dead, and the Sheep better have been too, and it was all him, all him, *be grateful*, all him. *I don’t wanna leave. I don’t wanna stay*.

Sprawled on the floor, out of their minds, only half watching as Kajii fiddled with a lemon bomb, the twins raised their hands in a goodbye — mere seconds before Rin threw up in her brother’s lap.

“I’m sorry about the foot fungus thing, Kajii. You’re not a foot fungus!” Chuuya screamed back, helpless, as the door closed behind him. Albatross had never found out he’d stolen his favorite pair of sunglasses, and so, “— I’m *really* sorry I got you killed.”

Half dragging him, half attempting to get his arms to stop flagging around, so that he could pick him up on his back — Dazai stilled.

He stumbled out of his hands, snorting, again and again, until his nose burned and his throat choked on his *need* not to scream. The sound of a small-scale firework shook the ground, deaf to Dazai’s soundless moving lips — landing him face first into the nearest hedge.

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Despite the shattered car window, Hirotsu’s unimpressed gaze didn’t lay on them until he had *actually* pulled the backseat car door open.

“Did you know,” Dazai was insisting, reaching over to correct the lines of nonsensical *kanjis* Chuuya was sluggishly exercising writing on the man’s stolen notebook, “That you can’t commit suicide by holding your breath?”

“I could,” Chuuya garbled, immediately, eyes watering from the effort of remembering that recently-learned art. Discomfort was knocking on every corner, dutifully ignored — the tight fit of their bodies lying on the backseats, heads pushed against the car door; with Dazai’s freakishly long legs stubbornly pushing for space. His dirty footprint was tattooed on Chuuya’s best pants. Pieces of glass tickled his knees. His neck was curved unnaturally. “I really should,” he concluded.

“No, no,” he insisted. “Your muscles would stop you. And watch that stroke — what are you, a chicken leg? Look. *Like this.*”

“*Fuck* my muscles.”

“I’m infinitely smarter than you. Trust me on this. I was on the roof, the other day —“

He squinted at him. Dazai’s pupils were blown out of proportion — Chuuya tried to recall if he’d seen him ingest alcohol or headache pills, at some point between dragging him by the calves and almost getting thrown in the river. “Why were you holding your breath on the roof?”

He shrugged. In the tight space, and given their position, all it did was almost send himself rolling down under the seats. “Jumping sounded unoriginal.”

“You jumped yesterday.”

“That’s why it’s unoriginal, now.”

“Boys,” Hirotsu interrupted.

They looked up.

“Oh!” Chuuya exclaimed, before returning to his notebook. Dazai had scribbled a little dog on the corner of the page and, after kicking him between the legs — he had added a little hat on it. “Gramps. Drunk driving is a crime. Give us a ride.”

For good measure, Dazai reached over the backseats to pick up a lost coin, and threw it right into the man’s monocular.

The emergency light in the front seats was offensively bright. Chuuya had a vague memory of Murase and Matsuda screaming at him whenever he turned it on, on days they managed to lock him inside the police car. *Something something waste*, he thought, and, *something something battery*.

“I think electricity shouldn’t be taxed,” he declared.

Dazai perked up. “While we’re on it, I think penalizing suicide is frankly —“

“Alright,” Hirotsu sighed, pushing the door closed. “Let’s just go,” He slid into the driver’s seat, only slightly rattling them with the immediate acceleration. His knuckles were white around the steering wheel; he glanced through the rearview mirror, frowning at the unmistakable fresh bruises on both their faces. “You know, you could have just called, instead of breaking in.”

They stared, blankly.

He sighed again. “Where to?”

It was all strangely blurry. In the time it took Chuuya to squint, suspicious, Dazai stole the notebook from his hands. Undeterred, he reached for the edge of his black coat — and held it over their bodies like a makeshift *separé*.

“Do we trust Gramps?” Chuuya whispered.

Dazai turned so fast his neck creaked with it. Chuuya went strabismic in the effort to meet his eyes at that vicinity; he focused on his braces, instead, and had to bite down a senselessly victorious grin. “We don’t trust Gramps.”

“He’s *old*,” he hissed. “He has an *agenda*.”

“You’re ugly. I don’t trust you either. Why are you a *furnace*, anyway —“

Chuuya stole the notebook back. Dazai kicked his knee.

“Bet he wants to become Executive,” the boy insisted.

He gasped.

“Boys,” another voice intervened, “I truly have no aim to —“

“Well, what do we tell him?” Chuuya squinted.

“*Well* —“

“Boys,” Hirotsu interrupted, somehow, despite the coat-curtain. “I can hear you,” They gasped. “Oh, for God’s — I can drop you off at the HQs, if you prefer.”

They exchanged a look.

“Go here,” Dazai rattled off, eventually, with a deep sigh. “If I free a drunk Hatrack into the city, Mori might just sit me through another *Sanitary Habits* presentation. I can’t afford that,” The car took a sharp turn. Chuuya’s head bumped harder against the car door. He cursed.

Colors blurred and focused, the lights from the buildings pulsing against his retinas, framed by the glass-less window and the edge of the pages they sluggishly passed back and forth. *Beautiful, beautiful Yokohama*. Chuuya could have muttered a few words and razed it to the ground.

*Would you?*, someone asked. Pianoman had a tendency to sound reasonable; Iceman, *daring*. Chuuya had always preferred butting heads — it was why they never sent the older man to talk to him.

He wondered what their eyes would have looked like at the mention of Rengoku.

The *kanjis* grew less casual, after a while; he got the feeling Dazai had baited him into writing down some poem only he knew. *Every and each one, no distinction among them*, it read. *All taught to die was best*.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to help?” Hirotsu questioned, a good half an hour later. He was leaning against the destroyed window of his car, cigarette in hand, directing skeptical looks to the assortment of abandoned apartments in front of him. “I can carry him upstairs.”

“It’s Chuuya,” Dazai replied, muffled, attempting to drag him onto his back and not stumble.

“*I am* Chuuya,” he confirmed, head hanging crookedly from his shoulder.

Hirotsu sigh. “Drink some water.”

The boy started walking too soon — they crashed against the entrance doors. “You’re not the boss of me!” Chuuya called.



Safe-houses had been an unspoken idea, bloomed in the week of the aftermath of Beatrice's death. Her office under the Arcade had been the first of the bunch — whenever Chuuya had entered it, a new piece of mismatched furniture or emergency kit had been left on the ground.

Eventually, seemingly arbitrary doors all around Yokohama had started catching their eyes. Dazai had left dog-shaped stickers on the binds of an underground store, filling the doorknob in itching dust; Chuuya had hung a mummy-puppet dangling from its neck on the door of an abandoned apartment.

*Precaution*, he recalled justifying it, to no one in particular. Chuuya didn't remember much of the journey back from Rengoku, except the taste of blood. Chuuya had never really bled, before *Corruption* — and he had no intention of starting in the open street.

The gaming systems had been a whim.

“Technically, it's Mori's bucks,” Dazai said — blue controller held between his chin and his shoulder; so that he could keep his eyes on the TV and gingerly gulp take-out noodles. “What else is the mission budget for?”

“Weapons,” Chuuya guessed, mercilessly attacking his own red controller. Cooling water brushed his chin, breaking right at the edge of his bent knees; he wasted a blink, as he always did, wondering what patron had decided to place a bathtub in the living room. “Men. Car lifts. Stuff to help the mission.”

The boy thought about it. Shrugged. “It's easier when I make the plan and you kill them.”

He retched. Dazai shivered.

The apartment would have been considered a scam by most of the working class — weirdly placed rooms, strangely shaped windows, and destroyed kitchen aside, it gave the impression of being about to fall. It had no furniture, apart from the one they had dragged in; electricity was a guess, and water usually came in a single, powerful rush, before shutting down for the rest of the night.

Chuuya's biggest concern was the family of spiders Dazai refused to kill — then again, he had only woken up with one of them walking over his face *once*. The Sheep, he knew, would have treated that place like a goldmine.

*You don't owe poverty to anyone, you know?*, Kouyou had retorted, the first time she had visited his apartment. *None of the richness you refuse to take advantage of is ending up in their pockets.*

Chuuya hadn't answered.

He studied the edge of his boxers, floating under the only *slightly* strangely colored water. His box of food was a makeshift ship over the surface; the torn piece of wet shirt he had tied around his forehead wasn't quite helping with the hangover.

He said: “About Tsuchiya Yukio.”

From the other end of the bathtub, soaked bandages in place, Dazai's face freed the way for amusement. "Are you going to tell me I went too far?" he asked, like he already knew the answer.

The edges of it all were still a bit blurred — a crueler sort of daze, not merciful enough to make him unaware. "Ask stupid questions again," he said, studying the whitish line of the scythe scar on his forearm, "And I'll kill you."

Forgotten, his car crashed somewhere on the side of the screen. A crown appeared over Dazai's own character — his untouched noodles stared back at him.

"I just think it's interesting."

"What is?"

Dazai scratched his ear against the edge of the tub. He was paler than moonlight, apart from the sunburned spots. Chuuya could count his ribs, if he squinted. *Weren't the bandages a pain?* They had to be. *Were they?* "Your concept of authority."

"I'm too drunk for this."

"You respect Mori," he insisted. "But I'm just like him, and you don't normally approve of my methods."

*What a weird thing to say.* Not because it *wasn't* true — not because it *was*. Similarities laid in crossed hands under chins and people rolling in their palms; useful or not. Differences relied on the assumption that someone would care enough to search for them.

"You're not like him," Chuuya said, slowly. It was supposed to be taunting, he believed.

Dazai's soaked bangs stuck to his skin, somehow always feverish. He was all sharp lines, despite the lingering childhood; Chuuya could imagine what he would look like in a few years. All *sharper* lines. Women would keep sending bombs and breaking *Chuuya's* phone with calls.

He was making a face. His braces were catching the light. His hairpins were all over the floor. "What a weird thing to say."

Chuuya recoiled, kicking water. Feeling like there was something more to be said — feeling like he might just never say a thing again, and Dazai might not either, and it might just be *fine* — he grunted: "I don't care who you punish. But my affiliation with you creates problems. I need Tsuchiya and Noguchi to collaborate."

"Ah, yes," Dazai commented, uninterested, dangling his head over the edge of the bathtub. His bandaged throat was washed in the *START AGAIN?* lights. "Your *Amazing Six*."

It was a lost fight from the beginning. He stared at the hint of *wrongness* he couldn't quite place on his naked hands, hidden under the veil of water. "At least don't antagonize them."

"But they're *boring*, aren't they?"

“It’s not for long. Just ‘till,” He hiccuped; wondered where his gloves were, and if his shoulders should have been tenser about it. “‘Till I get my Executive seat.”

The snort that abandoned him was real, at the very least. “You have such big dreams for a tiny slug. Unrealistic, too.”

“No way you’re beating *me*,” he scoffed. “Making us fight together will just highlight how unrealistically pathetic you can be.”

“*You need me*,” Dazai snapped his tongue. “The same can’t be said for the opposite.”

“You’d be dead ten times over if I weren’t around,” he drawled. “Need to remind you *whose* collaboration *you* asked for, when nobody would believe you about the crosses?”

A hint of pettiness pulled the boy’s face — which meant a *win*, but not one he would acknowledge. “I’m still becoming an Executive before you.”

“*No*, you’re not.”

“*Yes*, I am.”

“You can’t even fight right —“

“When *I* become Executive —“

“Which is *not* going to happen —“

“Let’s bet, then,” Dazai challenged, because he was *dirty*, and he was a child, and Chuuya never saw him quite as lively as he was when the prospect of putting him in the mud appeared.

“*Fine*,” he snapped, sitting up straighter; pushing water out of the bathtub and onto the ruined tiles. He stumbled to the side, only a bit; he picked up his chopsticks, stuffing the boy’s mouth with shower-wet noodles. “I bet that I’m going to become an Executive before you.”

“And I *bet*,” the boy rebutted, through his forced munching, “That *I’m* going to be the youngest Executive in the Port Mafia’s history.”

“When *I* win, you’re going to receive the most *horrid, bone chilling* price of your life —“

“And when *I* win,” Dazai taunted, pushing himself forward on the water, until the slimy skin of his knees pressed against his, “*You’ll* regret not getting tortured to death by Professor N.”

He offered his hand. In the darkness of the safe-house, a frown overtook the boy’s traits. “Why?”

Chuuya blinked. “To seal the *bet*, moron.”

“That’s not how you do it.”

“What, you wanna link fucking pinkies?”

The sudden grip over his palm startled him; astonished as he was, he let Dazai play around with his hand, until every finger but the little one was bent. His pale finger, wet and bony, was confident and quick to wrap around his gloved one.

“*Now*, it’s a bet,” In a motion he didn’t recognize, he made their knuckles knock, clicking his thumb with his own. “Got it? Look at us. I could vomit.”

“It’ll be over when I kill you.”

Dazai’s pity was tactile. “Torturous latency is to be expected from you, but still.”

“It’s just a word,” Chuuya spat out, curtly. He ripped his hand away from the other’s grip. “Mori can fantasize all he wants. You can call me *partner* all you fucking like. I didn’t sign any damn blood pact.”

Cruel to the bone, and intoxicated, and *familiar*, Dazai’s grin broke his face in two.

The determination with which he stood rained a new wave of water all over him, soaking the floor even further. Chuuya cursed him out, as he watched him jump out into the warm air to kick the controllers away from the puddle — bumping against walls in his effort to gather his clothes, stalking to the kitchen.

Chuuya looked at the bright shadows the small television had painted on the floor. He pushed a noodle out of the bathtub; hanging onto the edges of the ceramic, he sank underwater.

The silence was utterly incommensurable.

It pressed against his ears, muffling any hiss that wasn’t the twirling blood inside his veins. He watched strands of hair float in front of his aching, unblinking eyes — didn’t realize he had curled up on the floor of the tub, until an echo of sleepiness slithered between the fingers he was cutting through those ersatz waves.

He recalled — blurred, at the edges — the torn apart belly of a stray cat, abandoned at the doors of one of the Sheep warehouses. Whatever sadie had done that to her had not known she was pregnant. Chuuya recalled watching a small, pinkish shadow — barely a kitten; barely a breath at all — crawling through the blood; *attempting* to fit inside the open gash of its mother’s womb.

*Won’t you let me go home?*

Neon green flickered behind his eyes. Lines of numbers — lines and lines and lines, and cold and dark and *quiet*. A hand on a glass tank.

He kicked his head out, stumbling out of the tub, gaping for hair.

“What are you doing,” he demanded, as blankly as he could possibly muster up, dripping water onto the kitchen tiles.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dazai’s head was stuck under the counter, gathering vase after vase. He slammed them on the marble. Chuuya wasted no time wondering why that specific safe house had been filled with strawberry jam.

He lifted a knife to open them. Chuuya spluttered: “That’s *mine*, you ass —“

“Hey — take off your gloves.”

Defensiveness spread through his body like fire on gasoline. A bit too pathetically for it to work, he hid his already-naked hands behind his back. “Why?”

“I want to draw dicks on your knuckles.”

“Fuckin’ entertainer you are.”

“I know, you have your whole dauntless philosophy going on,” the boy huffed, wildly bumping his fist against the base of a particularly stubborn jar. “*If I take my hands off my pockets it means I will fight to live, and blah, blah, blah*. I assume the gloves work similarly? All the same, no need to be dramatic. Take them off, yes?”

Chuuya spluttered. “I don’t — I don’t *talk like that*, you bandaged giraffe —“

“Giraffe? Because I’m *tall*?”

“Because you look *stupid*!”

“What have giraffes ever done to —“

The jar opened, at last, splattering jam all over the counter. Dazai stared at the mess. For the first time that night, Chuuya took notice of his lack of leg-cast and crutches. “Look what you did.”

“What *I did*? ”

Openly ignoring him, Dazai slid both his hands on the counter, palms up. “Don’t be annoying.”

“You —“

“For however arduous it might be for you.”

He slapped his nape.

“Do it or you’re a coward.”

“I *hate you*. ”

Only a candle on top of the refrigerator illuminated the room. Next came Dazai’s intent gaze, serious in its chilling amusement — as if taking responsibility for his own tricks.

Feeling foolish to take the bait, Chuuya gingerly laid his naked palms on the pale ones on the counter.

The rush of *No Longer Human* was as detested as ever — familiar in its shape and in the useless resistance his body put up against it. Tiny needles prickling every pore of his skin, seeping inside, grasping, *pulling*, turning off something that didn't even know how to recharge.

"See," Dazai said, "That was easy. Now."

Distracted as he'd been, it took him a moment to understand what the sudden, *slimy* cold against his palms was.

"Are you *fucking kidding me?*" he screeched, trying to pull his hands away, stopped by the death grip of pale fingers around his wrists. Jam went flying everywhere. "That's disgusting —"

"Now you're just being dramatic," Dazai huffed, peacefully continuing to spread jam on both their hands with one of Chuuya's knives. "To think I was trying to compromise for you."

He gritted his teeth. "*Compromise?*"

"Surely you didn't want me to actually cut your palm?" He blinked, raising his knife. Jam dripped from the edge of the blade. "Rituals have unusual requisites. I *had* considered putting up the candles and all, but I'm allergic to candle wax."

"Of course you are."

"I don't get why people have to cut their palms, anyway," Daza continued, idly. "Such a messy work. And *painful*, too, which — no, thanks. An elbow would do. Anyway, mixing our blood seems a bit — extreme. Who knows what canine germs you might pass me. I'm not ready to jungle the weight of human-animal experimentation —"

Chuuya hit the nearest jar with his elbow, splashing the boy's face with a satisfying amount of jam. Plain exasperation painted his traits.

He snorted, unabashed. The knife pressed harder against his finger — cutting. "*Hey!*"

"Now, because of you, it's jam *and* blood," Dazai muttered, jam pooling down his nose.

"Man, that's gonna get infected —"

"With *what?* Strawberries?"

"Seriously, *what* did the pollution in the river even do to you —"

"*I, hereby,*" Dazai interrupted him, dropping his tone — and when Chuuya raised his voice, he repeated it, again and *again*, until their screams were an indistinguishable storm of adolescent voice-cracks and pettiness, hands pulling and jam dirtying the counter, the knife flying somewhere on the floor — "*I, hereby,*" he screeched, high enough to plug his ears,

keeping his hands still with his whole forearm as they rolled around the kitchen, kicks and punches and assured bruises, *“In the name of the blood that was spilled and the will whose honesty we will never contest —”*

*“Is that the recruitment ritual —”*

*“— I shall here permanently bind Nakahara Chuuya’s canine existence to the desires and orders of —”*

*“Do you want me to kill you — ”*

*“ ...Nakahara Chuuya’s canine existence to Dazai Osamu’s, in the name of a much detested partnership, promising to not stick each other’s furniture to the ceiling and cover the doorknob in celery dust, especially when said dog knows that it gives me asthmatic attacks —”*

*“ — and what the hell do you — ”*

*“ — and only minimal insults about your hats — ”*

*“ — don’t believe that for a second — ”*

*“And all those nice, revolting things partners are supposed to do, unless I get bored, in which case I will ask our men to shoot you straight and clean in the forehead —”*

Perhaps the wine-haze ran deeper than he had initially thought. Chuuya couldn’t quite remember what the rest of the ritual had demanded — by the time his pounding head allowed him to open his eyes again, he was starfishing on the floor, trying to find the moon through graffitied *kanjis* on the broken ceiling.

One of the older Sheep had attempted to teach him the bases of reading, he recalled; and then he stopped recalling, because it was *draining* — trying to contextualize the Sheep’s kindness.

*The Flags*, he considered, *had been easier*.

Good-hearted to the bone, over the first three layers of blood on their hands. *The Flags hadn’t needed him*, he added, ungrateful, *and it had felt good* — and he got the peculiar feeling that if he continued on that line of thought, he would end up emptying his guts in the broken toilet.

*“What does Corruption feel like?”* he asked.

Busy painting skylines on the wall with jam and the blood trailing down his nose, the line of Dazai’s shoulders — under the soaked dress shirt that never fit him right — didn’t change.

He thought about it. *“Like it shouldn’t exist,”* he offered, eventually.

It sounded unmistakably sincere — his words were melting acrylics, and Chuuya had learned to cup his hands in the right place to stop a mess.

Disgust gathered under his nails. Chuuya traced the spiral scars on his arms — didn't notice that it had turned into scratching them until Dazai accidentally dropped his knife, startling him.

*Gloves*, he thought, but didn't move. His hands were covered in jam. The bad taste was still stuck in his mouth — Tanaki grabbing a gun; the pool tables at the *Old World*, with no rust and no handprints he knew; the way the light had filtered in through what the diaries said was Verlaine's favorite window. He wondered if Arahabaki could feel disappointment, if not the rest of it — if he knew both his and Dazai's skins were off limits. If it was just Chuuya who was starving.

"Come on," he said. His arms were itching. The wine had made him jittery; France had made him tight, hugging himself in a space that was wider than what reality wanted him to believe. On the reflection of the bathtub, his smile was more crooked than the crust of the earth. "The Colonel wants me to learn control, yeah?"

Dazai studied him.

He didn't speak as Chuuya stumbled out of the safe-house — he followed with hands lifeless and waiting, as they left jam-footprints on the concrete and dragged their soaked limbs to the parking lot of *Soul's* corpses. *Tainted* appeared in snapshots, devastating the ground and making him as light as a feather.

*The sky*, he thought. He wasn't sure if he was floating over it all or not; the stars were closer than any feasible answer. Chuuya had crawled out of his own devastation and seen them, first thing.

A hand wrapped around his wrist.

Dazai was too close. He hadn't picked up his hairpins from the floor; his hair was a mess. The quiet was goosebumps-inducing — only then, over the echoing *nothing* of his skull, Chuuya tasted the words perched on the roof of his own mouth.

"I think I'm suicidal enough for the both of us," Dazai informed him.

Analytical. Curious, at the edges.

Chuuya couldn't say if the curve of his lips was his own. But Arahabaki was nothing that *he* wasn't, and there had to be a *point*, he thought — a moral of the story. *Get something out of everything*, Mori had ordered, perched on his Hospital bed, tracing the spiral scar on his knuckles. *What else was it for, otherwise?*

"What," He dragged the letters out. *Be grateful*, he reminded himself. "Actin' like you don't wanna see it?"

Dazai's fingers grew weaker around his wrist. His pupil was still blown out. *Pretty like death*, Chuuya had heard someone whisper about him, once. He couldn't figure out if he would have appreciated it or not. He couldn't figure out why he hadn't killed him, for the crime of laying a single foot inside the *Old World*.



“You know,” Dazai offered, like it didn’t matter at all, “I truly dislike it when you speak French.”

Something snapped.

The sound of skin tearing apart was familiar in the way of memories he didn’t have, and that still *tingled* — wet and warm and *deaf* under the sudden white noise, high-pitched and never ending; the abandoned microphone on a cursed stage. His fingers clawed at his mouth; only when they came away bloodied — he realized he was the one speaking.

*Quit it, now*, one of the Sheep had said, shaking him awake. The sky was starry and alive. He wasn’t drowning. He wasn’t dreaming. *There’s no enemy. You’re the only one screaming.*

*More*, Arahabaki crooned, sweeter than wine and gentler than his brother’s walls — and he knew there was use in that, too. There was use in all that kept him alive. Chuuya just needed to remember he *was*.

[You are not to blame, *the poem they had scribbled in Hirotsu’s backseat had read. Chuuya tried to recall if his ink strokes had been something Kouyou would have been proud of. I, of course, am not to blame. Everything is the doing of loneliness*].

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*The day before he left for France, Mori met his eyes from the other side of his mahogany desk, and asked: “Mind walking some steps with me?”*

*Refusal was a snap of the tongue, easy and familiar. Balance was a thing of bones and flesh, though: Arahabaki had no men to fear. Arahabaki, still, was nothing but a prisoner. Since the first time he had heard his name, Chuuya had thought about killing Mori exactly four times.*

“No,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

*Stained-glass windows lead their way down the Hall, shattering in a thousand crystal squares. Chuuya stepped on them in a silent game, skipping the yellows and landing on the blues; then crossed his hands behind his back and straightened up.*

“Are you mad at me?” Mori started.

*It was an unusual starter. “What for, sir?”*

*“For the proposal I made you and Dazai.”*

*A vein started pulsing on his temple, tired and irritated. He scowled his features into something more peaceful. “It’s just work, sir. Differences will be,” He swallowed, “Put aside.”*

*“How mature,” Mori commented, not necessarily because he believed it. “Your collaboration is bound to raise some eyebrows. Or — I heard you two have been referring to it as a partnership?”*

*Chuuya made a face. “I do have better terms in mind. He refuses to listen to them, though.”*

*“Most are unable to understand why someone as promising as you would work with him.”*

*Something in that wording made him pause. “Is Dazai,” he dared, “Not promising?”*

*Small steps, heavy soles. A hum that might have been the beginning of a laugh. “Dazai is unstable. As such, being promising is a roll of the dice, in his regards. His interest follows the wider puddle of blood on the ground, only to despise it a moment later.”*

*“That’s not unstableness,” he pointed out, after a beat. “That’s just him being bored.”*

*“A mafioso bored by life does not signal unstableness, in your opinion?”*

*He had nothing to say, so he didn’t.*

*“As I hope you will forgive me for —” the doctor continued. “This is one of the reasons why I have insisted so deeply on the matter of your collaborations”*

*“With all due respect, Boss,” Chuuya kept his eyes forward. “I can’t stop him from leaping off the nearest roof.”*

*“I would never expect you to. And it is not quite my concern.”*

*“Do you want him dead?”*

*He regretted it the moment he said it.*

*Mori only blinked at him, though — a bit timid, a bit clueless; the way he interacted with Elise when she was most annoyed with him. “Chuuya, I’d be terribly disappointed if that happened.”*

*Makes sense, he considered, uneasy. And then — was disappointment a shade of grief?*

*“All the same,” Chuuya concluded. “I won’t have to worry about it any longer, once I’m Executive.”*

*Mori laughed. “Even an inch of your confidence would benefit many men in the organization. Your Flags taught you well. Although, I can’t recall a time when you weren’t like this.” He wondered, offhandedly, if unstable had been among the words the Boss had used to convince*

*Pianoman to keep an eye on him. “Their efforts to help you are proof of their worth,” he continued. “Going against me, even, just to make sure you might gather some information about your past...”*

*“They weren’t trying to challenge your authority, Boss,” he was quick to assure. “The information on my past was a — a leash of sorts. They understood. They waited until they were sure that having gained what I wanted wouldn’t drive me away from the organization. This is my place. I wouldn’t leave it.”*

*“That is...” Mori’s scarf brushed against the glass stains on the floor. “That is certainly a relief. You fit to a fault with us, Chuuya. It is inevitable that you will thrive here — in whatever way you choose to. It is a shame, though,” he continued. “That your Flags’ efforts were so valiantly nullified by the machinations of Professor N.”*

*Chuuya paused. “I’m not sure I follow.”*

*The doctor smiled, somewhat privately, chin brushing his coat — laughing at some joke he hadn’t been invited to the punchline of. “Well, most of their information stemmed from the picture they found. The one of you and Professor N, yes? Unfortunately, the photo was taken when you had already been detained by the military facility.”*

*He blinked, slowly.*

*The picture, he recalled, distantly. Chuuya hadn’t looked at it once. The black curtains of what had been before were a place, not a lack — water and numbers and men in lab coats. Chuuya didn’t care, behind that. Chuuya couldn’t.*

*He had to have had a family, he thought. He had to have had a mother, a father — people who had given him a name they must have cried for. “It’s a shame,” he offered, unsure of whether it was a lie or not. “But you promised me you’d look into my origins, didn’t you?”*

*“If you still wish for me to,” the man replied. “Get to the Executive position, and I promise to give it to you.”*

*And then what?, he wondered.*

*“Sir,” he asked, pointlessly. “What happened to Verlaine’s body?”*

*Mori’s curled eyebrow wasn’t enraged, so he assumed that question was allowed. “You wish to pay your respects to a man who hurt you so deeply?”*

*“No,” Chuuya made a face. “No, it’s not — it’s not that.”*

*“Spitting on his grave would be considered just as reprimandable, I believe.”*

*“It’s not about the grave, or revenge, or anything else,” he insisted. “Really. I just — I’d like to know.”*

*The doctor sighed. His gloved hands twirled under the painted lights, purples and blues reflecting on the white fabric — breaking in a thousand shards against the sharp lines of his*

face. “Why?”

*I don't know, he didn't beg, frustrated. He'd punched it into a wall and framed it next to the unreal pictures in Rimbaud's home. I don't know, he promised. He wanted to see Verlaine's body all disfigured, bones tickling the air, neck snapped, legs gone like Doc's had, cut too short like his friends' lives — covered in such endless rivers of blood their hair would finally match.*

*He wanted to see him pristine and resting — wanted to apologize for killing the man he loved, even if he'd killed him first. He wanted to kill him himself, again, and again, and again, until Lippman's body stopped rolling out of that damn car. He wanted to ask — do you long for it too?*

*“There was no body anything could happen to, Chuuya. Your brother's Singularity destroyed him. All we found was your hat,” Mori bowed his head. “I do apologize for the disappointment.”*

*Light and silence. His scars itched.*

*His mouth: “Better for everyone.”*

*“But is there anything else I can give you?” the man asked, after some silent steps. “A good luck gift of sorts, for your journey.”*

*Chuuya thought about it.*

*“Say, Boss,” he dared, hesitantly.*

*The man's letter — he didn't yet know — would read as such: what did Corruption feel like, this time around?*

*Like I shouldn't have done it, Chuuya, at the edge of Rimbaud's roof, would write back — and burn it, never to be sent. Like I won't know how to stop.*

*“What do you know about poisons?”*

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya: i am doing just fine

anyway in his near vicinity: and btw the flags —

chuuya: [youreexperincingpsychosis.png]

hi there! i want to start from thanking you guys again for the sweet, sweet words for last chapter! starting out with chuuya scared me a bit, but i'm glad it seems to have been well received <3 i do hope you'll continue to enjoy his pov.

onto the chapter — the one thing i want to point out, as an easter egg of sorts, is that the whole “smashing streetlights/light poles” is actually a canon fun fact from irl Nakahara Chuuya himself! apparently, one time when he was drunk, he not only tried to pick a fight with a much taller Ango Sakaguchi, but also started crying by the end of it and smashed several light poles. an ancient icon.

as for the plot — this chapter was certainly more of a filler for what's about to come. chuuya has some stuff to juggle, what with the colonel's “unexplained” rancor (or is he) and noguchi's “unexplained” annoying ass (or is he) and dazai in general. dazai in general might be the worst one. what did you think about the jam ritual? it's actually one of the first things i ever thought for this fic lmao. and the corruption at the end... wonder why that just happened out of nowhere. surely it won't be plot relevant or anything.

anyway! i'm sure i had more to say, but i'll guess i'll just say it next chapter. i hope you all have a lovely day, and i hope you'll keep reading! comments and kudos are always appreciated. keep warm!

see you <3

# PALE

## Chapter Summary

*Two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end :)!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xiii.*

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*Case number: 99985672*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. disappeared after [...]*

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*Two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes.*

*He assumes. Their bright emerald glow burns his retinas, blinking on the black computer screen on the other side of the glass. Maybe they are carved on the glass itself, and the black is nothing more than a quirk; a consequence to the darkness pressing him down. In that metallic womb, he knows — all is shadows and cold and the monster that shares his pillowless bed.*

*What a curious thought, he thinks. But what — [the sky is close enough to touch. There is no reason not to do so, when it's right there; he does. His hand feels weird and looks wrong; it should be darker than it is, like a glove. Only freckles and blood, craters tearing him into pieces, dancing cracks, crimson rivers separating his skin in two, ripping it apart, and where is the sky, again? It —]*

*— even is a pillow?*

*More than their color, what unnerves him is the codes' flow. Imperceptible, almost, with how fast it goes; from left to right, right to left, up and down, down and up, a spiral hypnotizing his careless eyes, not smart enough to look away — but smart enough to understand that two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes are definitely long enough to follow him wherever he might try to hide.*

*Behind the lines, there's him.*

*His eyes confuse him the most. Their blue is a light in the radioactive ink he's floating in, colder than winter in color, but warmer than anything he might have experienced long enough to write a comparison. They settle on him. They stare. They look. They know him. They accuse him.*

*They're right.*

*Look at you, a voice says, somewhere. Maybe everywhere; maybe from the lips behind the glass. He's got his hands plastered on the tub, and he's been knocking — but he must have stopped, at some point, because the voice is free to break the silence.*

*Look at — [someone is calling his name. Sirens, he thinks, sirens and footsteps and the sound of a castle crumbling. His body feels on fire; every ounce of blood is poison, is water, is liquid sun, and he is nothing more than a body, and he's on fire. You don't understand, the voice screams, and it seems uncharacteristic, and the sirens are meant to be seen, not heard — you don't understand, he's under there, you need to let me get him, you — Someone is laughing. Is that him? Can't he see he's dying? Can't you —]*

*— you. It's all you need to do —*

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— causing me troubles,” the voice said, too far and too close.

Scratchy vowels and muffled consonants; it came to his ears behind a waterfall. There was nothing to think, nothing to feel; he *was*, and that was all. The voice moved closer — a warm flame in the darkness; a heartbeat that had nothing different from all the others.

He reached forward, mindless and hungry, ready to sink — found the weight of the sky on every inch of him, pressing until his ribs could carve themselves a place in his lungs. Arms sneaked around his shoulders, dragging him from the back, constricting, *stubborn*, nails sinking in, refusing to let go until he stopped moving.

Silence.

Pain.

Behind the waterfall, he found, somewhat disappointingly, there was only the moon. He opened his mouth to express his distaste; all that came out was a choked whimper, or a scream, or something else entirely, as his knees hit the concrete, as *agony* invaded lands he’d forgot he owned, set fire to the grass and stepped on in polluted waters, and so he waited, gritting his teeth, because silence would come again, it always did, and the wounds would close, they always did, and the *silence* —

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*The green lines are beeping.*

*He knows this, because no heart-lines of his could produce that sound. The boy behind the glass knows it, too — knows it wouldn’t be the same, if he were allowed to leave the tub, to*



*show off the thing in his chest, petty like a child, because he is a child, and so is —*

*So am I, he explains, lips against the glass, and it's cold, like he always is, and it makes sense — like mother like child. So am I —* [there are beating hearts on every withering flower, and his mind embraces the world, and there are so many *lights*, so many heartbeats, so much blood. There is so much blood. There is so much blood. There will never be enough blood, and he knows, he *knows*, there might be silence if there were enough blood, and if there wasn't, he would bring it himself —]

*— so am I.*

*The boy in the tub does not believe him. That is fine. The men in the white coats will convince him instead. There will be sparks in that pressing darkness, and maybe they'll be bright enough to drown out the green of two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes. Maybe they'll be bright enough to kill the boy in the tub, and then there'll be no one to show off something he doesn't have.*

*You're being mean, the boy in the tub explains.*

*Guilt devours him. Forehead against forehead, divided by a glass, by two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes, he says sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I want you dead. I want you free. I am the best you will ever be. Sorry if I don't know how to be it.*

*Fuck you, he thinks, then, and it's not very childlike, but he's not either —* [there is liquified concrete under his nails; or maybe it's skin, hardened by trials, bones softened by disuse. He laughs. He laughs. He laughs. There is so much blood in him, is there not? It might make him happy. Might make him quieter. Might clean the dirt under his nails. Isn't he blood, isn't he hungry, isn't he laughing? Isn't he *happy*, for once —]

*— fuck you, fuck you and your glass, fuck you and your heart, and I am you, can't you see? He is floating — banging hands that will never be soft and unscarred against a glass, watching two thousand, three hundred eighty-three lines of codes build him up, reassemble him, shape him into something he's not, but he'll be. He will —*

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*— leather stuck to his raw skin, brushing a layer that should have embraced his bones in solitude. It squelched wetly and nauseatingly when he moved, dragging part of him away with itself — forming a warm pool under his back.*

“Don’t do that,” the voice chirped. Car honks appeared, distantly. He moaned — the motion caused him a coughing fit, wetting his lips and chin in liquid heat. “Now, *now*. Don’t be like that.”

Naked fingers sunk *in* his chest, through the banks of his bleeding rivers, and he cursed them out, loud enough to set his throat on fire, kicking and kicking and *kicking*, blinking painfully at the emergency light almost over his head, and *were they in a car?* Hands gripped his skull, and it was *good*, almost, because it was *quiet*, and it was *warm* against his decaying skin, and he wanted them *gone* — hands covered his mouth, forcing him to be quiet. Naked fingers sunk in his chest.

“I’ve never stitched someone else up,” the voice insisted, somewhat conversational, a hint — perhaps made-up — panicked. “What a boring death you might have.”

It lulled him, somehow — the unfailable rhythm of it. *Something* pulling his skin together, hands pushing the overflowing blood to the side; brushing hair off his soaked forehead; pressing harder on his mouth when he started to scream — not even complaining when he bit down. The hazard lights of the car had been turned on; slowly, his heartbeat fell in symbiosis to their melody.

Every inch of him was on fire. He tried to speak against the palm cutting his air off, either on purpose or not, but his vision blurred, fog climbing his scratched throat to reach his eyes, the eyelashes he couldn’t bat, blood sticking them together. He tried to push himself up; gentler than he would have expected, the hands laid him down again.

Unreasonably angry, he breathed in, and forgot to breathe out.

“I’ve got you,” the voice assured, and it sounded mocking, sincere, cruel and dishonest, scheming and apologetic, and *young*, he thought, so agonizingly *young*, too young to have a corpse in the backseats of a car, too young to do stitches under emergency lights, and he had nothing else, and if he would just *touch him again*, then *maybe* — “Stop fretting over your uselessness.”

*Bleeding out*, he considered — bleeding out in the backseats of a car, with Dazai Osamu patching his stolen corpse back into shape, right in time for a second funeral, a *second funeral*, how pathetic was *that* —

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*Lippman is staring at him.*

*It is, he considers, quite rude. His tendency to blink every three seconds — I do need to make sure the make up stays in place, Chuuya — is nowhere to be seen. He lays, crooked and wide eyed, one leg hooked to the hood of his brother's car, one hand brushing the road. He stares. Does he want something? He must. No other reason to look at him.*

*You should help the guy, Shirase says, bored, dangling his legs, seated on a wooden box — some abandoned prize by some stupid trader; as if the first rule of Suribachi City wasn't, never leave your stuff where children can reach it.*

*At least help him, yeah?*

*Unfair, he considers. Unfair, unfair, unfair, but he can't quite remember why, and if he's right. Unfair, still. Not that he tells Shirase; not that he ever will. Unfair, but it doesn't quite matter.*

*Sorry, he says, kneeling next to Lippman. But his bloodied body is gone, and that man's face is staring back at him — untouched and pale, human and yet not, blond braid soaked in blood, and he's angry, so angry, how dare he? Sorry, brother, still. He will apologize until he has a tongue, but only in his mind.*

*There's a child bleeding on the ground. The sticky rubies reach his shoes — no, his feet are naked, and he's smaller, is he not? The child is not even a child. He's a bundle of blood and possibilities, and so why should it be his fault, when he can blame —*

*"A child who was given a gift he doesn't deserve," Dante considers, hands on his shoulders. "Who thinks it gives him a right to do whatever he wants."*

*Rimbaud is sitting on his grave. He offers him a smile, because bloodied lips have no excuses not to be put to use. Dear, he says, you could have at least fixed the bed, before leaving.*

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There were roughly thirteen metal panels on the roof, and a hangman knot over the seventh.

He took his time to count them — catalog them through the cages of his eyelashes; to feel the rough texture of the mattress of his creaking bed, no sheets or pillow. To get attuned to the overwhelming warmth and the flames licking his throat, the absolute numbness of most of his body, and the *pain* — the *pain* —

*A stool*, he noticed, cheek on the pillow. A stool and a desk, covered in dossiers, and a fridge, small and rusty, emitting a low hum that he didn't know if *he* should have been able to hear. And —

He recoiled so fast his body bumped against the wall the bed was leaned on, rattling the whole place. It tore a curse out of his sticky lips, and he breathed harshly, eyes on the *thing* hissing quietly at the feet of the bed —

“Don't be rude,” Dazai called, somewhere — *was he sitting under his desk?* — knocking on the haze of his eyes. “Kazuko was just saying *hi*. Or, perhaps, she mistook you for a very small snack.”

*That's a boa constrictor*, he wanted to say. They were in a shipping container, and he had torn so many stitches apart with that startled move his head was starting to spin — and his bandages were covered in blood, and Dazai was reaching out to pet a *boa constrictor* named Kazuko.

Quicker than he would have thought possible, the boy was on him, pushing him down onto the bed — and he was covered in blood, too, every inch of his dress shirt and every blooming stain on his face, eyebags purple and metal glinting on his wrist — *handcuffs?*

Inside his hollow bones, Arahabaki licked his lips, loud, *everywhere*, the way he was whenever he was allowed to tip-toe out of his cage — whenever a tip-toe became a footprint, whenever a footprint became a crater in his ribcage.

“You need to stay still, stupid,” Dazai told him, over the hisses and the statics. One of his fingers escaped, and the pad brushed his clavicle and *silence*, he thought, *silence*, some *silence* —

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*The boy in the tub is dying.*

*He shakes him, cradles his cheeks until he makes a funny face, and he insults him, and he knocks on a glass that's not there any longer. Forehead against forehead, he begs for his life, for reasons that are selfish and are necessary. Because he needs proof, and because he doesn't want to know, and because what else do you do, when someone puts a secret in your hands? What else do you do, when the one you might have stolen everything from dies in your arms?*

Sorry, *he'd like to say. He'll apologize until his tongue can move, but only in his mind. Sorry, he should say, but he does not. It would be admitting defeat; admitting who the mean one is between them — who could read the green lines from the outside of the tub and who deserved to. He does not say sorry. Chuuya's human. The boy in the tub is dying. Chuuya will say sorry when he dies, too.*

*If he dreamed, he would dream of him.*

Murderer, *the boy's lips are shaping. He can see clouds in his eyes. Murderer, he says. Chuuya can see the clouds from up too close — can never touch them, despite having flown so high he couldn't breathe. Murderer. Murderer. Thief. Murderer.*

Write that down, *the man in the white coat says. No reason to waste data.*

*[That's very sensible, someone says. Chuuya is supposed to break out of it. Chuuya isn't meant for betrayal. For a Limbo.]*

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The unmistakable fragrance of maple trees and recently sharpened iron of Kouyou's villa was the first thing he tasted.

Blinding moonlight rays pressed against his eyelids' best efforts to separate. The low murmur of a News channel buzzed to life, somewhere on the left of the impossibly soft bed he was laying on. "...*The mostly abandoned area surrounding the valley is still under orders of evacuation,*" a woman informed, over the sound of sirens. "*Experts fear the earthquake might be followed by a similar —*"

A coat-wearing back was perched over a low wooden table, staring at untouched tea. Guarding the door; playing with his wristwatch.

"Old man," Chuuya croaked.

His voice tore his ears. The scratchiness was borderline tactile; high-pitched hisses appearing with every cracked whisper out of his mouth. His throat had been scraped to blood — the wave of liquid fire that climbed it when he spoke made his head spin.

Hirotsu turned so fast his scarf fell from his shoulder. "Chuuya," he said, blank to the point of imperscrutableness. "Can you hear me?"

The question came off strangely. Trying to focus on the complicated expression on the man's face made his head pound. Instead, he traced the murals on the rose walls; the mess of drawings, of souvenirs, clothing and weapons abandoned all the way to the outrageously endless vanity table on the other side.

“What —” He stared at the wooden ceiling, sinking a bit deeper into the mattress with each second it took his brain to connect, “— am I doing here?”

It was pointless — wordlessly, Hirotsu had run out of the room the moment his fingers had started twitching on the bed. He attempted to sit up, hissing at the paralyzing web holding his body together. The light of the small TV was brighter than he could take; the woman kept talking and talking, *disaster* and *survivors* and *unexplainable*, and Chuuya tasted nothing but blood.

“You should lay down.”

Kouyou wore a distinctively familiar look, over the layers of untied hair and home-staying *yakuta*. Her hands were red with dried blood; wet, as if she had been in the middle of scratching them to raw skin. *Carelessness*, he catalogued her kindness as — just like after Verlaine. Masterfully built; all to allow him to lay into a play-pretend where she didn't think he might explode in her hands.

“What am I doing here?” he insisted.

“Your assumptions are as good as mine, I'm afraid,” the Executive replied. She closed the door. Suddenly, — with a nauseating certainty he had learned even with no adults around to scream — he knew she was angry. “The demon child left you inside one of the artificial rivers.”

Memories crashed on him, ripping the air out of his lungs. He bolted upright, immediately regretting his choice when his whole body tensed up and — *screeched*. Rusty bones and numb stitches, holding him together by pure will — when he looked down, the eye-shaped scars from Arahaki's taunting were bright and pink.

“Shit,” he breathed out. “*Shit.*”

Out of nowhere, Kouyou's hands were on his shoulders. “Don't move.”

Chuuya couldn't listen. “*Shit,*” he insisted, kicking his legs out of the cover, gritting his teeth against the urge to scream. He resisted when she tried to haul the pants abandoned on the floor out of his shaking grasp; escaped when she tried to touch him, and cursed under his breath when his shoulder hit the wall. The sensation was familiar; Dazai had to have popped it back in.

“Stop that,” the woman said, hands raised. She wasn't close enough to touch anymore; the calming texture of his voice set his nerves on fire. “You're going to hurt yourself.”

“I'm fine.”

“Chuuya.”

“*Shit*, I don’t even feel it anymore —“

“Chuuya —“

“I’ve done it before,” The encircled stream of consciousness didn’t seem like it would ever stop — not at the walls of sense, not at the need to move on. “I’ll do it again. It’s fine —“

“You had your *goddamned*,” His fingers creaked with stupor at the curve of her lips around the curse. Something that was almost terror, or the sirens at the edge of Suribachi coming closer, or something entirely unknown. “Viscera out of your *skin*, Chuuya, could you *stop* —“

His jaw unlocked — not a word came out. He tried to convince himself to step away from the corner — reminded himself of the distaste of being treated like a cornered animal.

Under his eyes, the roads of recently removed stitches seemed never ending. Echoing like water ripples, was the awful sound of skin getting ripped off like velcro from a car seat — the cat-piss smell of old bandages on opening and *reopening* wounds; pale hands cleaning vomit off his chin.

“ — *of such a wide scale, unless we refer back to the catastrophe of last year. Eyewitnesses speak of ‘a red light of sorts, lighting up the sky, and a thunder-like smell in the air’. It is unclear, as of...* ”

Chuuya blinked.

Attributing the stickiness of the words leaving his mouth to the embers down his throat seemed reasonable — but hypocritical. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

Eyes carefully vacant, Kouyou lowered her hands. He wondered if he should have felt more embarrassed about standing in his boxers in front of her. He wondered why she was about to lie.

“Is that a question?”

“No,” His tongue was stuck. *I’m not wrong*, he told himself. *I can’t be wrong*. “The bastard would have stopped me before that. Why am I on the News?”

She didn’t speak.

“*Kouyou*,” Chuuya moved away from the wall, tensed all the way to his skeleton. His clothes were all over the floor. He didn’t recall anything that wasn’t red. “Why am I on the News?”

The burned strand of her hair brushed a knife she hid in her *yakuta*’s belt. Her words came out clipped: “You said you could control it.”

It came crashing down awfully quietly.

“I can,” His mouth was moving; feeling it was a distant thing. The woman on the television was still rattling on. He needed to get to his clothes; needed to get to the door. They’d dragged him to the center of the crater, the last time he had made a mistake. They hadn’t cared if he wasn’t even screaming. “I can. I was — angry.”

“Angry,” At last, an unstable note took over Kouyou’s composed voice. She didn’t step closer; she didn’t move an inch — but she was merciless in the gaze she directed to him. “What were you two *thinking*?”

Chuuya couldn’t speak.

“No information to the Headquarters. No help. You aren’t even *allowed* near the Hospital, for God’s *sake*,” The Executive’s hand had a spasm, as if she wanted to cut the air in two. “You could have alerted Hirotsu. You could have alerted *me*. This is not the moment to attract the public eye — *you*, in particular, Chuuya, not when —“

She cut herself off so viciously sharply even his frozen limbs couldn’t stay still. “When?”

The motions of her chest were harsh. A rise and fall he could have gotten lost in; the gathering ire down the tips of his fingers, new gloves on, not even fingerless, and still not *tired* — the knowledge she wasn’t a target. She was unskated by permanent marks; nothing like his skin, naked for offering. She was too ephemeral for blades to linger.

“The *Special Division* is on our tails.”

His head snapped up.

“The Verlaine accident was ruled out as his own, solitarily self-implosion,” she continued, her knuckles white around the air. “Verlaine is dead. They know there must be someone else. It’s the *Government*, Chuuya. Professor N and his men’s death covered your traces, but — they *know* what they were robbed of.”

His head was disconnected from his body. There was no *Tainted* glow on the top of his nails; he felt light as existence itself. “The Government knows I’m here.”

Her nod was solitary. Curt.

He clenched his fists. “Fuck that.”

“Chuuya.”

“They want to try and get me? *Fuck* that, I —“ Getting dragged down the crater; too big hands around his destroyed clothes. The fire. The eyes. The corpse on the ground. He had never learned how to apologize; he had resolved to screwing up his own troubles. “I’ve escaped once, I’ll take care of them —“

“This isn’t about what comes next,” she interrupted him, colder than marble, stealing the voice from his throat. “This is about what you have already *done*.”



“I didn’t *mean to*, ” Chuuya said, gulping down the urge to snap at her. The woman on the TV insisted — the southern valley had almost been reshaped. The wounded had cars, and thought they hadn’t died, they *almost* had. There was no one to blame but nature. “I was angry.”

Her laughter was disbelieving; humorless. His ears ringed with it; he bit his tongue until he tasted blood — tasted the electricity spasming his fingers. “Angry at *what*?”

“I don’t — “

“You think you know rage, Chuuya?” Her hiss was sharper than a knife; she moved so quickly he had to plant his feet on the ground, not to take a step back. She was nose to nose with him; she was a burning fire, and Chuuya wanted to punch her, and Chuuya knew no words to apologize to corpses, or *he would have already*. “You think you truly, *truly* know what it means?”

“I —“

“You’re *blind*, ” she snapped, “Blind and defenseless to the aggression the world has shoved down your throat. Blind and defenseless to your *grief* — “

He flinched. “This isn’t —“

”And this *won’t be* how you deal with it. All this does not make you furious. It makes you *lost*. And it does *not* give you the right to open the ground with that lack, and drag us all down with you. It only makes you someone who *will* cause his own demise — and I will *not* let you. Not for your rage, not for your grief — *most certainly*, not in the name of ashes in the bay,” Her breath was harsh. “Do you understand?”

He clenched his jaw so tight his spine shook with it. He thought about her litanies of literature, as he copied her ink strokes on a desk. He stared at the floor — at the scars running up his feet, intertwining around his calves like ivy. He wondered if the view had been Hell from the cars he had destroyed.

She spelled out: “*Do you understand me?*”

Blood bubbled between his lips, bitter and warm; it seeped through his teeth. “I understand.”

Some commercial started playing on the TV, right as the crickets standing outside the open window sang their displeasure. There was no wind for his ear to catch, over the rush of his own blood; the air was charged and silent. In a blink that lasted twenty years, Kouyou took a step back.

In an inhale that made his ribs scratch his lungs to new blood, her hands cupped his cheek, framing his face with relentless violence.

“You’re mine,” she articulated, slow. The fire in her eyes was as overwhelming as before — but utterly defensive. Wide enough to forget cruelty in the name of being all-encompassing. The bottom of the crater was blurred. “You will stay here.”

Something got stuck in his throat. Chuuya wanted to believe it angry; he couldn't look away from a single strand cutting her eye in two.

*Sorry*, he thought about saying. It wouldn't get out. "I'll fix this," he croaked. *Thank you*, he wanted to beg. *Be grateful, Chuuya*. "I swear."

Kouyou's fingers carved themselves on his face. They unclenched their grip along with his next exhale; settled on his shoulders. When they *gripped* the scar on his clavicle — the spear that had run through him; feeding him lighting with every word out of a man's mouth — he pretended not to watch her marble traits grow merciless.

She nodded.

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"You two have been gone for five days," Kouyou offered, conversationally enough, in the middle of Virgil's anxious fiddling with Chuuya's temporary wheelchair.

Utterly slow, he raised his eyes from the tray of cookies she had forced on his lap. "What."

Virgil let out a nervous giggle.

He fit to a fault with the unsullied shelves and the never ending tomes of Kouyou's library — Chuuya vaguely suspected he had picked an all-blue kimono only to match the marine murals on the walls. Underneath the open fabric, his azure t-shirt of the day read: *Love You To The Moo-on And Back* — framed by cartoonish, smiling cows.

On the throne-like chair on the other side of the room, Kouyou's fingers were massaging her temples. Her hair was soaked — Chuuya knew she always washed them at the end of the day; she said it helped get rid of the smell of blood.

"We knew nothing, after the meeting," she explained, somberly. He closed his teeth around a cookie. The taste — blood; several mixtures of several poisons; and the face the younger Sheep used to make when some older kids forgot to ration their stolen food — was as revolting as ever. "But the Headquarters immediately received news about the alleged earthquake. The descriptions were unmistakable. The Colonel and Ace almost blew their veins up in horror."

Chuuya winced. Perched on the table behind him, Virgil seemed unsure whether to pat his shoulders or not — but he accepted the cookie Chuuya offered him.

“Mori asked Hirotsu to find you. You two were already gone, though, when he arrived. Boss called Dazai to verify your location, but he —” She cleared her throat. “The demon child spent the last few days answering and hanging up to his face.”

“Of course.”

“We only received Dazai’s report a few hours ago,” Kouyou tapped her nails on a pile of papers on the desk. “Apparently, your...” She glanced over at Virgil. “Your *state* was even more unpredictable than usual. He described you as more focused on self-destruction, rather than outer damage — you crashed the parking lot onto your own head.”

Some spot just over his nape pulsed in late compassion. He massaged it, frowning. “But how did Dazai reach me, then?”

“That’s the issue,” the Executive shut the file with clear distaste; she leaned back onto her seat. “The cops arrived on the scene right as he was trying to make his way to you. Dazai wasn’t sure if he had touched *you* or one of the Souls’ corpses —” Chuuya stiffened, crashing what was left of his cookie between two fingers, “So when he was taken to the Police Station, he had to escape to come check. Luckily, you were nullified — on the verge of death, yes. But normal.”

*Normal*, Chuuya mouthed. “The syndicate has been in a bit of a frenzy,” Kouyou continued. “Losing sight of you two specifically, and in these circumstances — well. Mori was the only one who was absolutely unconcerned.”

“According to Lady Kouyou’s servants, you and your partner eloped,” Virgil offered, usefully, pulling onto the green bandage covering half of his face. “Or something.”

Chuuya’s head snapped to him, horrified. “Tell me you’re joking.”

The Executive cleared her voice. “According to Boss, Dazai must have brought you to the one place where you wouldn’t be disturbed. A wise choice,” she admitted, begrudgingly. “Surprising, considering who we’re dealing with — but wise. You’re not in the position to be seen in such a fragile state. Luckily, nobody dares to step foot around Dazai’s — residence.”

“No,” Chuuya grunted. Thirteen metal panels, he recalled. A single lightbulb, dangling in solitude, watching him bleed out on an unsheeted bed. “Fucker brought me to the closest shipping container his mummified ass could find.”

Suddenly very busy with the papers in her hands, Kouyou said nothing.

Chuuya stared. “No.”

Virgil stared at the ceiling. She kept quiet.

“A *shipping container*?” he repeated. “You’re telling me *lives* in that thing?”

His mind was running — the infernal squeak of the makeshift door; the glimpses of trash from the cracks; the blinking moon from a hole in the ceiling. Dazai’s silhouette — seated on the sole stool, legs crossed, coat brushing the ground; chin on one hand, staring at nothing.

“According to Mori,” Kouyou said, at last, toneless. “Yes, that’s his choice of residence.”

“His *choice*?”

The warning look she sent him cooled the room. “I do *hope* you’re not assuming *Boss* would put him in such an — absurd situation.”

Silence was tight around his throat — as awkward as a thousand eyes set on him. “Of course not,” he concluded, kicking the *something* between his ribs away. “I’m merely stunned by the bastard’s idiocy.”

Kouyou relaxed, sipping at her tea. “Dazai has always been — particular. All the same, you will offer him your gratitude. He took care of your wounds for five days. It was much worse than the — other times. And with no Hospital...”

He made a face. “I’m not letting one or two wounds kill me. I would have crawled my way to the nearest stitching set.”

“Chuuya,” she tutted — the most amused she had sounded throughout that entire evening. “You *will* thank him.”

“You don’t even like him —“

“Respect has nothing to do with dislike,” she replied, putting her cup down. “And who ever said I didn’t, anyway?”

He stared her down. She held it.

Eventually, something more difficult to find settled into her voice. “Chuuya,” she asked. The tone made his dried clothes scratch unpleasantly against his skin. “How do you feel?”

He felt hungry, he thought — for anything but food. *Heavy*, like the liquid cement sagging his bones, solidifying a bit more with each breath he took. Grounded, more than he had since Rengoku. He felt like Momo — whose body the Sheep had found under the bridge where they hid the alcohol and the occasional drugs.

*I felt a bit better each time I did it*, she had explained to him. He was nine, and cleaning vomit off her body, and he’d just seen her tear her wrists apart. *I thought it was the absence, that wanted me dead.*

“I feel fine,” Chuuya offered.

Virgil darted a look his way — skeptical. He kept his eyes on Kouyou, though — the uncured hair on her shoulders.

*You are blind.*

Bleeding to tear the words off the roof of his mouth, he stared at the ground and muttered: “I didn’t mean to do this, Ane-san.”

The smile he spied on her face was meant to be beautiful. He took it as such — accepted her quiet request to ignore any graveyards under the blossoms. “No one got seriously hurt — apart from those corpses in the parking lot. I know something about demons occupying the space in your veins, lad,” Kouyou said, eventually. “All I ask of you — is to *tell me* when you intend to free them.”

“For Yokohama’s sake?”

“If anyone asks, that will be my answer.”

On the wall in front of them, a scripture had been carved in an elegant, golden calligraphy — 竜頭蛇尾. *Head of a dragon, tail of a snake.*

It tickled his mind — Albatross’ grin; his arm around his shoulder and his beer-stained breath, as he decanted old proverbs wrong for the sake of annoying Lippman. *Head of an Albatross, tail of your mother.*

*A marvelous beginning*, he had explained, hanging off of him, once the actor’s protests had brought him to correcting his words. *But a rather disappointing end. That’s what it means. Let us hope you won’t end up like this, shall we?*

*Think about yourself, asshole*, Chuuya had snorted. *And about your disappointing end.*

Kouyou said something before leaving — an emergency meeting; subordinates to reassure. She tapped two fingers on his chin; left with fingers still crooked. He didn’t quite listen; didn’t do much more than watch Virgil timidly twirl through shelves — a pair of headphones around his throat, and the kindness not to say a word between his teeth.

“*Oh, oh,*” he heard him sing, low. “*I knew* she was lying about the world’s newfound distaste for literature.”

Texting Dazai brought no results and no answers — all he found was an even more cracked screen and several viruses installed on the device; plus a programmed system that intermittently showed him a cheerful jingle, framed by the words — *Where Is My Souvenir, You French Wannabe?*

“Ever heard of Hirose Fumiko?” Chuuya spoke up, eventually.

Virgil was startled enough to bump his hip against a shelf. “You — you mean the singer from the eighties? The one old housewives listen to?”

“I see you’re feeling better,” Chuuya said, too loud, climbing to his feet, attempting not to stumble. “And you’re still locked inside the nearest dusty place. Not very enterprising of you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t —” At a nasty glare, Virgil removed his eyes from the wheeling chair. “For your information, I’m organizing reports for Lady Kouyou. It’s terribly useful, and —”

“Do you think it’s possible that I was back into Dante’s *Limbo*?”

Silence came a bit too belatedly.

It didn't quite manage to hide his intake of air.

His face fell. "He's dead, Chuuya," For his sake, he ignored the note of pain stuck between the syllables. Attempting to convince himself, perhaps. Attempting to learn to say it out loud. "No."

*His absence is something I rejoy in*, he had written, in the only letter he had sent him, while he was in France. Chuuya had not asked — had done everything he could not to ask. *But I do wonder — is that enough?*

"Yeah. Of course. Don't worry about it. Hey," Chuuya crossed his arms, stealing the tiniest bits of *Tainted* to keep himself upright — stalk his way to Virgil's surprised frame. "While we're here, doing shit. I have a proposal for you."

The offer toppled the man's jaw on the frescoed tiles of the library. By the time Chuuya was done talking, it took him several moments to remember it was his time to fill the silence.

"Me?" Virgil said, finally, like something ripped out from the depths of his chest. His wide eyes felt out of place with the greyish curls mixing with wooden ones — something *childish* shone in them; as if he'd suddenly remembered he'd died younger than sixteen. "But — you could choose so many people."

"You managed to shoot shitty Dazai, and he hadn't even planned for you to," Chuuya pointed out. "In that fucking *Forest*, or whatever. That's more than most men in this syndicate could do."

"He was tied up."

"Bastard once played me like a fiddle while getting himself dragged through the snow and whining about how little he wanted to be there," he muttered. "It's only six people, and at least two of the ones I've chosen have good reasons to want me dead. I have to balance it out, somehow. I need people I trust."

Virgil blinked. "You — trust me?"

"You've had many chances to kill me. *Soul* or not," He shrugged, awkwardly. "You could have lied and told me your Ability could control my own. You could have done shit. And you didn't. Accept the offer or don't, I don't really —"

"Chuuya," he interrupted him, right before he could accelerate. His grin was brighter than the moon. "Chuuya. I'd be honored to."

"Oh," He straightened. "Of course."

"I know he —" Virgil sunk his teeth into his lower lip, digging a new way for the words to leave his mouth. "Dante. He took so much time from me. That doesn't mean my life is over, right? I have more blood on my hands than I will ever be able to deal with. Since I cannot

wash it away, I might as well make sure whatever else of it I spill has a reason. I trust you can give me a good one.”

*You think you know rage?*, she insisted.

“Sure,” He cleared his throat. “Sure, I’ll — better prepare yourself for some very long weeks, then. You don’t get to play lazy.”

His smile grew teasing. “Unlike what you might think, I don’t enjoy spending all my time in a library. I’m rather excited to watch the greatest duel in the Port Mafia’s history go down.”

Chuuya blinked. “You know about the race for the Executive position?”

“The entire organization does,” Virgil informed him, easily. “Everyone is watching. The vultures want you to prove yourselves unworthy of the title of prodigies.”

He scoffed. “That’s the Mackerel’s thing. Not mine.”

“You think a particularly ordinary person could keep up with a prodigy? A demonic one, at that?” The man smiled, gently. “A great number of men believes you two foolish kids who the Boss needs to keep entertained. *Another* great number thinks that Dazai’s connection to the Boss means his seat is sold. Another great number thinks him an idiot for believing he could beat you.”

“Let’s focus on that last group,” Chuuya said. “And let’s hope most of the six of you will be part of it. I have no hopes for Noguchi, but —”

His enthusiasm faded, slower than dread. “You said six people, *ah?*”

“They’re good,” he assured him. “Koda will probably decide you’re his new best friend. The twins seem like nice enough people, but *don’t* get Kenta drunk. Tsuchiya doesn’t care enough about anything to hate you. And Noguchi —” He grimaced. “He hates me, but he has no reason to be pissed off at you. If you want to sink your shoe in his mouth, though, I’ll do anything but stop you.”

“Noguchi,” Virgil squinted. “Noguchi Toru, you mean? With the Colonel?”

Chuuya perked up. “Yeah. Why?”

“He’s in a group currently preparing for an infiltration,” the man explained. “The Colonel sent Lady Kouyou the information, since they’re going to exterminate one of the trader groups she personally dealt with. Seems like a serious enough matter that the Colonel himself will join.”

His brain screeched to a halt. Suddenly, the lingering pain on his limbs seemed as distant as a memory. “When you say currently —”

“The mission should start an hour from now, roughly. If everything goes according to — where are you going?”

“Talk to you later,” Chuuya called, without turning back, as he made his way to the nearest window. “This has been an enlightening convo.”

“*Chuuya*, wait — *wait* — you aren’t in any condition to —“

“Warm up your shooting skills while I’m gone,” he screamed back, climbing down the ivy on the walls. When he let go, Virgil let out a rather high-pitched yelp. “If you fall behind, I’ll kick your ass all the way to Rengoku!”

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“Don’t shoot unless I order you to,” the Colonel said, almost an hour after Chuuya had sneaked inside his men’s SUVs. “Don’t speak unless asked. We have datas to recover, if we want to fix the mess Executive Ace’s men caused. You will *not* risk the operation by blowing our cover. Clear?”

“Yes, Colonel,” the rows of men barked out. The top of Chuuya’s hat barely brushed the shoulders of most of the mafiosi in front of him — he wasn’t quite sure if he should be grateful or offended.

“As for our special guest,” the man continued, not even turning around. Their march seemed endless, but they kept walking heavy strides in the wake of the Executive’s footprints, roaming down the empty street that led to the abandoned warehouses area. “He will be asked to keep his Ability in check and, if necessary, to only use it in the least noticeable way possible. Should he be recognized by the enemy, he will be abandoned to his own resources. Clear?”

Murmurs arose.

He was the eye of the hurricane, and their words came muffled and running, suffocated by the wind of his own irritation. *Rengoku* was a frequent one, and so was *god*. He knew them all, at this point — *dangerous* and *unstable* and *what if* and the steps back they took, putting space between them.

“Yes, Colonel,” Chuuya offered.

*I believe he does think your Abilities are similar*, Kouyou had explained to him, in the shadows of the hallway, outside the meeting room. *And I believe, in his mind, you use your own in all the wrong ways. It frustrates him deeply, that Boss still holds such high hopes for you — considering the distrust he initially held for the Colonel’s own Ability.*



*He distrusted it?*

*Mori is always hesitant to welcome soldiers. They can bring... unwanted ideals, with them. In the Colonel's best hopes, you'll fall into such an obvious mistake that Boss will finally let go of you.*

*You, of course, she'd concluded, shall not make mistakes.*

"Noguchi," the Colonel called. "Nakahara. With me. I have a separate decoy for you."

He stiffened. A few steps in front of him, shoulders held comically straight in an effort to hide Chuuya from view, Koda let out a half whine.

"Chuuya's fine," he said, only, teeth clenched.

No stars decorated their crepuscular roof, and the impending darkness felt heavier than ever, embraced by the summer heat. He'd made sure to push every visible bandage under his clothing, but the trick did nothing for the sweat gathering down his ice-cold skin. Mosquitoes filled the night, overcompensating for the lack of people and vehicles, hissing louder and louder the further they went down the tight streets.

Noguchi's glare was stuck on his nape. He made his way to the Colonel's marching silhouette; didn't notice anything wrong until the whispers led his eyes down — to the cracked, footprint-shaped ground left from *Tainted*.

Lost on *when* he'd done that, Chuuya frowned.

"They're smart," the Executive started, the moment they reached him behind a road of trucks. A fresh corpse slept between his shoes. "The displaced organs have been spread all over. They must have had a system to locate them, but the guard here," He spat on the body. "Was mostly useless. And their leader has already been dealt with by Lady Kouyou."

The uniform the corpse wore was the same green from Koda's hissed explanations; he was melting like a candle against the concrete. Chuuya had never considered what the Colonel's Ability might do to a living body — nudging some liquified skin dripping from his temple off his shoe, he felt a surge of interest appear.

A second look at the man's face erased it.

"Are there any police traps?" Chuuya asked.

Both heads turned to stare at him. Noguchi's hostility was a familiar pulse under his skin — a mixture of burning hatred and the somewhat begrudging tease he had worn in France. The Colonel, though, was inscrutable.

"With all due respect," he huffed. "You called me here. Permission to say a damn word on the matter?"

"Maybe *actually* show some respect?" Noguchi said, pointedly.

“You have some fucking audacity to talk about respecting your superiors —“

The coughing fit appeared with no warning. The glimpse of astonishment that ran over the two men’s faces was tactile.

Chuuya turned, hiding his mouth in his elbow, and tried to focus on something that wasn’t the needles on his skin, climbing up every scarred inch of skin they could find. Flames scratched his throat — inexplicably, through the blur, he realized it was the beginning of a laugh.

A hand was slammed on his back. It *did* manage to drag air back in his lungs — but the palm sank on what had to have been a slashed piece of skin between his scapulas, startling a wet warmth from a wound.

“Oi,” Noguchi said, hesitant, allowing him to take a step back. “Is —“

“Fine,” he snapped, breathless, praying the bandages would soak up the blood. “It’s fine. I choked on your bullshit.”

On the ground, the dry squelch of skin melting protested the sudden silence.

“No police traps,” the Colonel said, at last, eyes still searching. Chuuya met them with his chin high, strung up like an overheated wire. “They made deals with small vendors around the city. Still, we have to intercept the goods. They’re more than fifteen percent of our predicted introits for the fall.”

He paused, raising two fingers to his in-ear. His order was short and decisive — some breaths later, Chuuya heard the echo of bullets against the night sky.

“How do we figure out the system?” Noguchi asked, running his eyes across the rows of trucks. “They’d have to be suitable locations. I can think of several areas around the port —“

“Suribachi City,” the man interrupted him, nodding to the corpse. “They’re all in Suribachi City, according to him.”

Pieces fell together with disgusting efficiency. The edge of the crater was merely a walk from the edge of their side of the port — Noguchi was the bulkier of the squad, and Chuuya was the only member who had actually dealt with similar jobs in the settlement.

The realization that the Colonel had *expected* him to join the mission was as startling as it was deafeningly irritating. Chuuya bit down what might have been respect, had the coagulation of sweat and sick fever under his fringe not painted everything red.

“The two of you will deal with it,” the Executive said. “Half of the stolen goods have been hidden in the crater. The area is a good site to escape from the eyes of the police, but it’s littered with Black Market pirates. If they were to find such a treasure in their hands —”

“How long do we have?” Chuuya asked.

The Colonel was efficient in explaining, even as he threw his unwilling informant over the railing, down the waters — nonchalant in leading them back to the warehouse, where his men

were already dealing with the slowly rising mountain of corpses. Chuuya met Koda's eyes — a fraction of an instant before the heel of his shoe sank in a head biting the curb.

"Nakahara," the Colonel called, right as he turned to follow a clearly peeved Noguchi to the SUVs.

He had walked some steps further from his men, landing where the moonlight was muffled by the industrial chimneys; where the long look he sent Chuuya's way — mistrust and irrepressible curiosity; as if he had hopes, and wished to see them crushed — would go unnoticed.

For some reason, it reminded him of Iceman.

Being subjected to that Flag's gaze had been the most stubborn test of his time in the Mafia — a fluttering *deja vu* between what the smoke from his cigarette had looked like between the roofs of Suribachi, and what it felt like when the man wordlessly offered it to him. Iceman never got drunk — when Chuuya did, though, he accepted to bicker on the logistics of their old battles with an exasperating childishness.

[Once, with the two of them perched on the roof of the *Old World*, he had asked — *do I look different now to you?*

Iceman's drag of smoke had lasted longer than the irrelevance of that question. *Why would I tell you, Chuuya?*].

"Colonel," Chuuya offered, vacantly. "I told you. *Chuuya's* fine.

His glance was uninterested. *I don't care for your dislike.* "You have an Ability," The shreds of his military uniform should have tickled some rusty part of Chuuya's brain; they never did. "Use it."

He was taken aback. "You said —"

"I said to use it in the least noticeable way possible," the man interrupted. "*Not* to not take any advantage of it. Don't be dense."

"I thought I needed to win in ways that had nothing to do with my power," he spat. "Sir."

"There's a difference between knowing how the unluckier ones fight, and wasting a gift," the Colonel concluded, devastatingly easy. "It's yours. You should learn to use it correctly, yes — less earthquakes and less spectacularity, which will get you nowhere in an illegal organization —"

Chuuya flared. "It's not like I —"

"But your Ability *is*, and it will *always* be an advantage. Think of it as being given an additional flock of soldiers," he added. "Hide it in the bushes, keep it for the rainy days; but don't ignore it. Learn to control the things in your veins — learn to make them *obey*, not the other way around; no matter how tempting or enraging or *there* they feel — or they'll control you instead."

He stared.

There was no time to offer any questions — no time to wonder why the man had turned into wisdom what he had decorated in *blame*, in the meeting room. Noguchi was grunting for him to keep up — and the Colonel had already turned, hands outstretched towards his men.

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“This place smells like a horse shit festival,” Noguchi muttered, the deeper they sank down the levels of the crater. “How the fuck do your nostrils still work?”

Chuuya had never thought about describing Suribachi City in flattering terms.

Even when he lived there, his attachment might have made him defensive, but never a liar — there weren’t many ways to make a kid say that a shithole was a castle. He’d loved and protected their territory for what it gave — for its maze-like streets, keeping intruders out and offering escape roads to stumbling kids, and for every disadvantage he’d learned to shape into a personal weapon. *Not*, he considered, *for any actual, existing pros*.

Still.

“Your presence helps me keep in shape,” he spat. “Keep up, or I’ll leave you behind.”

It was an unfair request. The foreign settlement was more roofs and secret tunnels than it was streets; jumping around in idle circles was a mindless habit to him and a challenge to someone as big and unused as Noguchi. Chuuya had no time to care. The sight of his gloves against the dirty wood of this or that box felt as strange as the one of them shaking Shirase’s hand.

The plan was easy enough — it relied on Chuuya’s memory of several possible hiding places for such an unusual cargo. The Sheep had never truly dipped their hands in the trade market, stealing what they needed and making Chuuya deal with eventual protests — nonetheless, he’d spent sleepless nights making sure no whisper in Suribachi would escape his ears.

Black market storages were everywhere, protected for less money than what would have been right by desperate inhabitants of the settlement; specifically, they sagged the epicentre of the crater, deep enough that most hypothetical cops would surely be shoot in the head, robbed, or chased away before they could even reach it.

“Come on,” Chuuya called, eyes sticking to a wall. If he squinted, the pink of Yuan’s hair was just behind the corner. “I know where to start.”

He breathed in, deep and nice. The familiar panorama under his eyelashes was smudged red at the edges; when he blinked, all of it was showered with a crimson tinge.

It was an assortment of things, muffled and sickly sweaty under the sound of Noguchi’s complaints — the blood in his mouth, invisible and impossible to ignore; the slight tremors of his fingers, damp on the no-longer fingerless gloves.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” Noguchi called, struggling to be delicate in his grip around the edge of a window.

From the roof, Chuuya wiped his sweat off, offering him his most unimpressed glance. “No offence, fish-face, but I was sneaking into these magazines when you were still eating high cuisine with your mommy’s toy boys.”

The man’s face burned red.

Guilt lasted less than lighting, but the smell of burned lingered. His background had been offered on a drunken afternoon in France, after a mission gone too well. Koda and the two of them had mostly stuck together — while Noguchi was still skittish, whatever Chuuya had done must have managed to gain his — *something*. His acknowledgment, maybe.

*He was mad*, he thought. He was mad. He wanted Noguchi to apologize, and he couldn’t have cared less about it. He wanted to never hear the name Albatross out of his mouth again. “Move,” he said. Chuuya would have bled for a new story on any of the Flags. “We’re almost there.”

Their first two stops, embraced by silence, brought no results. Chuuya scrubbed the locations off his mental list, trying to remember which caves had been the most popular for similar trades.

The topography of the crater had mostly stayed unchanged — but it had been more than a year. What the residents had no way of changing, street-fights would destroy; what felt no need to modernize itself, would be struck by storms that always seemed more disruptive down there.

If he had tried to look for the assortment of makeshift buildings where the Sheep had lived, Chuuya had the feeling he might have gotten lost.

*Cry with an open heart*, an old, wrinkled woman had told him, once, when he was nine and pretending innocence to devour territory. *You’re young. Cry, if you so wish.*

His revenge came with the third location he brought them to — a secret basement in the third-to-last level of the settlement, its door hidden by rubble and some strategically placed wooden tiles. He was quick to sweep them away, pretending he hadn’t noticed the exaggerated violence of the motion, *Tainted* a tad too involuntary on the tips of his fingers.

When he lowered a glowing arm inside the opening, rows and rows of industrial cold-storage boxes ripped a whistle out of Noguchi's lips.

"Great," he snapped, directing floored gazes to the buildings. "Let's get out of here."

The mouth of a rifle appeared next to Chuuya's arm.

Faster than eyes could follow, Noguchi extracted his guns — swifter than that, Chuuya's fingers grasped the neck of the rifle, bending it backwards.

The bullets it shot ended up somewhere in the walls surrounding the alley; the glow of his Ability spread all the way to the stunned face of the guard — and when his weapon was ripped away from his grasp, he *squeaked*.

Chuuya felt calm. He reached out; laid his fingers on the man's face, hovering, not touching, relishing in their light, and then — clenched.

The man dropped, liquified brains pooling down the square door of the basement.

"We could have gotten intel about the other locations from him," Noguchi pointed out, scoffing, after the echo had vanished. He'd taken a step back; a single one, that Chuuya couldn't quite focus on.

*Red*, he thought. When he climbed to his feet, he stumbled. "Come on," he said. *It was all red*. "This is the most secure of the locations. Let's bring everything we find here. The extraction team can worry about it."

Mercifully, Noguchi let it go.

They settled into mechanical motions. Chuuya led them through the roofs and down in the tunnels, skipping over fragile structures and dead end alleys. The rhythm became familiar — trying to control the electricity in his veins to explode this or that entrance; taking into account the presence of the organs boxes; getting rid of whatever guard the traders had put on site; dragging the congelators to the basement, in a mixture of his Ability and Noguchi's muscles.

"This is where you lived," Noguchi said, offhandedly, at one point — as he watched him lower himself down the tear of an old storage.

It sounded strangely tense.

"Not here, specifically," Chuuya answered, eventually. The circular lights of the containers emitted a gentle hum; when he put his hands on them, the vibrations shook his bones. "We had claimed an area of abandoned houses in the higher levels. But this was our territory."

"All of it?"

He shrugged. "All of what we needed."

"King of the Sheep," he said.

As it usually went, the title didn't arise any particular reaction. *Too much shit in this body to worry about one more substance*, Doc had told him, once, dragging his IV pole.

Chuuya had detested that name, back when it was somewhat true — had gritted his teeth whenever mafiosi brought it up, unsure if he felt shame, protectiveness, or just lingering bitterness. These days, it didn't taste like anything at all — if not, sometimes, like Shirase's never-sent London postcards.

“Does it mean you were the most cowardly of them, or the only one who wasn't?”

He kicked the next door down, hands in his pockets, and watched the chain of his hat dangle in the corner of his vision. “It meant I was the only one with an Ability. And if you don't want me to crush you with it — you'll learn better than to call me a coward.”

Subconsciously, Noguchi rose a hand to the knuckles-shaped scar he was still sporting.

A complicated expression dawned on the man's face; begrudgingly, he crossed his arms to his chest, eyes following his skips and tricks up and down the building. Chuuya knew what he was truly looking at — the ravaged streets and deteriorating habitations; the occasional pair of hungry eyes behind shredded curtains; the women in the alleys and their ruined fabrics. The children.

*This is my home*, he thought about spitting, nonsensically. Sunrise had always looked priceless from the top of the crater. The sky had been full of stars. The first thing Chuuya had ever seen — he had been birthed by the earth, and made cry by the firmament. *You don't know shit about it*.

It irked him sooner than he'd hoped for. “Cat got your tongue, rich boy?”

“I wasn't rich,” Noguchi muttered, scratching his fish-bone tattoo. “My mother was.”

Chuuya retched. “That is *such* a rich boy thing to say. Make sure no one in the syndicate ever hears you say that shit.”

“It's just,” he frowned. If Chuuya hadn't gotten accustomed to the specific brand of ire on his face, he might have picked the embers of the fight and started a fire. Few things made Noguchi angrier than injustices. “The twins, the Kure —“

“You know them?”

“We met during a job, while you were —” He paused. “While you weren't around, the last few days.”

Chuuya stored that information. “Good.”

“They said none of the Sheep was older than sixteen.”

“So they have eyes.”

“And you took care of them?”

He shrugged, uncomfortable. *Too gentle of a term.* “Someone had to.”

“Yeah,” he pressed, seemingly perplexed. “Yeah, *that*. Why did no one intervene?”

He blinked, hiding his motions behind the stocked refrigerators in his arms. “You’ve been in the Port Mafia for months, now. You said you joined because your family died, and you feared you’d be accused of their murder, yes?”

Noguchi nodded, jaw tense.

“Here’s a pop quiz, rich boy,” He leaned forward. “Why didn’t *you* go to the police?”

No answer came.

Peacefully enough, perhaps because of the silence, they collaborated. He wasn’t surprised — France had taught him that the two of them shared working ethics: killing quickly, without lingering. He could see why someone like the Colonel would have chosen Noguchi. He was a package of good bets — well-liked, efficient, and new enough not to have yet offered his loyalty to anyone. Most of all, he dragged a soul wrenching wish to prove himself by the neck.

“Fuckin’ nice,” Noguchi mumbled, eyes lingering on the bleeding eye socket of the dead guard in front of them. “Learned that from your bandaged toy boy?”

“Not my type,” Chuuya replied, searching for the nearest street to float the refrigerators through.

“What’s your type?”

“What’s yours?” he asked, smiling emptily to the air. “Tsuchiya?”

The somewhat revolted face he made didn’t exactly come as a surprise. “Don’t insult her like that,” Noguchi grunted, dropping his boxes down the basement. “She deserves way better than any half-assed mafioso will ever be able to give her.”

“You’re a half-assed mafioso, too.”

“I don’t see her like that,” the man snapped. “And you’d do better to keep her name out of your mouth.”

Chuuya scoffed. “She’s at least reasonable enough to take responsibility for her actions. Why can’t you let her?”

His turn was sharp enough to hiss along to the wind — through the reddish, sweaty haze of his gaze, he looked every inch the furious recruit Albatross had once told him about. “Her actions didn’t deserve that response. That — that *bastard* risked causing her permanent damage, and she still didn’t survive unscathed. She’s spent the last month trying to figure out how to function with a missing eye, and —“

“And you weren’t there with her?”



The fish tattoo winked along to his skin as he frowned. Under the lingering glow of their packages, the ink seemed to disappear, highlighting the vertical scar cutting his eye in two.

Chuuya sighed, crouching down on the edge of the door. “Noguchi,” he said. “I’m going to be honest. I don’t care if you hate me.”

“You —“

“I don’t care,” he insisted, “If Shitty Dazai makes you piss your pants, and you’ve decided fucking *me* up is your only plan B. But it’s clear you care about Tsuchiya. If that’s the case — you should probably stop making her damn life about *you*. ”

The crooked canopies of Suribachi City laughed their loudest shrieks at him. Hypocrisy wasn’t a familiar kind of venom, but he could still recognize it in his reflection — especially on the surface of the place where he’d learned to lie.

He wondered if mothers acted like that, too.

Chuuya searched through the darkened streets, gathering sweat on his upper lip and licking it off, mentally tracing the fastest journey to the wooden boxes the Sheep had used as living quarters. He remembered his makeshift futon on the floor — the one he never found vacant, when the younger kids braved their first winter.

*Hey*, he called, to the howling wind. To the debris of his childhood; to the things he didn’t want back. *Hey, do you remember me?*

“I’ve told you this, once before,” Chuuya said, meeting his reluctant gaze, again. “This is the Port Mafia. Your personal judgment on what she did, the reasons you have to believe she was in the right — they don’t matter. People are going to die because of what she did. The syndicate can’t survive on forgiveness,” He kicked a pebble down the road; thought about Shirase’s sharpest teeth. “Nothing can.”

Noguchi worked his jaw. “Would you say the same, if she was someone *you* care about?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I would say the same about myself. And I believe Tsuchiya would too — if you let her.”

The line of his shoulders was harsh. “With those beliefs,” he muttered, hands shoving pieces of boxes down with too much urgency, “You have some fucking face swearing you could keep us safe — as if destruction isn’t what you —“

“But Albatross could have,” Chuuya said. It sounded devoid to his own ears; it sharpened the mountains of Noguchi’s shoulders until even the clouds had to fear. “Couldn’t he?”

*I didn’t need to be told*, he wanted to add. *I never needed to be told*. The world had been the bell over a bar door, had been the splatter in front of his eyes — had been Albatross, holding onto his jacket with crimson hands, saying, *but I saved Doc*. The world had been looking at his best friend, and putting the dog to sleep with a lie.

“I’m not him,” he let him know. “If you want to hate me, hate *me*. ”

Noguchi's breathing pattern grew harsher and harsher; the bullet-holsters X-crossed on his chest trembled with every conflicted inhale. Chuuya knew he understood. He knew he cared. He knew the two were difficult to balance, most days.

"My baby sister," Noguchi said, eventually, unsure even as he opened his mouth. "She —"

The haze embracing him was both a blur and a shot of heightened senses — *Tainted* activated before he was even fully aware of his body turning around, and before he could meet the masked face of the silhouette shooting an endless tunnel of bullets into Noguchi's back.

The man slammed the door of the basement shut, rolling away, wide eyes settling on the scarlet bullets immobilized a few inches from Chuuya's chest. "Shit!"

He kicked his leg in the air, leaping over the next bundle of projectiles, and thrust the ones littering his body back to the source. "Of fucking *course*," he cursed, eyes running up the four snipers, hiding behind destroyed windows. "Go!" Chuuya snapped. "Follow me!"

They climbed up and down the roads they had spent the whole night stumbling through; he made sure to sink his fist into the nearest wall, dropping the front of the building onto the basement door, hiding it. At least one of Noguchi's bullets had hit the target, given the body dangling from one of the windows — but when he raised his head, Chuuya saw three masked bodies run over their heads.

"The traders?" Noguchi screamed at him, as they slipped down the broken roof of the next house, pulling shredded curtains down with them. Chuuya slammed his hand on his back, lowering the man's gravitational mass, and watched him let out an embarrassingly high yelp when his next jump almost sent him several buildings away.

He squinted at the trio. They were trying to cage them in; the tallest of the group was carelessly offering his back to them, trusting his partners at the sides would block them before he turned.

"The lower levels!" he called.

"What?"

"Stay on the lower levels!"

The fight, in Chuuya's experience, was not the most entertaining part of a job.

It was the second one.

The chase — the *chase* was easy.

Feet on every inch of existence, because the definition of *ground* wobbled and changed in his palms. The grin overtaking his face. The smell of blood — even Noguchi's struggling breaths, stumbling to guess his next step; to understand what Chuuya's eyes saw in the place of buildings and roads.

He sunk his fingers on the wooden railing of some abandoned storage. Channeling the uncontrolled bundle of *something* still prickling his nape, he stomped on the roof, digging a hole through the beams. He dropped inside the building, hearing the echo of Noguchi's call of his name.

One of the pursuers appeared in the tear of sky upon his head, through the curtain of dust and rubbles. He raised the railing like a bat, and stabbed it up, lightening its weight and increasing it again when it was met with the resistance of flesh. A soul wrenching scream choked the silence — blood rained down on him, joining the crimson veil of his vision.

“Fucker,” he mumbled, looking up.

Lifelessly, the impaled corpse swayed along with the wind.

He climbed out of the hole again, meeting Noguchi's startled expression — he'd already pulled the deceased pursuer by the legs, dropping him down into the empty streets.

“King of the Sheep!” one of the two voices left called. “Stupid enough to come back home?”

Chuuya stiffened.

Sharply, he turned around, looking for their silhouettes. They were from Suribachi; no outsider would have known how to take advantage of their surroundings the way they were doing. *No one else*, he considered, *would have dared call him King of the Sheep again*. The real world knew better; the real world had heard worse tales about him.

Noguchi growled, cocking his guns. “They're here for you.”

He glared. “How perceptive.”

Pointedly, the man elbowed him with the neck of one of his weapons. “Don't just drop like that, you brat — I thought they'd hit your ass!”

He squatted down behind what was left of the railing connecting the canopies. His hat had almost flown off during the fight; in his haste, he tried to his belt instead of putting it on. “I *told you*, asshole. And you were supposed to take care of the other one, in the meantime!”

“No, you didn't tell me —“

“Yes, I tapped your hand —“ Horror crowded down his spine. “Oh, *no fucking way* I just said that.”

Bullets drew pores on their coverage; Chuuya's hand shot out, grabbing them and hiding them in his palms. Amidst his rolling away, Noguchi sent him a weirded out look. “What the hell are you talking about —“

“Come out, King!” the voices called. A gasp — horribly obnoxious — followed. “Unless the voices were right. Was it *Queen of the Sheep?*”

Chuuya frowned.

“What are they talking about?”

“Not sure. Get the car keys ready,” he replied, throwing the bullets in the air, and tightening his fist around them again. “Give me a minute to take care of the jerks.”

“Nakahara —“

One of the masked men leapt from the window of the nearby storage, rifle pointed to his face, firing uselessly at his feet. Chuuya let the bullets dig the air all the way to the tip of his nose — when he sent them back, this time, he did so in a compact bundle.

The clump sank like a spear in the flying man’s chest, tearing a hole through his front — wide enough to snap the edges of his ribcage, struggling to keep the upper and lower sides of his body together. The two flesh halves destroyed the roof of the house they sank into, startling a scream from some vendor inside the walls.

On the ground, mockingly gentle, floated a familiar piece of plastic: a blue bracelet stained with dried blood.

The rush in his ears stopped.

*This is our pride*, Shirase had explained, once, with the seriousness of someone older — of someone who still felt no jealousy. Chuuya had been eight, and starved for more than something he could give back. Chuuya had — *But when others have it, it’s their spoils of war*.

*Learn to control the things in your veins*, he recalled, distantly. *Or they’ll control you instead*.

His next words sounded distorted even to his ears; a mixture of his voice and something else — higher and lower; hungrier and quieter. “Make it thirty seconds.”

His memories ended around that moment — the floating bracelet, the reddish tinge of the world; the lungs-drying sweat and the flames down his throat. Chuuya had never been sick before. The eye-shaped scars down his body reopened, and confirmed that one truth.

Not *Corruption* — not quite *Corruption*. But his stitches still ripped — the scream that left his throat was still a caged animal’s cry — and gravity still pulled everything down, uncaring and enraged and *red* and out of his control.

When he looked down — when he sank his fist, or tore apart, or ripped, or *skinned*, or killed, somehow, anyway, never ending — a fourth body still fell, and Chuuya followed, jaws open.

*[Imagine a gate*, a voice had said, wearing a lab coat and typing his days away on a computer. *Imagine leaving the door ajar*.

*I can’t leave the door ajar*, he had replied; or maybe he’d just wished to. Or maybe none of it had ever happened at all. *Mama says bugs will get in*.

*Oh, yes*, the man had agreed — only, he had made it sound like hunger. *Imagine how many bugs could get in*].

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— *through the waves.*

*Insistent and cold, brushing against his calves, wetting the edges of his yukata. He hadn't wanted to wear it, anyway. The village loved its festivities, though, and Chuuya knew the other boys would say mean things again, if he went against the tradition.*

*"Dear," the man called. Their hands were connected, sturdy fingers around too-small ones. His yukata was untouched by the waves. He kept saying he would bring him back to the townsquare soon — very soon, very soon, or his parents would get worried. But the man had needed directions to find the sea, and so he had followed, and —*

*"Dear," he repeated. His face was invisible, blinded by the sun, and a syringe was locked in his fingers. "Smile for the picture, yes?"*

*And —*

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Everything was a gentle rose shade, and a boa constrictor with a pink bow on its head had laid its head on Chuuya's thigh.

"That's a boa constrictor," Chuuya said.

A dip of the mattress. A head of knotted hair and bandages appeared over him, one wide eye blinking. "The boa constrictor line is bound to get boring soon."

*Deja vu* tickled his senses. The bed under his bones was softer than a cloud — but damp, like the velvet sweat-matted sheets from the nightmares Lippman had had almost every night.

Little butterflies were sewn on the blankets; the wallpaper had the same motif — though the ceiling had been decorated in ivy branches.

A new face joined Dazai's one, a cascade of blonde curls almost hitting the constrictor in the face. Elise, just like her room, was as delicate as ever — as plastic, too. "Her name is Kazuko, and she's ugly."

"Kazuko is *beautiful*, thank you," the boy replied, undeterred. One of his hands sneaked to tap on Chuuya's forehead, taking advantage of his mostly unresponsive muscles. *And well behaved*, he tapped, viciously. *She's only bit me F-I-V-E times, and it wasn't even venomous!*

"She's ugly," Elise insisted. When she fixed the bow on top of the creature, all the boa did was twirl her tongue, crawling on Chuuya's lap. "She looks like — like Rintarou's poop."

"Lise, I don't wanna *know* that —"

"You *said* you were going to throw it in —"

Chuuya laid back on his elbows, attempting to sit up. Immediately, a freezing sort of flame ran down his spine — landing him back onto the fluffy pillows and mess of stuffed toys.

Kazuko hissed. It sounded like a laugh.

"Fuck you," he wheezed.

She *was* ugly. Her brownish skin was interrupted by darker shapes, blooming down its endless body in circles and lines, until it reached two unsettlingly stupid eyes. They didn't evoke malice — but that only made them creepier. When it settled its attention on him, hissing a thin tongue in a greeting, Chuuya saw the lower half of her sole limb tighten around the boy's shoulders.

*That thing is gonna kill you*, he signed back, fingers curling in the air, despite Elise's whines.

Dazai's grin was brighter than the lights framing the bright pink vanity desk. "I hope so!" he squealed, leaning down to pat the creature's head, affectionately. "Did you know that, contrary to popular belief, this nonvenomous beauty kills her victims by choking off the blood flow to the heart and the brain? It's not suffocation. Imagine how peaceful my final breath will be! She's *living-anesthesia!*"

"I don't think that's how — where did you find this thing? And where's your leg cast —"

"Odasaku and I met her in the sewers," the boy answered, easily; pointedly ignoring questions about his disappeared crutch. "After she tried to kill me, he suggested we get rid of her — but I just couldn't let that happen. I convinced Odasaku to let me keep her. Now, all I need to do is wait."

Chuuya felt as if every organ inside his body had been passed through a microwave. "You named the boa constrictor whose murderous tendencies you're anticipating."

“*Kazuko the II*, ” he confirmed, gravely. Elise put her hand to her mouth, mimicking a trumpet. “After my first grasshopper. Elise danced on her.”

“I did!”

“May she rest in peace. I didn’t even have time to see if her bite was —“

“You domesticated the thing that’s supposed to kill you.”

The constrictor slid down from Chuuya, gathering into a donut in Dazai’s lap. His hair clips for that day were reptile shaped. His sleeves were stained in blood — when he slipped his chin on his palm and stared, Chuuya *knew* he was looking at his burned eye. “And?”

“Fucking fine,” When he pushed himself up, that time, he managed to sit up, head spinning. The number of toys all over the room was just short of nauseating; everything carried a strange smell of *untouched* — like the doll house Yuan had spent three months trying to steal. “Cheering her on. What happened to me?”

Falling back onto the bed, Elise and Dazai blinked. It wasn’t quite coordinated — it didn’t matter, still. Chuuya had always thought they looked a bit like each other — something in the dip of their cheeks; in the roundness of their eyes. A bad copy; something just wrong enough to pass all suspicions.

“Ah, well,” Dazai stared at the ceiling. “You kind of —“

“Exploded,” Elise offered, dropping in the middle of their bodies. When she attempted to dig a snow angel, her hands slapped them.

“Medical terminology,” Dazai agreed.

His coat was spread underneath him like a void on pink sheets. Curling over Kazuko’s head, his nails were always bitten to raw skin. No, not the nails — it was the *skin* surrounding them, red and ripped, as if his teeth had moved to the nearest substitute after having been smacked away from his nails one too many times.

The influx of memories gathered iron on the top of Chuuya’s tongue. Hesitantly, he laid down on his back — raising his arms to study the lines of bandages running over them.

“It wasn’t —“ he started to say.

“No,” Dazai said. “But similar. Noguchi dragged you to the Headquarters, screaming like a chicken,” A grunt. “Ruined all my work.”

His mouth dried up. “Did everybody —“

“See? No. Apart from you being hardly perceptible even behind a microscope, they *are* renovating around, after the hole we made on the twelfth floor —“

Chuuya stiffened. “Shut the fuck up. There’s no way you predicted *that* would happen —“

“Who knows,” he replied, vaguely. Head on his clavicles, Kazuko hissed — he murmured back something, fixing her little bow.

“Did you —“

“Fix you up? Sort of. You regenerated on your own, kind of. It was very weird to look at, by the way. And bandaging you up was sticky and smelly and *annoying*. You owe me so many Arcade tickets. And your corpse, maybe.”

“But the other night —“

“Same thing. Except —“

“Would you stop interrupting me?” Chuuya snapped, grabbing the closest pillow — the one under Elise’s head — and throwing it in his face. A shrill rang; Kazuko hissed louder.

Dazai threw the pillow back, furious. “You were *asking*. ”

“You weren’t *letting* me *ask*. ”

“I have a boa constrictor on me.”

“An *amazingly* well behaved one.”

“You two are insufferable,” Elise offered — the same tone she had used when they had received their first pay, and been lost enough about the value of money to spend all of it in two nights at the Arcade. “I want Q. Q is *fun*. Why do you never bring them around?”

“That is an awfully sweet question, my Elise.”

Chuuya had never seen Mori with his lab coat on — whenever the man had locked him in the backroom of his office for a check up, he had been back in his scarf by the time his eyes had opened again. The whiteness of it was awkward against his paleness — the stethoscope dangling around his throat was a shock of hot pink.

He had blood on his sleeves. Chuuya knew, without a doubt, that it was his.

“Our little Yumeno has been terribly busy with experimental missions,” he explained, shutting the door behind himself. The hallway of the highest floor of *Building One* was empty, lit in approaching sunrise; Mori’s hands tapped the end of the flower-shaped bed, smiling. “I’m sure they can’t wait to play with you again.”

Elise *humpf*- ed. The air folded into itself — when Chuuya blinked, she was gone. Kazuko, now curled on the edge of the bed, was unsightly staring Mori down.

“This is worse than when you fed all the bees into the clinic,” the former doctor sighed, tilting his head to study the beast. “Your allergic reaction was the least complicated part of that whole ordeal.”

Pettily, Dazai kicked Kazuko’s bow off.



At last, Mori laid his eyes on him.

“Well,” he started, a bit more strained. “You certainly had an eventful week, Chuuya, yes?”

Something climbed up his burning throat — something different from the shame Kouyou’s glare had burned through him, eyes low and fists tight. Chuuya thought about the few wounded men from the parking lot; the names he had memorized from those ricocheting TV News. He thought about the man’s hands on his shoulders; his knees on the ground. The scars under his bandages — *otherwise, what was the point of it all?*

“Yes, sir,” he said, obediently enough.

“Dazai here fixed you up all by himself,” he informed him — something, in the curve of his mouth, more *taunting* than proud. “I kept watch, though, don’t worry. He’s good, but he still bears some lacks. You needed a transfusion, and if he had actually given you his blood — well,” A scientifically curious expression took over. “I *have* always wanted to see what would happen.”

Chuuya barely had time to ponder fruitless poetry about the deadliness of Dazai’s own blood — a pillow hit him right in the face.

“What the *fuck* —“

“Are we even sure the eventfulness of the week is over?” Dazai questioned, leaning both elbows on the pillow, effectively attempting to suffocate him. His fingers sneaked underneath his kicking legs and fists — settled on his nape, right under the choker. “No bloodthirst and such?”

Merciless, nails tearing his skin apart again, he traced, like an order: *don’t take your gloves off.*

Chuuya paused.

The pillow was removed; Dazai didn’t even meet his eyes, flopping back next to Kazuko, leaving a sea between their bodies. “Define bloodthirst,” he heard himself say.

“How should I define bloodthirst?”

“If it’s that glazed, pathetic look you get whenever someone puts a gun in your hand,” he drawled, annoyed. “Then, *no.*”

Easier than most things should be, Dazai shrugged. Chuuya tried to recall the feeling of his palm on his forehead, swiping matted strands of hair away — clenching his mouth shut on a scream, under car lights and a smell of rust. “Pretending not to find *something* in death when you’re good at it makes you a hypocrite, not a good person.”

He grunted. “Who the fuck wants to be one?”

The world shook.

Chuuya yelped, hanging onto the edge of the bed not to fall over, spine on fire — Dazai's whines seemed to have more to do with whatever Kazuko's peeved reaction had been. As soon as his mouth ran out of curses, Mori sighed, contentedly, spreading in the space between them, hands crossed on his stomach — counting clouds between the ivy branches painted on the roof.

"Now, now," he tutted. "Now is not the time to philosophize. Chuuya, mind telling us how you feel?"

He stared at the ceiling.

*Impatient hands are fallible hands*, Pianoman had liked to say, rubbing banknotes under his nails. *Fallible hands are a death sentence*. A death sentence would have aggravated whatever Arahabaki was made of to the point of never ending screeches and scratches and words that *words* were not. Chuuya would live, for sure; he'd hate it.

"He feels like stuffed chicken," Dazai said, helpfully. Chuuya reached over to slap him. He watched him kick Mori's calf. He carried not an inch of the seriousness he had traced words on him with. "Elise will maul you for stepping on her bed."

"Let this old man rest his bones, yes?" the doctor groaned. "It's been report after report, you know? This *Special Division* business is *hell*. Who knew a permit could get someone so far."

"You're not old," they chorused. One of Mori's age-crises was the least optimal result.

He sighed. "If only you two had seen me in my prime."

"Was the Ice Age as cold as they say?" Dazai questioned.

Elise's chandelier was a rainstorm of little crystal pieces, reflecting the moonlight into gently candid lines. Chuuya moved a bit to the left, and winced against the feeling of being blinded — he sunk his head deeper into the pillow.

"— truly no point in being so difficult," Mori was insisting, attempting to pat Kazuko's head. "Your tarantulas appreciated me."

Dazai angled his body to hide her. "She's clearly smarter than them. Time is a learning curve in companionship. Like that dream I had, about the phantom crab —"

"It's like now he knows he can be let out," Chuuya forced himself to spit out, once the darkness of his eyelids began to bloom with stars. "Like he's decided he was never meant to be kept in in the first place."

One of Dazai's hair clips — star shaped; a bit ruined at the tips — dangled weakly from a curl, landing on the sheets. It seemed louder than death.

"If that's how it is," Mori said, surgically devoid of anything at all. A blinking dot on a computer he was typing his research on; the latest dossier on what Verlaine might have called the *sin of Chuuya's stubborn breathing*. "Report."

His lips parted through a tight jaw; quirkier than shrugged shoulders, Dazai said: “It was my fault.”

He stiffened. “The *fuck* it was, what are —“

“I had noticed early signs of instability, ever since Chuuya came from France,” he continued, undeterred by the morgue-like silence of the room. “Even before that, truly — but we cannot be sure of how much of that should be blamed on Dante. I should have taken them more seriously.”

“That’s just not —“

“What signs?” Mori demanded.

“Sweating,” Dazai listed off. “Scratching the *Corruption* marks. Distant gazes; wide pupils. Involuntary activation of *Tainted*. Murmuring. Convulsions; tremors. A steadfast refusal to meet reflective surfaces. A —“

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Chuuya snapped.

“Why did you let him use *Corruption*?”

The medical detachment of Mori’s tone set his nerves on fire. “He needed to prove something to himself,” Dazai’s shrug didn’t rattle the bed; barely a real thing. “I let him. It was my mistake.”

“It was *my* — Boss, seriously,” Chuuya insisted, tone bordering the dangerous. “I lost focus. Nobody but me has shit to do with it. I’m going to — deal with it.”

“Certainly,” Mori replied, pensive. “People got wounded because of you. I would suggest encouraging the idea of people getting hurt *for* you, rather. The *choice* is what makes the difference,” His smile was nowhere to be seen; he tried to understand *where* the amusement was drooling from. “You deprived them of one. I am sure you understand why the *Special Division* might be after a power that can do something of that gravity.”

He didn’t dare exhale.

The man hummed. “*Ha*. Gravity.”

“What do you suggest?” Chuuya asked.

“You have a goldmine at your feet,” Mori’s tone sounded elementary. “Who cares if it knows how to bleed? So do all men. Hone it. Eventually, from my experience — it won’t even smell much.”

A beat.

Dazai was carefully uninterested when he questioned: “You want him to train *Corruption*?”

“*You*,” he corrected. “Not *him*. Plural. Your collaboration is necessary, yes? Mostly, at least. I can’t say this week’s results have been some of your best, Dazai. Truly,” For the first time, a corner of his mouth curled up. It was distinctively unfriendly. “In the future, do try to move a *bit* quicker than the parking lot crashing on our syndicate’s strongest Ability User, yes? Imagine the mess. Imagine the *gore*. Three stores, four hundred square feet of decades-old *stone*, landing quicker than an exhale — *heavier* than whatever ball you must have had locked around your feet *not* to keep his skeleton from splattering,” A sigh. “Who needs bones. A loss is a loss.”

Chuuya traced the ivy on the ceiling. There was a mirror, in the furthest corner of the roof — a strange spot. He imagined Elise laying on the ground, cheeks rosier than a plastic rose, pulling her hair to see if the reflection would answer.

His lungs ached with memories he didn’t have. He tried — squinted until his head pounded; *forced* the corners of his skull until it was all shaded in frustrated shades — to recall what it had felt like — being buried.

“Yes, Boss,” Dazai offered — like he might have said more, if Chuuya hadn’t been there. Like they both would have.

“All you have to do is touch him. Call for backup, if necessary. Fairly easy, don’t you think?”

“Like you wouldn’t imagine.”

“Listen,” Chuuya attempted.

“As for you, Chuuya” Mori continued, jovial, “I won’t lie to you — I’m at a loss as to what the optimal solution for this Arahabaki issue could be. We have never dealt with anything similar — I wouldn’t dare give you orders on a matter I cannot back up. Given the sheer number of men I already have busy burying this matter — we don’t want to risk enlarging it further, do we?”

A pang of guilt. The man’s coat was a shock of white; he was right, and Chuuya didn’t even remember the blood on his hands. “No, Boss.”

“Nonetheless, nothing is ever quite as prolific as experimentation. I believe the necessity would match up nicely with you boys’ little competition,” He joined his hands. “*Corruption* exists with its cons — *Extrema ratio*, the Latin would call it. A last resort. Only the most hopeless situations should allow its use,” His cheek laid on the pillow; Chuuya couldn’t even consider laying his eyes anywhere that wasn’t on the man’s own. “I’m sure there won’t be particular difficulties finding circumstances with no hope to offer.”

“You’re asking me to set him free,” he said.

“I am.”

“To understand *what*, sir?”

Mori seemed to think about it.

“Where hunger becomes greed,” he landed on, eventually. “Where greed becomes foolish — cracking teeth on emptiness. I have theorized an endless state of *Corruption* would kill you, Chuuya. But death is a last step — the last step of a road filled with things to devour. I think it would benefit us all,” he concluded, unblinking gaze meeting his own, wrists to the air and shoulders flat. Exhaling. Never afraid. “To know when a god stops being hungry.”

*Even the helplessness you feel, Verlaine had thundered, is by someone else’s design.*

“I’ll do it,” Chuuya said.

A gentler smile. “I know you will. Dazai?”

The boy’s eye was stuck to the ceiling — *bored*, Chuuya thought, but not *quite*. “Don’t act like I have a choice.”

“Oh, none of us does,” Huffing, Mori sat up, climbing out of the bed by its feet. The motions shook his roughly-reconstructing ribs; Chuuya bit the inside of his cheek, unable to look away from the Boss’ hands, cleaning his coat. “We swore that petty right away the moment the Port Mafia buried us.”

Kazuko hissed. Perhaps she had been smart enough to keep quiet while Mori got his orders out of the way. When she curled over Dazai’s legs, she seemed uncertain of where to settle her starving eyes.

“The rules remain, obviously,” Mori said, fixing his sleeves. Chuuya’s blood was still on them, inevitable like their last punishment — *no doctor*. He wondered if Mori counted.

“*Corruption* is a matter of absolute secrecy. You will have to deal with the consequences alone. *Ah*, and Chuuya — do keep that hat on, yes?”

Discomfort settled between his clavicles, as both of them sat up. An uncertain complaint — something sharper than, *you said it was a competition*; something less dubious than, *is it minimizing the damages, or widening them until they can be seen from the highest floor?*

“Boss,” Chuuya bowed his head.

Dazai stared, head tilted to the side. “Boss,” he said, like a question.

Two white gloves of long fingers, thin like bones, ruffled both of their hair. “I trust you boys will find the best way to turn this mishap into a weapon,” Mori said, kind. Then, meeting Chuuya’s eyes, “Atonement comes in bloodied shapes, sometimes. It doesn’t make it less worthy. It only makes it unfair.”

“Isn’t unfairness unfair?” Dazai jumped in, with the tone of someone who did not care for the answers he already had.

“No,” Mori replied. “It just is.”

Chuuya felt himself nod, jaw clenched. He was still locked in that bite when Mori closed the door behind himself.

“He’s so predictable, sometimes,” Dazai muttered, chin in hand. Nonetheless, something in his tone was shaken.

Distracted, Chuuya made to kick his legs out of the bed. “We need to start planning,” he said, under his breath, hands reaching for reports he *knew* had to be lined up on his desk by now. “We need to take recovery times into account — hours and locations and fucking *civilians*. *Corruption* might —“

The moonlight disappeared.

His first instinct was to kick, *Tainted* in his palms — the sting from Kazuko’s fangs came right before Dazai’s breathless wheeze, hands sunk in the spot Chuuya had instinctively hit between his legs. The blanket he had put over their bodies draped across their curled up shapes like a funeral sheet.

“Are you *stupid*?” Chuuya spluttered, cheek smacked against one of the pillows. “Tanaki already told you, you *can’t* wrap people up like fucking rugs —“

“It needs to be a forest,” Dazai said. “And just so you know, I’m not doing the dance.”

*This isn’t yours to apologize for*, he almost replied. The crimson glow of *Tainted* painted caves of light on the boy’s unconcerned face, turning his bandages bloodied. Kazuko had slithered off. Dazai secured the blanket tighter over their bodies, and signed: *it’s E-L-I-S-E’s room. It has to have cameras.*

Chuuya thought about a doable answer to that — something that wouldn’t land him in the dungeons, Dazai’s finger stuck in his ear while Kouyou tore his viscera out of his ribs.

“Why a forest?” he asked, at last.

“Or a valley. Or — well. Not a parking lot.”

“Why a *valley*?”

“Can’t risk you becoming stupid enough to crash your head against a building, again,” the boy answered, easily. “You fell like a rag doll, last time. If you lose more brain cells than what you have left, your hat won’t even fit you anymore.”

He punched his chest. “Did you seriously get yourself arrested trying to get me out?”

His sole eye settled somewhere over his shoulder, deep purple underlining sharp eyelashes. His breath smelled like salsedine — he wondered if he had jumped from a bridge again. “Matsuda sure had the time of his life trying to figure out where you’d run off.”

Something tickled his conscience — maybe Mori’s words; maybe a glimpse of Arahaki’s cold madness. “You shot me.”

Very patient, very blank, Dazai reached out — and laid his palm flat in the middle of Chuuya's collar bones, eye holding his stare. Gingerly, he studied the teeth marks he had left on his hand during his *Corruption* recovery.

Chuuya felt the sudden need to see that bullet scar for himself — to study it in its every curve; memorize it as a mark that did not belong to the intruder in his nervous system. Dazai was known for his good aim. Dazai was known for his *undeterredness*.

“Did you fucking have to?” he snarled, in the absence of something better.

*This is on you*, he snapped at himself. *What are you mad about?*

The boy's eye didn't move from his own knuckles. He wondered what he had looked like — if he had run through the debris, lips white, stepping on pieces of severed limbs with no care. If he had been excited at the prospect of making him bleed. If he had been silent; had raised his gun with the *Port-Mafia-black* severity expected from Mori's proudest diamond.

He thought Mori ought to look at him with more kindness, had that been the case.

“I shouldn't have had to,” Dazai offered.

Chuuya couldn't speak — he feared breaking his own teeth. He feared being mean, and revealing it was all for the sake of ricocheting. Something like *rage*, he mused — something like masochism, maybe. *The sane*, Verlaine's diaries had read, *do not wish for blood*.

“How did you know you'd nullified me?”

His pause was shorter than a blink. Chuuya wasn't quick enough to hear it; he saw it in the red tear *Tainted* rained between his eyelids. “I didn't.”

*I did*, Chuuya almost said.

It sat uncomfortably on old certainties.

*There was something there*, he thought. He searched and searched; found nothing but the downward curve of Dazai's mouth, lips bitten to blood — more curious than disappointed. When Dazai raised his hands, Chuuya only had time to notice the rings of bruises around his wrists — then he took off Chuuya's gloves, and it was darkness. It was the curved lines between Dazai's fingers; the blisters shaped like a gun; the scar near his thumb, a match to his own. It was quiet.

Chuuya grabbed the hems of the blanket between his toes — he straightened his leg, raising it just enough to let Kazuko peek in along to a ray of moonlight.

His hands were dying.

“That can't be good,” he concluded.

The ash-black color started at the tips of his fingers, climbing all the way to the middle of his forearms, fading into onyx veins. A burned out piece of wood — a decaying corpse from a

house fire. When Dazai pressed his thumb to the middle of that decomposing skin, it didn't even pale.

A hum. "What if your limbs fall off?"

"They're not going to *fall off*," Chuuya snapped, horrified, pinching the wrinkles between his eyebrows. "Fucking *die*. Why not tell Mori?"

"He has your life in his palm," Dazai replied, distracted. The hold of his fingers around his own was strangely warm; the taste of *No Longer Human* less nauseating than usual. "Your death should be yours."

It landed weirdly between their arms.

Chuuya frowned.

He was missing something — he knew. It was stuck between the falling skin of Dazai's lips and the strangely obsessive way he was running his hands down Chuuya's own; clinging to his wrist to scratch them, like a displeased cat. It was stuck under his destroyed nails — the nails of someone who had *dug* — fingers littered in Elise's band aids. The smell of strawberry jam hadn't even lingered — nothing they touched ever did.

He thought about it all for five seconds.

He stopped.

"So it's rotting me from the inside," he said. He had the suspicion he should have cared more — that the vowels should have tasted more bitter. "Great. What do we do with it?"

"We can't extirpate it," Dazai shrugged. It rattled the bed; on the ceiling, the mirror offered Chuuya its widest smile — teeth drooling blood and stone debris. "Mori might just lecture us again. I guess we'll have to let it grow, then, yes?"

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Between the twirling static lines of the tape, on the ancient laptop — Chuuya was an irrelevant dot, amongst cars parked on the paved roof of the parking lot.

His silhouette wasn't steady on his feet — a strange sight. The cracks widening under his steps were uncontrolled and relentless, spreading like a spiderweb working shift-night



overtime. The red of *Tainted* was washed out by the quality of the television — to an eye that didn't know, it would have been nothing more than TV statics.

*Abilities*, Mori had written, once, *don't deal well with secrets*.

The world came down soundlessly — a cloud of crimson dust and scorching thunder. The ground shook, as the mezzanine of the parking lot came falling down mercilessly, undeterred by Chuuya's head thrown back in laughter, and the energy with which he was attempting to slam his own body onto the catastrophe.

The screen wavered. When it settled again, ruins devoured the scene — shaking under lines of red electricity, as Arahabaki did his very best to climb out. Pieces of devastated cars appeared through the cracks; bloodied flesh from the *Souls'* corpses hung from the metal.

Dazai came running.

It might have looked somewhat ridiculous, had the utter silence not raised goosebumps. The blackened lines of his coat climbed up and down the destruction, mouth relentlessly calling a single word, fingers dragging up and down every inch of naked skin he came into contact with.

Blue and red lights appeared shortly after, surrounding the scenes in a panicked attack; a frame that might have been Matsuda reached the top of that shaking mountain, pulling Dazai down by the arm.

He resisted. Matsuda didn't let go. Dazai's free hand reached and reached and *reached*, his mouth still open, blurred face contorted in —

A hand slammed the laptop closed.

“Considering we *do* have a front door,” Officer Matsuda questioned, leaning wrinkled hands on the other side of his desk. “Did you have to break my window to welcome yourself in?”

The first morning light coming from the hallway illuminated his messy office — the piles of unfinished reports and *closed-but-only-technically* cases; mocked by the storm of pictures hanging on his walls — connected by a red thread that was *so* on the nose, he used to believe the officer would only put it up when Chuuya broke in to erase Sheep traces from his database.

*That entire place*, he didn't stop to consider, *reeked of Sheep*. Chuuya had done his very best to keep them out of that room — it had worked sporadically. If he squinted, he could see Shirase's shoes on the guest seat; the way Yuan would stare right at Murase's face while she stole colored clips from under his nose.

*Chuuya will get us out of here*.

*Don't linger*, Chuuya reminded himself. It had been written all over Rimbaud's diaries. *There is nothing to find in the abandoned*.

Sunrays rained on the officer's lingering eye bags, too — and, all around them, the ring of fresh bruises, shaped like the rusted bars from the cells in the corridor.

“You're not a fighter,” Chuuya frowned.

“Not outside of what the Academia had me learn,” Matsuda confirmed, massaging his nape as he dropped onto the guest chair. A stain of coffee had turned the edge of his collar brown; his eyes were studying him a bit too attentively. “Your boy wasn't particularly glad about being detained.”

He stared. “That Mackerel did *not* do that.”

The Officer massaged his neck — right over the bruises were leather scratches; the result of a jacket being strangled around his neck. “He swears you taught him that specific move, actually.”

Something uncomfortable settled in the space of the piece he *knew* he had been missing. Chuuya didn't understand. Chuuya didn't want to know why Dazai had bruised his knuckles for him.

“Can't believe you got yourself beaten by a pathetic beanpole with noodle arms,” he spat.

“Mafia kids can't be called *pathetic*.”

“Can't they?” he echoed, toneless.

A glare. “Was it actually you?”

Chuuya tapped his fingers on the laptop. It held several files on the wounded victims of the catastrophe — a good number of cellphone numbers, and reparations costs, and tears-stained testimonies. *Damning evidence*, Ace would have hissed. *Abilities don't deal well with secrets*.

“I put money in you guys' funds,” he said. “I don't trust the police to actually use them on civilians. I do hope you'll do it, though. The Port Mafia will deal with the rest. Yokohama shouldn't be burdened with others' mistakes.”

Matsuda's lips trembled. Speechless.

Chuuya cleared his throat, spinning the chair around to stand. “Anyway,” he offered, “I'm not here for that. I need some of your voices.”

“Chuuya,” he said, very gentle.

“*Queen of the Sheep*,” Relentless, he leaned his own palms on the papers on the desk. The new fingerless gloves hadn't been stretched out enough yet; they reprimanded every twitch of his fingers. “Am I meant to just interpret it as an insult, or have I missed something?”

Matsuda looked at him.

It took Chuuya's unblinking stare to drop his shoulders — not as much acceptance as it was defeat. He reached forward, extracting one of the dossiers from the piles.

"I *have* heard that around," he admitted, eyes roaming through pictures of Suribachi City. "I assumed it might be a mishap — you and the kids haven't been around in a year. I thought perhaps the old myth had begun getting blurred at the edges — that people had forgotten."

He curled an eyebrow, unimpressed, nodding down at himself. "I'm not particularly forgettable."

"Maybe you look like a girl."

"Maybe you look like a shiny bowling ball. You said *I thought*. What do you think now?"

Matsuda hesitated. "I think someone is willingly spreading the story differently. Trying to make up a rumor, maybe. I don't know what the gain is supposed to be, though."

Chuuya ran his tongue along his teeth. He squinted at the pictures on the wall — studied the vacant, bloodshot eyes of Dazai's mugshot. It would be taken down soon, he knew — removed from memory. Everything they touched was.

"Alright," he concluded. "Let me know if you hear something more about that."

He circled the desk, hands in his pockets; stole a pack of cigarettes from the pile of boxes near the doors, and pretended not to pause when Matsuda said: "It's not your fault."

His hummed. "Don't be stupid now."

The man opened his mouth. Whatever he wanted to say was nowhere to be found; when he shut his lips again, his gaze moved to the framed picture on the furthest corner of the desk — him and Murase, hands around each other's shoulders, grinning widely at the camera.

"I have a feeling he would know what to say," Matsuda commented.

It rolled onto the floor, harmless and heavy with consequences. Chuuya had been squeezed out of any feasible reaction to that sentence. His arms were itching. His hands were red. His duties were clear.

"I have a feeling he would be here, if he had known how to shut up," he replied.

The man didn't deny it.

"Come on," he said, instead, cleaning dust off his pants as he stood. "I'll give you a ride."

It was in the midst of Matsuda's rant on the positive effects of group counseling, right when Chuuya's forehead had begun to pound with the constant bumps against the window — that he saw the trail of blood in the sand by the crosswalk.

"Stop," he called. He thought he had, at least — the man's yelp only registered after Chuuya had already thrown his car door open, shoes sinking in the sand.

*Grieving*, he considered, with every missing pant out of his trained lungs, sand sticking to his shoes, *seemed like an unbearably heavy concept, at times.*

“Chuuya?” Matsuda called, attempting to follow his gaze. “Chuuya, are you —“

“My business,” he replied. “Not you guys’.”

At that — the man fell quiet.

He resigned to making his way down the shoreline, juggling the sand with his feet to cover the red river guiding him. *Who says this is your business?*, some reasonable voice offered. *Who says blood ever is anyone else’s?*

All thoughts vanished with the sea wind; something was waiting for him at the end of the blood road.

The corpse was putrid. A sharp, bitter smell clogged his nostrils the closer he circled around it, intense enough that he ended up removing his hat to protect his every oxygen door. A hunting knife had slit the animal’s throat; the blade was sunk in its side, an unlikely flag. Blood pooled down its dirty white mane, blending with the sand, rendering it a sticky mush under his shoes.

Chuuya met its lifeless eyes, frozen in the last emotion it had ever felt: irrational, feral terror.

*Apart from my poor dreams*, he recalled — on the glass of his entrance doors, on the inside of a blue plastic bracelet, under his eyelids — *nothing interests me.*

Unaware of his memories, and unconcerned with his realizations, the dead sheep stared back at him.

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*London, United Kingdom*

*Order of the Clock Tower (Archivists Building)*

*Telematic Control Central, 356B67.*

*Case: S56780001B*

*Codename: “The Japanese Sheep”*

*Shirase Buichiro.*

*Port Mafia Intelligence — Burner 676.*

*Registered Call N. 16787.*

*Interferences have been registered. Theorized cause: Influence of Prototype A.F.  
(Creator: Professor Mary Shelley; 567006).*

*Transcription.*

*[Statics.*

*Transmission Status: **Interrupted.***

*“...and I don’t —“*

*Transmission Status: **Conflictual.***

*“Hello? Wrong number, d — ... ude?”*

*Statics.*

*“...what?”*

*Transmission Status: **Undergoing Work.***

*Transmission Status: **Fixed.***

*“ — Port Mafia?”*

*“What the fuck — where did you weirdos even get my num —“*

*Statics.*

*Transmission Status: **Fragile.***

*“What? Yes, I do think it’s an important detail — I thought I’d never hear from Chuuya again, so—“*

*“What? Well, why didn’t he call — Why would he ask you guys to contact —”*

*Transmission Status: **Fixed.***

*“No, I — Blood graffiti? Are you sure they’re from... oh. Could it be — maybe someone... killed one of the kids, and took the — I don’t know! Y — I d —“*

*Transmission Status: **Conflictual.***

*Statics.*

*“I promise, like — You can tell him. Not me. I’m too busy here in the city — Yes, Stray Sheep, I’m doing just —“*

*“...killed a Sheep? Who? What? Oh. Like, a real sheep? That’s disgusti — smell like sh — reepy — Can’t you just get Chuuya on the phone — “*

*Transmission Status: **Fragile.***

*“No, I don’t know. What? Y — What? Why h — specifically? I don’t know what happened, I told you. I told you! We — separate ways. I swear. She — Suribachi? Did he kill them? Fucking — could do better, anyway. What? Hey, wh —“*

*Transmission Status: **Conflictual.***

*Transmission Status: **Conflictual.***

*Transmission Status: **Conflictual.***

*Attention: Intromission. Attention —*

***“It’s not very nice, spying on Master Chuuya’s friends. Want to hear an android joke, instead?”***

*Transmission Status: **Failed.***

*Please report to \*\*/\*\*/\*\*]*

***End of Transcription.***

## Chapter End Notes

kouyou, dazai, and every person around him, very sensibly: chuuya i think you are having issues coping because irrational destruction isn’t your style

chuuya: [waving his slowly decaying arms and the body that’s activating corruption on its own] could an unwell person do this

hey there! first chapter of the week, and we're dealing with one my favorite themes i've written for this fic: the relationship between chuuya and anger. i don't typically agree with the popular fandom hc that chuuya has anger issues, but i do interpret a lot of his reactions to things that happen to him as a "rage first so you don't have to think about it second". this chapter is the start of a whole process where i'd like to analyze how chuuya, imo, in stormbringer and in canon and with dazai, tends to substitute grief and sadness with what's expected to him as a person — given his power and given his proneness for destruction. those of you who still remember chapter seven might remember dazai's "you do know you don't have to be angry all the time, do you?"

anyway! more on that. we got some more noguchi, which i've been waiting for! he's my best friend's favorite draft character, and i'm excited for what i want to do with him. has he warmed up to chuuya yet? what are he and the colonel planning? is the colonel as bad as they seem? we'll see

and mori! god. i love writing mori interacting with skk. i feel like it makes sense to assume the he would have a close relationship with both of them; with dazai because of how they are, and because i like the familial/manipulative interpretation of it and with chuuya because i feel like his loyalty has to have its foundations on something more than mere ideal. mori is a clever man, and he's shown not to be cruel to his subordinates — he knows better. when he's cruel, he's cruel in much subtler ways (like not kicking higuchi out but making her doubt her whole life lol)

and chuuya's squad is official formed! more importantly, corruption training is about to start. i'm curious to explore how the pm/skk figured out that corruption isn't exactly something that chuuya can use when he wants — and the executive competition is in place. very excited.

anyway, as always — thank you so incredibly much for all the love you show to this fic. i was really down when it got deleted a few weeks ago, and if my best friend hadn't convinced me to post it again, i wouldn't be here. i'm very grateful, and i hope to hear from you in the comments! those and kudos are much appreciated.

see you either saturday or sunday! keep warm <3

p.s. "Yes , I tapped your —" Horror crowded down his spine. "Oh, no fucking way I just said that."

anyone caught that chapter 5 reference? bomb in the near vicinity mafia code :)



# BLOWN

## Chapter Summary

*The crucial issue,  
the man mused, between one too-casual step and the other; eyes roaming in search of the  
other suit-shielded agents scattered through the parking lot,  
were his slacks.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end :)!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xiv.*

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*Case number: 78930985*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. completed the following [...]*

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*The crucial issue*, the man mused, between one too-casual step and the other, eyes roaming in search of the other suit-shielded agents scattered through the parking lot, *were his slacks*.

His wife had picked them for him. She had quit her job mere weeks after his position at the *Special Division* branch had been put on paper; *I paid for them with couch pennies*, she had whispered to him, in that eyes-crinkled way of hers. They had become his favorite.

When it rained, though —

“Quit walking like that,” the nearest Agent hissed. A smile was petrified on his face — he had some *never-touched-before* phone on his ear, and a shiny new briefcase in his other hand. Their conspicuous group could have been a floor of the nearest tech skyscraper, pulling their cars out for lunch — under the flickering lights, he couldn’t *quite* shake off the feeling that their faces were too blank to sell the part.

“I can’t,” he hissed back, unsbtly fixing his gun in the tight side of the pants. “They’re soaked. It feels like walking in a swamp.”

In the ear-piece, the toneless voice of the *de facto* commander spoke: “In position.”

He stiffened.

He walked to the car.

It was all a matter of careful balance — the tight grip around his briefcase; the tighter grip around his unresponsive phone; the *never-ever-let go* grip of his ribcage around his lungs. Summer rain always made breathing difficult.

No moon was there to blink at their casually abandoned bodies, from the tunnel that led to the exit. The industrial lighting, sickly white and insistent, wasn’t any comfort. This he knew, though: monsters could not survive without the starless night sky.

The man was no coward.

It was rational caution; delicate steps on a floor littered in glass shards, and white heathers’ petals, and similar deadly things. Something every reasonable man knew — *always carry a light with you, always listen to the things you can’t hear, always watch yourself from the shadows*. Yokohama had simply grown more deceitful, lately.

Old friend and old nemesis; *the city that would keep you safe* — if you had something to offer in exchange. The man had met crueller men. He had also, admittedly, met kinder ones.

“He’s coming.”

Water dripped from some faraway leak — the echo of its crystalline rhythm bounced off the walls, ricocheting against the man's skull.

The sounds of heavy steps down the tunnel echoed like a last scream.

Nothing about the quiet was meant to be unsettling; so it wasn't. The man made his way to his assigned car, eyes low, and did not dart a single glance to the other members of the squad — the ones busy talking nothings on the phone; the ones pretending to get into their own cars.

He opened the hood, and set eyes on the only object: a black, electric wire-laced net.

*Standard procedure for Abilities repression*, the *de facto* commander had called it. Then, four words that had kept him awake the entire weeks spent planning the attack — words that had never been associated with the net.

*It might not work.*

“Hi!”

The man slammed the hood shut.

“*Civilians?*” the agent closest to him hissed in their earpieces. “*We said to evacuate the area!*”

“I’m really sorry to interrupt you,” the boy offered, smiling. He was tall for his age, but built in the lanky uncertainties of adolescence — the baby fat on his cheeks and the shimmering braces on his teeth were strangely unsettling, when paired with the unnaturally straight line of his spine. “Do you happen to have a lighter?”

He squinted. Hesitantly, with the hand held behind his back, he confirmed to the closest agent — *civilian*. “I’m afraid not. Aren’t you a bit too young for bad habits, son?”

“My babysitter set me on the wrong path,” he sighed. He was dressed strangely formal; the hems of the coat he had only *laid* on his shoulders almost brushed the ground. Perhaps he was one of those rich, vaguely dispassionate kids who worked internships near the City Hall. “Well. Thank you either way.”

“You may want to hurry out of here,” the man let him know, tapping a finger on the hood.

“Oh,” When he tilted his head to the side, his overgrown bangs moved *just* so, showing off a head bandage, hiding his eye. “How come?”

He shrugged. “Heard they’re sending men in for pest control.”

“Oh,” he repeated. His braces peeked through a vacant smile. “I understand.”

*Get him out the fuck out of here*, he signaled, with his hidden hand. From the square of weak light appearing from the tunnel, thunder shook the heat-vibrant air. The LED lights flickered.

For a single moment, when the plastic light bit the darkness away — the man could have sworn he had seen the boy's skull grin.

The boy bowed. Something about it was unsettling — his smile, perhaps. The way his one eye followed his breaths. "Good evening, then."

"Good evening," he mustered up.

Over the drumroll of thunder, the lights buzzed again. When they came to an halt, he was nowhere to be found.

"He's gone," he muttered.

"Now," an agent replied.

What followed was a blur.

*[ "Be careful," the Commander told him, in the shiny Hall of the Special Division building. "If any other syndicate or authority caught a glimpse of this, it would create a mess we don't need." ]*

*"No one will know, sir," the man assured him. "We will be swift. The boy won't even know how to scream."*

*"You will be tasked with the net."*

*"I often am. I know how to hide. It was the first useful trick I learned in my life."*

*A curled eyebrow. "Were you a shy child?"*

*"No," he replied. "Just a disliked adult."*

*A grin relaxed the man's face. It was quick to disappear. "Still," he insisted. "Be mindful of the shadows."*

*It seemed a peculiar warning, with a fake briefcase in his hand and the future on his eyelids, and one of his son's dinosaur toys in his pockets. He was going through a phase. His hands were never empty enough. "The shadows, sir?"*

*"Yes," Whatever his gaze settled on, the man knew he hadn't been invited to observe it, too. Still, the hesitance of his next words was biting enough to slide shivers down his spine. "The roads of the underworld have been talking. Tales I have heard since I was a child — gods and demons, and whatnot," His pursed his lips. "Never seemed as real."*

*Nervousness turned into an awkward laugh; it was an old habit of his. "How should we know which shadows are the shadows, sir?"*

*"Oh," the Boss blinked, as if he hadn't considered the possibility. As if two shadows had come, and obscurity could no longer exist on his own; outside of the realm of servitude to two swift-footed thieves. "Well, not all darkness has teeth, does it?"]*

A5158 was a stain of red and blank.

The man *heard* him more than he saw him — flashes of war cries and screams escaping from gritted teeth, as the flickers of electricity whipped his glowing limbs. *Upon The Tainted Sorrows* was red, according to their database — with the almost theatrical buzz of lighting and broken neons, the mess seemed more a bright, luminescent *black*.

*Standard procedure*. The men fired their guns at him, bullets-shaped tranquilizers that hit the target with an echoing roar — the men threw the net he quickly passed through their hands, and they forced the boy to the floor, and they watched as electricity tore a shriek out of his throat.

*Standard procedure* — the guilty convulsed and screamed and fought back, drooling like an animal, baring his teeth like a beast, uselessly attempting to flare his vanishing Ability.

Silence.

Through the labored breaths of the agents holding the net down with their feet, the man let out a sigh. A5158 was passed out — curled in a fetal position, blood seeping out of his ears. The knots of the net pressed onto his cheek, plastering him to the ground — spasming fingers and all.

Behind the eyelid, his eye shook.

“Alright,” the commander ordered. A5158 had managed to strike some hits, before falling — the man met the lifeless eyes of half a dozen agents, skulls shattered against the cars he had flung them into. He cleared his throat. “Take him.”

Effortlessly, like standing up at the end of the dinner, he ended the order with a kick to the back of the boy’s head.

It thundered.

The lights flickered — once, twice; the dark breaks in between a bit longer each time. By the seventh time, they didn’t turn on again.

A breath. One of the agents cursed. “Where the *fuck* are the portable to—“ He fell quiet.

The darkness was suffocating. The man tried to remember where the nearest car was positioned — he kept his foot on the net, and reached behind himself, looking for his guns. He found nothing but an empty holster.

He swallowed his tongue so abruptly he choked, backing away, stumbling, unsure of his direction, heartbeat spiking in symbiosis to the flickering lighting outside — “Code Museum,” he called, his voice barely a whisper — and then it rose until it burned his throat — “*Code Museum* —“

He turned, right as lighting lit up the night, and he stepped on his commander’s corpse.

A guttural scream crawled out of his throat, not a screech and not a groan and not a cry, but something in between. The sound ricocheted off the walls — *almost* hiding the glacial clatter of the net being dragged across the concrete, the eerie lack of breathing patterns from his agents. He backed until he bumped against a car, hands trembling so violently his body shook with it.

When lighting flared again, he only caught it all in a blink — the sea of corpses, standing right where they had been towering upon the net, heads exploded into nothing but wet, slithering brains and chests torn into pieces, their ribs spread open like gravity had used a corkscrew to.

Then death came falling on him.

It was red.

His head crashed against the concrete, and then dug a road inside it, further and further. The smell of blood was intoxicating — the claws that were anchored inside his chest were *burning*, as a sound that might have been laughter drooled on his face.

When he managed to tear his eyes apart, he saw crimson strands of hair floating into air that had turned scarlet with a nature-made electricity — and eyes that lacked a pupil, crying blood tears on cheeks he had seen pushed to the ground until a moment before.

“Please,” he heard himself beg, through the blood of his shattered jaw, “*Please* — “

“Look at this, Chibi!” A voice called, some endless galaxies away. *Familiar*, he thought — and then he didn’t think anything, *anything* that wasn’t the liquid fire in his veins and the god upon him, burying his body deeper and deeper into the concrete, *laughing*. “They gave your treasure hunt a name and everything.”

The boy from before appeared upon him.

He had his gun in his hand.

“Don’t worry,” he told him, like he was very aggravated by the whole thing. His free hand pinched the god’s ear; like an exhale, like an Icarus — he fell, and blinked with human eyes. “My partner vouched to fill your veins with poison and send you back home to relay a message. I’m more for the *hot liquid metal* route, though.”

*He was going to die*, he thought. They were going to let him live, and he was going to die for it.

“What — “ His chest was scattered. The *thing* straddling him had claws no longer, but the eyes it set on him still weren’t human. “What message?”

A5158 seemed on the verge of passing out. Nonetheless, he sunk five nails onto the holes his vanished claws had left — *curling* inside viscera, his entire skin dripping in the agents’ remain — and leaned forward, framed by the never ending void of the other boy’s coat, the boy’s eye — and spit right into his face.

*Kamikakushi*, the man recalled. The tales of folklore his wife would tell him in the winter, fingers running through his hair. *Never seemed as real.*

Teeth brushed his ear. Nakahara Chuuya ordered: “Come find me.”

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## TWO MONTHS BEFORE

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Cemeteries were the one place where Arahabaki had nothing to say.

Chuuya would have expected anything but. The deteriorating bones and drained flesh littering the ground under his feet — so unapologetically endless he could *feel* them, *one by one* — were an ocean for him to get lost in. It was remarkably similar to the feeling he got whenever he stepped on holy ground — as if the *thing* pulsing through his veins had been reminded of just how tight the space was. As if it’d ever been holy; and not merely laboratory-made.

But Arahabaki — who scritch and who *pulled* and who whispered wordless ideas down the length of his spine; who didn’t even recognize death for what it was, always too much in a hurry after causing his devastation to stick around and see it poison the grass — fell quiet as soon as he stepped one foot inside that funerary playground.

It might have been interesting enough if it were respect — Chuuya knew he couldn’t feel anything of the sort, though.

*Lousy roommate*, he told himself, kicking rocks and walking heavily, because what else was there, if not leaving a sign — *Lousy roommate, mindless itch.*

“I came with the motorcycle, by the way,” he told Albatross’ fake grave, fixing his crossed legs upon it. It was the most uncomfortable of the bunch to sit on — but spiting him for all the days he’d spent on Chuuya’s counter was viscerally more *fundamental* than any pain. “Your dramatic ass should be grateful you’re dead. I would have never given that thing back to you.”

Summer painted the sky golden whenever he was finally *alone* — Chuuya liked to chase the skyline down the coast, to run fast enough that the velocity machines would ring and a cloud of dust would embrace him. He liked the sheer *rawness* of it, the electrifying sensation of his ears popping and his shoulders brushing the ground, the brush of brakes he didn’t want to step on, not now, not ever, not until he fell over the edge of the earth.

*You’d look cool as fuck on it*, Albatross had snickered, months before he —

“I’ve started buying your fancy cigarettes,” he told Iceman, then, throwing his peach peels on his grave. He would clean it up later — he always did. “They taste like shit. I get that you had a whole English-spy thing going on, but how far were you willing to go? They’re not even worth the money.”

The pack was a heavy weight in his pocket; Chuuya considered leaving it home every morning. Upon that enclosed area, the overgrown leaves of the tree offering shade to the tombstones hissed along to the wind, laughing at him. “Sorry I don’t get to stay long these past few weeks,” Belatedly, he gulped down a bite. Felt it get stuck — felt it grow old; felt it fester and grow vines up his throat.

He went there every week. Verlaine had died mere days after them; *days*, like stolen goods he didn’t deserve.

*Don’t be a hypocrites.*

“I’ve been rotting away. Quite literally. Doc would have a field day with my latest trick,” He snorted. “These days it feels like I’m only ever kicking some son of a bitch’s face in or passing out at the Arcade,” He lit up. “I know you guys didn’t care about that stuff, but we’ve come up with this foolproof technique to scam all those idiot kids at the machines, and —“

Lippman’s fake grave mocked him the most out of all of them. He had a real one — empty, and engraved with his stage name. It was littered in so many flowers the stone disappeared under them. He wondered, sometimes, if all those fans ever felt awkward — stuck with the knowledge they would never mourn his real name.

Misplaced, all of it. The dead could not accuse; guilt was a thing of the living.

“If they seriously make me do a speech, when I become Executive,” He munched on his orange, nodding to Pianoman’s grave. “I’ll call you out. No mercy at all. Getting yourself beaten to a pulp by a teenager, after all that shit you did. Pretty embarrassing.”

They had built Pianoman and Doc’s graves — or whoever they were meant for — too close. He never brought flowers, but if he had, they would have dripped water drops down each other’s stones. Chuuya had thought about lamenting the mistake. Even the dead deserved some privacy; to occupy a space that wasn’t even a quarter of the one they’d stolen from the world.

The dead did not give a shit about it. *The dead could not accuse*, he told himself.

These dead *would* not, even if the possibility existed — because he chose his friends *good*, and perhaps he should have been worse at it. Guilt was a thing of the living, and of pathetic idiots with murderous brothers.

Acutely, he wished he could remember the sight of whatever had been of Verlaine’s body. Perhaps it would have quieten it down — *it*, that sharp thing in his chest, glass shards and Doc’s shrilling laughter, a clock ticking and ticking; his brother saying *if they keep you here, they must be removed*; and why did he still call him his brother, anyway, as if —



*I don't know where to put it, he apologized. Misplaced guilt. The dead did not give a shit. It won't fit in your graves either. I don't know where to put it.*

“I still have to cut my hair,” he told no one at all.

Upon his head, the sun hummed.

He always stayed too long. Talking; silently dangling his feet from the grave. Tracing the stitches on his arms — studying them under the unobtrusive sunlight, where no one could gape at the scars. Chuuya knew they would heal and disappear, for the most part.

Not all of them. It pissed him off, pointlessly— the idea of Arahabaki leaving a mark; claws lines down the cell bars, mocking him.

*Wear bandages*, Albatross would have snickered. Armbands, maybe, Chuuya considered — ignoring him in every hypothesis, the bloodless and the real ones. Or —

*[“Why is your tattoo different?”*

*Mori's surprise was evident.*

*Elise was pulling at his pants, squeaking and pestering about some fair he'd promised to take her to. Politely, following a code they all knew, Chuuya pretended not to notice, waiting for orders from the other side of the man's desk.*

*“Sir,” he added, like a second thought. His hat was still in his hand, leftover from a kneeling position he'd been hurriedly been called off of.*

*“My tattoo?” the Boss echoed. It was hard to understand what had taken him more aback — the question itself, or the fact that Chuuya had actually spoken up and initiated a conversation with him. He wasn't foolish enough to believe his general avoidance of the Boss hadn't been noticed; he'd just thought he wouldn't care.*

*“On your wrist,” he said. “I saw it during the briefing, a few days ago. There's a dagger between the white heathers, right?”*

*If the question stunned him, he was quick to hide it. Shirase would have called him a Dragonfly Face. You know, he would have said, chugging a beer and staining his shirt like a toddler. Always around, until you actually go look for it. Like they know, dude.*

*“Am I not allowed to ask?” he added, eventually, when the silence stretched too long and grew too thin. He had never been scared of the man. Such premises inevitably birthed cautiousness — he hadn't grown up the way he had to believe that a lying fool could fill mouths with only blood.*

*Mori exhaled, somewhat amused. “No, no. Forgive me. I was simply surprised. It's popular knowledge, you see.”*

*He felt stupid. “I —“*

*“You fit so perfectly here with us, sometimes it’s hard to remember you didn’t grow up in the organization,” the man interrupted him, gently. “I assumed you must know, or I would have asked Kouyou to tell you. It’s not your fault.”*

*Chuuya bit his cheek. “What is it?”*

*“Executives embellish the syndicate symbol with this knife, just like the current Boss,” the man explained, tapping the buttons upon his wrists. He didn’t move to show him the inked skin — he found himself relieved by that fact. “Do you know what white heathers mean? I assume Pianoman must have told you.”*

*He didn’t ask him how he’d known which Flag had brought him to have his tattoo made. As blankly as he was capable of, Chuuya had long since come to the conclusion that there were probably few things Pianoman hadn’t told the Boss about him.*

*It hardly mattered. It had been his job. Every cable he found on the bomb had to be registered. Chuuya knew he hadn’t listed them all, still.*

*Sometimes, when Albatross’ apartment felt quieter than usual — when the mirrorball upon his head glistened under the moonlight of windows he refused to clean — he wondered if the cables Pianoman had kept for himself were the ones they’d one day need to keep the explosion contained.*

*“Protection, right?” he answered, digging holes through his pockets. “For the Night Wardens and stuff.”*

*Graciously, he accepted the definition. “Precisely. The organization was born, first and foremost, for the well-being of the lower levels of the city. Prostitutes, prisoners, children and those on the verge of self-destruction: these people were the founders of the Port Mafia. Many Bosses — recent ones, as you are well aware of — forgot their origins and mission too easily. But some things cannot be erased completely. The heathers are merely a reminder. I trust that no mafioso I would ever welcome in the organization would misunderstand the importance of the role we’ve been bestowed.”*

*“As for the knife,” Gloved fingers tapped the mahogany. “We are all but a bloodless organization. There is no simple way around it, and I would be disgusted by it all the same. Negating our crimes would make us hypocrites. And why should we? We live in a world that refuses to change, and that never will. Our methods are merely a fair start in a race no one wishes to be left behind in.”*

*Chuuya had never thought about justifying violence. And then it had been Detective Murase’s dying body — for him, because of him, always him. Weren’t you supposed to bring me to the light?*

*“Those who lead the crowd need to be aware of the trust they’ve been given,” Mori concluded. “We stand where we stand because we have not been taken away from it. The knives are meant to symbolize our willingness to get our hands dirty in the place of those under us. When the time to make complicated choices comes, we should be ready to make them — even if it makes us less of a protector. Don’t you think so?”*

*Chuuya frowned at the carpet. “‘Suppose.”*

*“I know you understand,” Blinking, he raised his head. The man’s smile was wider than the thin lines of his tattoo — he could feel it pulse, between his clavicles, indelible and real; realer than anything else. “It’s what you did for the Sheep, isn’t it?”*

*He stared.*

*“And it’s what you’d do for the Port Mafia,” the doctor continued, unbothered by his shock. “I trust this. I know this. You have proved it to me time and time again. Every man who has ever worked under your direction has reported how instinctual it is for you — to put your life on the line in their place. I told you once before, didn’t I? A good leader will ruin himself for the good of those under them. A good leader will give them a life to live.”*

*“I wasn’t a good leader for the Sheep,” he said, once his lips managed to tear themselves apart. “You said that too.”*

*“Oh, well,” He winked. “Growth has to start somewhere, doesn’t it? A road that may end in high places. Perhaps you weren’t what the Sheep needed, yes. But you must believe you can be what the Port Mafia needs, or you wouldn’t be competing for the Executive seat.”*

*“Don’t you want Dazai there, anyway?” he curled an eyebrow, skeptical.*

*Mori tilted his head — as if he had never considered the concept before. Strangely enough, it reminded him of Kazuko. He wondered if the boy had noticed the similarities too.*

*No, he thought. He wouldn’t have nurtured her into something that might put an end to him, in that case. Nothing would have left him less fulfilled than death by Mori Ougai.*

*“I want whoever can shoulder the weight,” the Boss answered, at last. “I have seen Dazai do it. I have seen you do it. At this point, it’s all a matter of —” Elise, who had mysteriously quieted as soon as the conversation had started, offered him a private smile — the kind that chilled mafiosi to the bone. That made her look just like — “Well. Of who can stand the sight of broken bones longer.”]*

*“Chuuya?”*

*Shit, he thought, very calmly.*

*“Tanaki,” he said.*

*She wore yellow. A single Chrysanthemum was left in her hands; as if she’d been very careful with offering the same number of flowers to every grave. The skin under her eyes matched the bruises under Chuuya’s clothes.*

*“Oh,” the woman cleared her throat, running nervous hands down the invisible crinkles of her skirts. The brat and his dead friends. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”*

*“It wasn’t exactly a fulfilling conversation,” Chuuya muttered. Hesitantly — studying the blurred names on the graves she clearly wanted to ask about — she walked to him.*

Stopping her would have been rude. Politeness wasn't exactly one of his daily concerns, but, then again —

[“*Get him out,*” she said, exhausted. “*He killed my child —*”]

Lighter than rain, she settled next to him “This is a nice spot,” Madame Tanaki said. “A good place for good friends.”

Chuuya crushed the rest of his peach inside his fist, imagining, imagining *hard*, then throwing it away. “You’re not going to rat me out?”

“Why would I?”

“Graves aren’t a thing in the Port Mafia.”

“No,” she admitted. “But sometimes we need more than a syndicate to hold on.”

He stared at the grass.

“Do you still come here every week?” the woman asked, eons later, eyes on the *Chips Chips* on Doc’s fake grave. He had seen people bring caskets of fruits and bread — but he didn’t see the point of leaving stuff the dead wouldn’t have enjoyed in life. And the idea would have given Iceman a migraine.

“Graves get dirty sooner than you’d think,” he said, and it was enough of an answer.

“I just thought —“ A pause. *That you’d get better, eventually.* “They do. I never had graves of mine to visit, apart from my husbands’, but...”

Chuuya watched her fingers reach for her abdomen with utter stillness.

“He didn’t want a grave either, you know?” she said — good Tanaki, unlucky Tanaki. “My ex husband. Said it didn’t matter. I know it’s how he deals with the pain, but — it hurts. Not having one. They were my *baby*. You know? I couldn’t greet them in life, but I like to believe I can greet them in death. That I can bring flowers to them.”

“Tanaki,” It was merely a whisper. Chuuya could have counted every blade of grass — spent the rest of his days just like that; could have burned the summer season and drank the ashes. “I’m not the person you want to be telling this stuff to.”

It hurt her.

She was efficiently quick to hide it, but it beat the sun for dominance and *blinded* him, bleeding down her cheeks like mixed tears and blood. A familiar picture. Body on the ground, hand in his own, eyes on the ceiling. *Where’s my baby?*

“Chuuya,” she said.

“You’re a good person,” he insisted.

“So are you.” Helplessness painted her tone. “Not every ounce of blood on this cursed earth has been spilled because of you.”

“I don’t have a complex,” he scoffed.

“And *I*,” Her Chrysanthemum dangled in the corner of his gaze, dancing along to her frustrated motions, “Have *never, not once*, thought of you as the man who killed my child.”

“I’m not about to make your loss about me —“

“But you *are*. ”

He snapped his head to her.

Fierce and glassy, her eyes refused to lower. Her hands were tight around the flower — did Chrysanthemums have thorns? Should he have gone and taken it off her hands?

“You *are*, ” Tanaki insisted. “And it’s not even — that’s not *you*, Chuuya. Guilt and rage, you use them differently. You push them back, you embrace them — you come *talk* to me, and you let me apologize —“

“*Apologize?*”

“— for blaming you for something you would have *never* done if you had been in your right senses. And I wouldn’t have either,” Tanaki stood straighter. “At the Hospital — you have to know. I would have *never* —“

“You weren’t in your right mind,” Chuuya cut her off, in disbelief. “Tanaki, you think I blame you for some shit you said while you were high to the moon on painkillers?”

Her laugh was shards of glass down his throat. “I know you don’t blame Executive Kouyou for anything that she did, or — or any of the other *Souls*, for what’s worth. All the men you killed that night — I’ve seen you go talk to their families. You don’t say a bad word against them, but you won’t give yourself the same forgiveness? What *for*, Chuuya?”

*Violence*, he thought, had never been something to justify. He wouldn’t have found the time, anyway. Too many people and too many reasons — too little care and too little space, a mountain of flesh under the soles of his shoes and the crunch of bones between his teeth. *All you are is what I will escape*.

Graves couldn’t speak. Albatross’ voice was in his ear, whispering things he didn’t want to hear. Lippman’s body rolling out of his brother’s car — never touching him, not once; leaving blood on Chuuya’s hands all the same. And then Pianoman’s lessons, *if it’s not real, it might as well be useful* —

*Making this about yourself*. And then: *making your mistakes about someone else?*

“Sorry,” Chuuya said, simply. “I’m sorry.”

Tears slipped down Tanaki's cheeks. Her hands were quick to reach up and wipe them away. When she nodded, it was sharp and weak all in one, and it never stopped.

"I'm sorry you lost them."

"It's alright."

"It's not."

"No," she agreed. Her child had no grave — but perhaps the flowers had been for them; perhaps she had only kept one because there was nothing else for her to hold. "No, not really. I wake up every morning and hope I'll feel them. I never do," A shiver wrecked her frame. "It's not alright, Chuuya, but I cannot let it kill me too. All that effort to save me — what for?"

"We all lost something. We will lose something more, as long as we live. It's the principle of it, is it not?" Tanaki concluded. Under the scorching sun, the silver X of her scars had a sickly shade to it — a new wound; newly opened, newly inflicted, newly cried over. "I have made mistakes. I will regret them until my grave. I am not unused to the pain — I will wear it until it doesn't fit. And I'll apologize, when I meet them again," Quieter, "I'll apologize to everyone."

Chuuya watched his fake graves. "The dead don't accuse, Tanaki."

She huffed a laughter, wet and humorless, warmer than summer itself. "The dead aren't here to police the way we feel about them either, dear."

*Oh*, he thought.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Flames clawed at his throat. "Yeah."

"They said *Souls* — they said Dante showed them something. What did it show you?"

Abruptly, *sharply*, he sunk his nails into Albatross' tombstone. "Not you," he offered. Enough time had passed that Tanaki had to have thought he wouldn't answer; surprised, she pierced him with the webbed glass of her eyes. "It wasn't like — It was shit from my past. Yeah? Not you. Some stupid vision."

"Oh," the woman frowned. Hesitantly, she asked: "Is... Is that why you don't use the elevator anymore?"

Chuuya stilled.

*[A glass tank, he thinks. Green light, green numbers, green lines. The boy is drowning. The boy is drowning. He is all the boy will ever be; sensibly, reasonably, the water is in his lungs. Since he knows nothing else, he rages. Hands against the glass, he—]*

“I noticed,” she continued, undeterred, in the back of his skull, “Sometimes you avoid me. It would make more sense for you to use the elevator, but you never do. I thought that maybe —”

“I’m not avoiding you,” he replied.

A wrinkled hand laid upon his own. Her rings looked like new scars upon his sun-kissed skin — just another white-and-red line he couldn’t rip away. The vivid lines of tattoos underneath them were blooming flowers, splattered in viscera. She had never told him who had painted her so deeply.

“I have no forgiveness to offer you,” Tanaki said. “You have done nothing to warrant it.”

He settled his jaw. He wanted to argue. He wanted to scratch the ground with his shoe, to trace *kanjis* until at least one of them would make sense to her — would make her *see* what she was missing. Chuuya was tired of acceptance. He was tired of the *not-mad-never-mad* tone of the Flags’ voices in his head, of Kouyou’s reassurances, of Mori’s closed eyes on all he’d done. He wanted —

*Blood*, he thought, very calmly. He wanted someone to punch him on the face — square and fair, just once.

He did the next best thing: inhaled, closing his eyes, and settled his nails deep into Albatross’ tombstone. When it began to hurt, he nodded.

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Cracked lips were the most annoying part.

*The press of the Singularity bubbles, as to say, when freed from caging cells — constricts your lungs in an effort to spread under your skeleton*, Boss had explained, flashlight digging into his eyeball. The sticky plastic of his gloves had dug under and over his eyelids, forcing them apart; Chuuya had studied his bent figure through blurred outlines.

*This isn’t aid*, Mori had said, before laying him down. His smile was kind. *If Dazai asks*.

*Dazai wouldn’t*, Chuuya hadn’t replied.

He liked the miniature clinic in the back of the man’s office — liked the butterfly sticker that had been left on the window, and the glistening anciently-shaped bottles of medicine on the

shelf. It was smaller than Kouyou's wardrobe rooms, and the roof was lower; when Chuuya couldn't hold in gasps, it didn't echo.

*That constriction*, the man had continued, as his fingers traced the path he was describing — because Chuuya had too many ideas about himself, and Mori at least *knew* the answer — *is the reason why you bleed so profusely under Corruption. You spit blood in an effort not to keep it inside. It slows down the salivary process; which explains your urge to regurgitate when you wake up.*

It had been a lot of words. Chuuya recalled them vaguely, and more vividly than most things. He recalled them like a warning whenever he passed his tongue on his lips — when the shattered road of dried skin falling off *burned* under the touch.

It was too hot for warm lips.

“What do the words mean, anyway?” Dazai questioned, palms hovering under his own.

*The Alley* was bathed in the blueish light of the nearby street sign — it gave the impression to last longer; as if the crooked stone stairs they had sat on might lead to something simply too distant to be illuminated. The broken pipe rained calmly by their calves. “What?”

His gloves were tucked in his pocket; the matching scar down their thumbs mocked the quiet laments of the nearby drunken homeless. Their hands made him think of Lippman — his stupid obsession with that slapping game, and the sheer number of times Chuuya hadn't been quick enough to pull his fingers away.

“*Grantors of dark disgrace*,” Dazai said. He pretended not to stiffen at the unexpected call. Curled on the boy's lap, silently studying them like the food she probably saw them as, Kazuko was a speck of scaly light. “Sounds downright dramatic, for a brat.”

He stared at the pool forming at the end of the stairs; had the strange idea of wetting his overheated skin. He wondered if Dazai's bandages were sweaty. “I doubt they meant to let me go and have me say it myself.”

“Point,” he admitted. His eyes traced the boa's body — it didn't seem affectionate, but he looked *selfish* as he did it. “Did Professor N have a thing for poetry?”

“Of course not,” Chuuya snapped, in the name of his own shelves, and the nightmare of taking something from the unwanted. “It's just — a shitty sophisticated trigger. An excuse to make a Pavlovian response into a theatre play.”

Chuuya could remember, maybe, if he tried — what the crowd of men in white had looked like, crowding around his tank. He didn't remember a thing; he *felt* it missing, like he just had to find the right portion of skin to stab to let it out. He could hear them clap. *Another good day.*

His sole eye twinkled. “A dog whistle?”

He kicked the pipe until it leaked water all the way to Dazai's shoulders.



Startled, Kazuko slithered to Chuuya's calves, hissing at him — but then seemed to find the spot comfortable, and settled there, ignoring his chilling remarks and attempts to shove her away without inciting the rage of her fangs.

He searched for words, as he stared at the curling lines of black over his scarred knuckles — vanishing against the scales of her body. Terms that weren't scientific, because Professor N didn't deserve to live on even as an echo — terms that weren't his own liquid ricochet of memories, because he didn't quite want to give *more* to a boy who was mere inches from discovering Chuuya *liked* it when Dazai made it all quiet.

"It can't be controlled," he said, at last.

"I know," Dazai replied, almost superior. *I don't care. Why do you?* "Kazuko, my moon, what are you doing? Come here. You don't want to catch rabies."

"Fuck off."

"Is it intuitively vicious, though? Does it need a target — does it need enemies?"

"*You* are a target," he pressed on. "You are an enemy. He —" He trailed off. There was quite no inauspicious way of clarifying what Arahaki's awareness of existence felt like — that there was the rumble of the earth itself moving, day after day; the sound of stars dying; the whisper of a flower cracking the concrete to grow. Heartbeats. All of them; every single one — heartbeats.

The boy curled his fingers up only so — just enough to tickle his naked wrists. "Quite," he said. "I do hope this will kill me, eventually, but I'm used to your own brand of disappointment. If you could?"

*You just want to see it up close*, Chuuya wanted to snap — like curiosity was a crime. Like he hadn't seen Dazai's blood plenty; like it made sense to pretend either of them didn't *get* it.

*[Some of the safehouses didn't have water — they dunk pans filled in the kitchen over their own heads, fighting for the rationed soap they kept forgetting to store. Some of them did have water, but not painkillers, and by the time they were on the floor, it seemed too late to care.*

*You're free to steal*, Chuuya had heard Mori tell Dazai, *from behind doors that were never quite locked, but never ajar*. For him].

"*You need not wake me again*," he insisted, pensive. "Seems strange. Were they not aware that never being awakened would have reduced their special little sadistic project into ash?"

"You're saying —" he dared, after a moment, startled, "You think it actually *can* be controlled?"

Dazai shrugged. "I'm saying I don't know. At the very least, *now* we know it needs to be said all together."

"Perhaps they just didn't give a fuck."

“Your existence is an indent bigger than the setting sun on a spring day into the Japanese Government's funds,” the boy pointed out, easily. “I will lay my humble bets on them caring.”

Chuuya thought he ought to be offended by *some* syllable in that conclusion.

*I took myself away*, he thought — a strange delight even in the littleness of freedom; of a given he had never called his. *I took your shit away, too. And you haven't caught me yet.*

He felt himself grin. “Think I got someone fired when I dragged my ass out?” What were a few faceless lab coats? A few sharp-eyed men directing the world from their desks — giving out coordinates to a seaside village, and picking the kid with the smaller fists and greatest potential?

*Potential to what*, he wondered, *potential for whom?* Black was crawling up his wrists, still and yet psychedelic; a burnt out match.

“Not that I understand it,” Dazai sniffed, which wasn't a *no* — which meant *some* of his troubles Chuuya *could* control. He lowered his head to whisper *something* in Kazuko's nonexistent ears; beamed when she returned to him, curling around his torso like the corset-like pants Dazai had started to wear with the summer. “I wouldn't pay a half eaten corn for you.”

He glared. “I wouldn't pay a shitty gum stuck under Gramps' shoe for you.”

“I wouldn't pay one of Elise's restaurant *napkins-and-breadsticks magical girl* potions —“

“I wouldn't pay —“

There was a cloud over the moon. Chuuya breathed in — parted his mouth before the *thing* in Dazai's eyes could become more material, and say something horrifyingly close to, *I'm here*.

Try as he might, he couldn't remember the sound of his words.

There was a cloud over the moon. When he opened his eyes again, it was red at the edges, just as blinding as the shots of pain from the spots where Dazai had sunk his nails in his palms. The strike of sizzling lighting curled around his ankle; Chuuya saw it twisted through the debris of a stone step he had destroyed. Grip unchanging, blood pooled on Dazai's collar — falling from the spot on his nape Chuuya had to have pushed against the wall.

He couldn't remember it.

He exhaled so heavily it ripped pieces of his skin off his lips, filling his mouth with iron. Chuuya dragged his tongue on his cracked mouth.

“Two point four seconds,” Dazai offered, fingers so tight around his own both their knuckles were white. If the hit on the nape had hurt him, he didn't show it. Kazuko was curled in front of him — protective. Hissing at Chuuya like only predators did. “That's how long it takes for Arahabaki to settle in. You only opened your eyes to stand on point five.”

*Less than usual*, Chuuya considered. His body was tense — his bones stretched out, almost let down; exhausted by the mercifulness of being stopped before they could snap themselves into pieces. *Less than usual*, he insisted, and, *did it matter less if the time was lost in smaller bites?*

It couldn't matter at all. Chuuya was used to being deprived of.

*There are no textbooks on this*, Mori had said, a bit apologetic — like Chuuya hadn't learned to fly on pages he couldn't read; like he had dragged his body out of the rubble and pretended to rule an organization by someone's information. *I'm afraid you boys will have to study your own instincts*. Like he wasn't the first and the last and the *only*. Lippman would have loved the uniqueness; Iceman would have sat next to him, offered a cigarette, and said, *I almost had you, anyway. Don't feel special*.

*Don't feel different*.

“Again,” Chuuya ordered.

That was when the man stepped in.

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Summer nights turned the concrete into an onyx sea, curling materialized heat over the betting eyes of the crowd, and turning the hoods of the racing cars scorching hot.

*“All vehicles step to the starting line,”* a voice nearly shrieked through some complicatedly built megaphone, near the light towers. Immediately, a slow turning tempest of undistinguished wheels — luxury cars, scrapped trucks, stolen police cars, a few motorcycles, and even an ambulance — rose dust amidst the enormous circular area of the race route, nearing a faded starting line smeared in red.

*Blood*, Chuuya considered, certain.

“That sketchy fucker should have put it on that brochure, if you could race with motorcycles,” he grunted, fixing his hands around the steering wheel. The leather was slightly ruined, but it was clear *The Man* had been rather proud of his weekly side hustle. “I’m way better on two wheels.”

*The Man* had been nothing much, as it was expected from *KK Company* goons. He had been slightly drunk when he had approached Chuuya and Dazai, perched on the stairs of *The Alley*

with a console and the remnants of the diner they had been haunted away from —

*How was I supposed to know Kazuko wasn't allowed in!*, Dazai had whined. *Anyway, if you hadn't thrown her in that poor mother's face —*

*She was trying to strangle my wrist, you piece of —*

— and had been rather enthusiastic to learn they had been recently kicked out of the *Shadow Blade*, and were looking for a new flag.

*[“There are five major organizations in the underworld of Yokohama,” the Boss explained, tapping gloved fingers on the maps the Colonel had offered him. Under the crimson led lights of the meeting room, each line of ink seemed heavier, scratched on paper instead of traced; no matter if they were probably all the results of Elise's grotesque drawings. “Four; the Port Mafia excluded: the Shadow Blade; the Bishop's Staff; the KK Company; and Takasekai.”*

*“The KK Company is an immigrated Chinese group, specialized in the contraband of ancient artifacts,” Mori continued, offering two dossiers for them to grab. “These days, it has mostly been taken over by Yokohama inhabitants, but they still have easy access to Chinese means of transportation. Their last wide scale trade was focused on the exportation of Thai silver — which is, surprisingly enough, exactly the material Beatrice's crosses were made of.”*

*“If I had known, I would have cut Chuuya open and stolen all that pricey stuff for myself,” Dazai made sure to tell him, eagerly tapping down his back. His eyes had a dangerous glint in them. “Say, think you can get yourself to throw up hard enough, if —”]*

Feet landed on his lap. “How very brave of you to assume any other racer would have *seen* you on a Slug-sized hellmachine.”

Dazai's head dangled from the window of the passenger seat, which made it sort of difficult to properly break his nose. Chuuya resorted to sticking two fingers in the spot of his knee he had seen a bullet go through only a week ago — the kick he received in the nuts was only so worth it.

The monotonous man on the megaphone was still talking.

Crowds over crowds of drunken onlookers were a weight divided by his half-raised window — women in leather, men with black eyes; all of them littered in so much jewelry it was tacky. On the sweaty, naked corners of their skins were tattooed two *K*s, intertwined to resemble a *x*.

He met the eyes of a particularly tall idiot, leaning so far off the gangly dividers he might just get snapped by the nearby truck. The man's eyes fell on the arm Chuuya dangled by the window — when he noticed the darkened edges of his fingers, he gasped.

Chuuya closed the window.

“Perhaps you ought to go back to normal gloves,” Dazai proposed, very entertained.

“It's too hot.”

“Then get rid of that coat. It makes you look stupid, anyway. Where did you even *get* a coat, anyway? Are you that hellbent on copying me?”

“Is this for Arahabaki,” he asked, at last, out loud — like he hadn’t dared to in the endless days of meetings. The weight of Pianoman’s coat was new; it was needed. “Or for the *Five Moons*?”

“It’s for Mori, actually,” Dazai replied. The strange position gave his voice a choked edge. He had a scar under his chin, barely over the Adam’s apple — it looked, strangely, like dog teeth. “Don’t be obnoxious. Everything is.”

“Boss doesn’t know what we’re planning.”

“Mori said the *Five Moons* need one or two reminders,” he insisted. The edge of the window had to be hell on his nape; he still tilted his head, settling a deadly focused eye on the empty road in front of them. “We are merely going our own way about it. He gave us a blank skate, didn’t he?”

Chuuya took it to mean, *if he knew what we are up to, he would make Kouyou take out the punishment baston*. “Fair enough,” he concluded, stepping on the gas. “Get the rifle ready.”

A woman in a flimsy skirt stepped on the dried traces of blood on the starting line. She didn’t have a flag to wave for the start — instead, she dragged a bag filled to the brim with diamonds behind her, and started rolling her fingers inside it, to the crude cheers of the crowd.

From the motorcycle beside him, a woman in a skull-shaped helmet met his eyes, and traced her throat with her finger.

*The only rule for the KK Company races is — The Man* they had left dead in the best hidden corner of *The Alley* had said — *if the cops would bust you for it, you have to do it*. The tip of Dazai’s designer shoes crashed on the car horn, unapologetically making every nearby pair of shoulders jump. It also — Chuuya noted, brusquely — ripped his own nails out of his skin.

“Don’t fret, now,” the boy commented, as if the whole thing couldn’t have bored him less. “You’ll get your blood soon enough.”

Chuuya clenched his jaw so tight he tasted rust — because there were things he remembered, and things he had to have made up. Arahabaki didn’t care for memories. Arahabaki had never cared about anything at all.

*Arahabaki had never cared*, he scoffed, to the rocks in the sky, to the blood-stained ground. Chuuya was the only body he’d ever known; the only reason why he knew how to articulate a laugh. *You are a cage*, he’d told him, once — the god who couldn’t talk. Chuuya had made it up. The first thing he had been, after all, was lonely. *Do not misunderstand. All you are, is to be escaped*.

No one, he considered, had ever even told him Arahabaki existed. His first lesson had been kind, in the way of talking to himself — *do not hope, and do not ask, for I do not exist for*

*you.* The second had been: *I will escape you, one day.*

He let go of his own arms. “You need to cut your hair,” he said, at last.

“You need to stop projecting,” Dazai sat up only minimally — just enough to prepare his rifle out of the window. “Go.”

The woman on the starting line threw the sack of jewels in the air, and vanished quicker than the rows of vehicles could start their engines. The rain of diamonds came tumbling on fast passing windshields; Dazai laughed like a kid.

Given the hunger in his gaze at the sight of the destroyed bottles on the road, Chuuya snapped the car locks on. Their fast dashing didn’t stop him from raising his head just enough to stare him down for it. “You’re so boring,” he blamed. “You’re —“

*“Watch your head!”* Chuuya cursed.

Out of nowhere, a fire-red BMW crashed against Dazai’s side of the car, almost flattening him into a piece of concrete. It took away their side rear view mirror, raising a rainstorm of flickers — sticking his rifle under the headpiece of his seat, Dazai didn’t even blink at the burning strand of his own hair before putting a hole in the driver’s skull.

And then, pointedly, he threw the weapon out of the window.

Chuuya was startled so badly he accelerated right into a passing truck, sending it skiing to the screaming crowd. “What the fuck are you doing?”

*“Mmh?”* Oh, enjoying the ride.”

His head was hanging out of the window again. Miraculously, he wasn’t hit by the quick section of bullets appearing from a stolen police car behind them. “They’re *shooting* at us!”

“I saw! Very exciting.”

“Your ass’ not gonna shoot back?”

He seemed genuinely perplexed. Most of his hair clips that day were cartoonishly car shaped. “And why would I do that?”

A hellish screech right by his side distracted Chuuya from the quest of kicking his skull in — he tightened one hand around the wheel until the fingerless gloves started tearing, and turned so fast Dazai’s head bumped against the dashboard.

The lights were blinding; the quietest roar of the crowd could have woken up the entire city — engines and curses and the sound of weapons turned his ears into drums, boiling along with his sizzling blood. *Either the best place to be* — Chuuya considered, licking off the blood that had stained his mouth since the destruction of the parking lot — *or the worst.*

When they crashed against a nearby truck and sped up so viciously his hat fell into the back seats, the rising curve of his mouth chose the first.

“See?” Dazai called. He still sounded bored, but his sole eye was laser focused on every car they were razing past, almost sadistic in its focus. “You can escape bullets on your own.”

“You sure whoever wins this gets to go and recover the prize themselves?” Chuuya had to scream back, over the whipping wind. They were among the first ten racers for sure; if he looked into the rear view mirror for too long, sharks blinked. “It better be worth it. They’re not even playing any rock music or shit.”

The *KK Company’s* treasure room was a legendary, cautionary tale across the underground — Albatross, in particular, had had something of an obsession with figuring it out. *Imagine the cutlery I could buy*, he liked to say. Some said it was an underground garage under the City Hall; others said it was under the sea — some went as far as to theorize it was all stored in a singular credit card, in the hands of their Boss’s daughter.

“*Mmh?*” Dazai called, again, distracted. He had fished out some dossier from the back of his coat, seemingly undeterred by the rotating path of their car. “Oh, that. No, that was a lie.”

Chuuya almost halted. “*What?*”

“You don’t need to know all the details,” the boy waved the matter away. “Move with the assumption that we’re fine. We’re about to be very busy right now, anyway. Entering the mine area.”

“I swear to fucking *God*, Mackerel —“

“Upcoming truck.”

“*What?*”

When he looked up, his jaw fell.

He had taken *upcoming truck* to mean one of the trucks was trying to get in their lane — what he got, instead, was a flying, *firing* bundle of metal and wheels, thrown with inhuman force, flying at maximum speed towards their windshield. With a rumble, it was joined by three more, erupting from the cloud of mine-made smoke and telltale light of an Ability. The crowd lost its mind.

“Alright,” With a surge of *something*, either hysteria or genuine excitement, Chuuya left a hand on the steering wheel, gripping the gear shift with the other. He licked his teeth. “You may want to get your head inside.”

His tone got Dazai to finally scramble into his seat. “Don’t forget about the mine—“

Chuuya stepped on the gas.

It almost felt like a videogame, from then on — a mixture of lights and explosions and the smell of gasoline, as they zig-zagged across the road with no care for the vehicles they slammed against, in an effort to escape where he guessed the flying vehicles would land. Chuuya didn’t care — he crashed the car like he was only there to destroy them; took away

all weapons appearing from nearby windows while he held onto the steering wheel with a hand; whooped so loud his ears bled with it.

For a moment, Arahabaki didn't even hiss.

"Oh, great," Dazai said, like he meant it, as he peeked through their broken back windshield. "I think you made everyone angry."

It was a fair description — somehow, they had attached themselves to the Ability User's car, the first in the race; the hordes of losing racers had caught up with their nasty play, and seemed now more intent on getting to *them* than on finishing the race. "Good," the boy insisted. He was staring forward too, now. "Just what we needed."

Chuuya didn't even breathe when a bullet passed right by his cheek; when the sand-stormed ground exploded right by their back left wheel, though, he was mercilessly jolted forward — crashing his head against the steering wheel.

"Mines!" Dazai called, excited. "I *told you* there were mines!"

"I don't *care* about your suicidal —"

The Ability User's vehicle was the old ambulance Chuuya had half-seen at the beginning — the woman at the wheel had her teeth clenched and one eye on them, as she slowly realized he was toying with her outstretched hand, attempting to touch their car to blow it to the sky.

"You might want to look at the street, *sweetheart!*" she called, when she met his eyes. She carried the *KK Company* tattoo right in the middle of her forehead. "Newbies don't know much about the mine pattern here."

"*Yeah?*" he called back, eyeing the crooked lines of ink. "Do you guys' tattoo artists know shit about patterns in general?"

The ambulance screeched on a single wheel — when the back brushed their only side mirror left, Chuuya crashed them against a nearby boulder, raising sparks so close he got shocked by them.

"Seven seconds," Dazai called. He was half climbing out of the window again — some of his head bandages had gotten loose, fluttering amidst too long hair. He was staring at the road; the sheer number of calculations under his eyelids could have sparred with Chuuya's *Tainted* plans. "Can you keep first place for just seven seconds?"

He sent a look. "If we go faster than this, the mines will activate for sure." They were clearly wagered on weight and acceleration — the number of car corpses surrounding them wasn't high enough to depend on mere passage.

Dazai looked back. "Well, can you?"

Chuuya grinned. "I can get you first place for the next seven hours, *sweetheart.*"

The boy retched.



With that, he threw his arm out, landing his knuckles on the side of the ambulance — only just barely; brushing a corner so fleetingly it didn't feel material. With a heart stopping groan, the vehicle began rotating up the street, cracking it open with the might of an earthquake.

Spinning the steering wheel fully, he faced the finish line again, and stepped on the gas.

The ground didn't explode under them. "Five," Dazai counted, still, eyes on the enraged crowd tailing them. The ambulance had already started running again. They ran. "Six. *Seven* —"

The ambulance passed by, unscathed. The cars behind it, voicing curses and chants of victory, had no time to celebrate third place — shaking every inch of that scorching hot reality, it blew up.

Every car that has survived the race until that moment wasn't fast enough to stop its run to the subject of their rage — powerless to slow down, they crashed against the pillar of fire that had become of the third car, one after one, until the circle of explosions seemed to touch the sky, painting it in shades of golden and tangerines.

The impact sent them skiing forward; they rotated, until Chuuya's eyes found the ambulance coming towards them — at maximum, merciless velocity.

"Out," he called, slamming his fist onto Dazai's shoulders, "*Out!*"

"Never to be said that you didn't let me jump out of a car," the boy commented. He waited and waited until the very last moment — right as the headlights of the ambulance blinded him, his car door was slammed open, his body landing somewhere into the dirt.

Chuuya didn't feel the impact.

His exact moves came to him only later — the punch through the roof of his car, bending the metal until it broke; his fly up to the sky, higher and higher, until even his head got numb. Under him, pieces of ambulance flew through the tongues of flames and smoke — before he could forget it, he extracted the bottle stored in his belt, and threw it where he could vaguely see Dazai hiding.

When he landed, amidst the chaos of the growing explosions and the screams of the crowd attempting to escape — he found Dazai with his gun, aiming for the fallen bottle.

"There you are," he hummed.

"Dude," Chuuya heaved, his grin so wide it seemed intent on splitting his skull. "*Dude.*"

"Yes, yes, you had your savage fun —"

"Where the hell's the treasure room, then?"

The boy nodded towards the sea of fire and gasoline, merely held back by the boulders on the roads. "See those cars exploding right there?"

Chuuya stared. “No.”

“Oh, yes.”

“You’re telling me there’s no treasure room at *all*?” he insisted. “They just carry everything back and forth on the race vehicles?”

Dazai shrugged. “What best way to make sure they can be out of reach at all times? It’s only the *KK* cars, anyway — they make sure not to let newbies know about the mines and the sharp toys that might damage *their* cars,” Bloodied fireworks erupted once again, raining pieces of junk onto the heated concrete. Chuuya kicked away a falling piece of dashboard before it could flatten them. “Well. They *made* sure.”

Then, with a yawn, he shot the bottle.

Black-and-yellow smoke erupted, curling like a snake amidst the more natural fires, and the running legs of *KK Company* members. It made his eyes tear — the *Shadow Blade* massacre-claim smoke signals weren’t usually meant to leave survivors behind.

Cold, bandaged fingers found his choker through the curtain of darkness.

He hesitated.

“If you want to do it,” Dazai said, eventually — close enough that Chuuya could read his lips; an almost impossible feat, between the glimmering explosions and the blood pooling down both their ears. “Now is the time.”

Immediately, lightning curled up his arms.

The stains of black had faded, in the past week — but they seemed to return, right under his eyes, vicious and stubborn. There were no voices to be haunted by. If *Corruption* was a source that needed to be emptied out — then the two accidents had left it filled to the brim, still.

*If you want to.*

*Hone it*, Mori had said. They weren’t meant to leave eye witnesses, for this plan of theirs. *It’s not always about fairness.*

Chuuya took off his gloves, and hung them over the neck of Dazai’s tie. “Don’t be a fucking idiot,” he said, like it was even a speck of the things he ought to say before doing something like this.

After that — he couldn’t recall.

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*We'll need to make it work without the morphine*, Dazai had explained, as they mapped out just what it would mean to go the next few months without support from the Headquarters. *Unless we can steal some.*

Chuuya had waved the matter away. *We have more important stuff to get a hold of. Stitches. Information on the syndicates' security techniques. You can just knock me out.*

Something like a sadistic, slightly bored tilt had curled the boy's lips. *We'll see how you feel about that in a bit.*

When he came to with a broken, coughing gasp; with the distant memory of hands and nails and needles and *blood* over every inch of himself, all of it slowly awakening under the buzz of stone-like limbs — Chuuya still didn't regret it. But he reached for the nearest *deep* thing and threw up inside it.

"There you are," The most detested voice in his repertoire broke through the rumble — the white noises of his ringing ears. "Mind looking up if wearing IVs while you're submerged may bring any, *ah* — unpleasant side effects?" A pause. "It's too late, anyway, but. Still."

The ground under his knees was hardwood and carpets — he was lying on the floor. It wasn't too surprising — Chuuya woke up on the floor most mornings; be it too much kicking or some form of sleep-walking. His knuckles were white around the edges of Albatross' least favorite vase, as he spit and cursed the smell of burned flesh stuck in his nostrils.

There were no slithering black snakes crawling down his arms.

When his eyes managed to roam free, vase forgotten and weak spine dropping to the floor again, they stuck intermittently — the pile of blood-soaked clothes on the floor; the IV pole, its blood-sack slowly vanishing into a bruised spot on his left arm; Dazai, with his console, huddled up in Albatross' bed.

"Why am I on the floor?" he croaked.

A dried, *left-to-die* thing — his voice crawled up his throat as if hooked to a thorned thread and *pulled*, bleeding out between his teeth. His lips were still cracked.

"Because I wanted the bed," Dazai said, easily, eyes stuck to the screen. The familiar tune of *Broken Roads* was slicing his pounding head into pieces. "I *did* put you in a futon, back at the safe house, but the wet dog smell was intolerable. I had to dump you in the bathtub — and when I tried to leave, because it was *intolerable*, the assassins broke in —"

He stared. "Assassins?"

“*Special Division*, I would assume,” Chuuya froze. Dazai turned and tossed on the bed, until he was leaning over him, undeterred. “We can’t use *safehouse number 13* anymore, by the way — Which is a shame, because I left my *Game of Soldiers* DVD there, and you’re going to have to recover it for me,” He reached over with one hand; pulled one of Chuuya’s wet hair strands, not even blinking when he slapped it away. “Corpses all over my precious console. A blasphemy. Very sloppy corpses, though, which I’m sure you will appreciate, since you missed out on all the fun.”

Everything was slightly spinning. His scalp hurt. “Why the fuck am I naked.”

“You’re in boxers, thank you. And your clothes needed to be burned,” Which probably meant he had taken care of most of his wardrobe in the meantime. Chuuya felt the irritation a bit distantly — felt too high for his body, like a floating breath of air stuck to the lower lip. “Congratulations — you tried to smash your skull against what was left of the ambulance, this time.”

He focused on the sticker-stars on the ceiling. Every inch of that apartment reminded him of Albatross; every inch of Albatross reminded him of blood. It woke him up. “I don’t like this.”

“This isn’t my ideal afterlife either, Slug.”

Chuuya nodded, vague.

He didn’t notice he had yet to *stop* nodding until a sharp hiss up his arm called his attention — the blood bag had turned, dangling from the wind of the closest window Ōmu had pushed to get in. Standing over the bed, the parrot stared him down, as if extremely displeased with that territory breach.

“Why are you —“ Chuuya squinted at him, turning his head as far as his pounding nape would let him. “Your ass needs to stop breaking into my house.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t,” Dazai threw the console on the bed, abandoning a *GAME OVER* screen he felt the urge to taunt him for. “You’ve set up a futon *just* for me, and I even have my own coffee cup! One can’t help but think you await me night and day. I’m not one to disappoint.”

He gaped like a fish. “That *isn’t* —“ *Isn’t a futon for you*, he wanted to say. Sure, Dazai had used it plenty — but there was a *reason* why Chuuya kept it rolled up and hidden under the deepest corner of Albatross’ bed. To send a *message* .

He didn’t manage to say any of it — before he knew, he was reaching for the vase again, sticking his face inside it.

“That is *such* an unnecessary reaction,” Dazai’s blurred, distant voice sighed. He pulled at the ends of his hair petulantly, refusing to move the longer strands from the vomit stains. “We can have your dream slumber party, no issue. I can sacrifice my good sense.”

Chuuya only vomited deeper.

Dazai knocked on his skull. “And anyway, I usually sleep on the bed. You never wondered why you keep waking up on the safehouses’ floor?”

*It’s not even your goddamn cup,* Chuuya didn’t manage to say. *It just says Dog Owner on it.*

It seemed hours before he managed to sit up again. The *IV* pulled painfully at his arm, until he resettled — Chuuya studied the bubbling blood inside it. “Where did you...” he trailed off. “You can’t give me *your* blood.”

“Of course. Stupid,” Dazai huffed. “They were in the ambulance,” *Now we’re stealing blood bags?*, he almost asked. He wasn’t quite spoiled or guiltless enough to. “Getting them out was a very boring business, just so you know. *Corruption* is just so *grandiose*. Does it really have to? There was a downright mess on that race route.”

There was an underlining tension on every vowel out of his mouth — something both bitter and freezing, dripping with the ease of the few sweat droplets stuck to Chuuya’s forehead. He was speaking too much — speaking too *fast*, the way he did when there was a trick he didn’t want the listener to catch. When there was a *point*.

“Wait,” he called, frowning. Chuuya didn’t quite feel sane — but he felt more *settled*. His lips burned when he wet them. “How long was I out?”

*We move by instants,* Dazai had explained, under Elise’s blankets, a week before. Perhaps it was pointless — *planning*, where Arahabaki was concerned; *planning*, where Mori had only smiled. *Scales like wounds or destruction aren’t reliable. We test how many seconds are too many seconds.*

*What’s the final goal?*, he had questioned.

*A full minute.*

“Twenty seven seconds,” Dazai offered, as he watched him crawl towards the bed, sitting down with a spinning head and coughing lungs. Nothing like the exercises in precision in *The Alley* — the excuses to write down data that never quite matched itself. That had been a *real Corruption* attempt. “You’ve blabbed a bit since you passed out — but this is the first time you’re awake in two days.”

*Two days.*

Chuuya set his jaw. “Couldn’t you have, like — kicked me awake or something?”

“Kicking fallen dogs is not even worth the energy. I’m not a cartoon villain.”

“You and I both know I can’t afford that long of a recovery period.”

“You broke half of your ribs,” he replied — nudged him in the spine with a wet, sock-clad foot for emphasis. “Trying to tear them off your lungs before they perforated them wasn’t pretty. If they hadn’t started fixing themselves halfway, you wouldn’t even have *had* a recovery period.”

“Dazai.”

“Chuuya,” He stared at the monkey-shaped statue in the left corner of the room; something like wonder in his questioning gaze. “I don’t think you should be doing this.”

A pin could have been heard as it dropped.

He turned around — ignored the screech of his bones and the lines of tension of his muscles, firing electricity all the way to his nails. The IV pulled; Chuuya thought he could feel the new blood circulate — find new ways to fill him up until he imploded.

“Excuse me?” he snapped.

Dazai climbed out of his perching spot, wiping his hand on some cloud patterned blanket Albatross had *touched* — as if that wasn’t enough to make Chuuya’s fingers seal on the edge of the bed. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“We made this plan together.”

“Because Mori left us *plenty* of choice.”

He stared. “What, did the mission fail?”

“The mission was successful,” he replied. “*A hundred percent success rate* — these are the predictions the Intelligence has, if we go on with using *Corruption* at our whim —“

“*My* whim,” Chuuya reminded him. “You can fuck right off about how *I* decide to —“

“Don’t get cocky. I’m the reason you get to have whims, with that thing inside your veins.”

“What the hell are you even —“

Dazai leaned against the doorframe. He had removed all hair clips but one — a heart shaped pin he was positive to have seen on Elise, before. He was wearing a shirt — an old, maroon thing Chuuya had stolen from Kouyou’s wardrobe. It was surreal to see him in colors. “Do you really think *Corruption* wasn’t created as a last resort? Even Mori called it so.”

“It *is* a last resort,” Chuuya replied. “What got you in a fucking twist? We’ve been activating it three times in one afternoon in *The Alley* — “

“That’s not nearly the same thing,” the boy spat, chin up. “It’s not an activation. I shut it down before your eyes can even roll to the back of your dog head.”

“You think I enjoy the weekly comas?”

“This *wasn’t* a last resort.”

“There couldn’t be eyewitnesses —“

“What, are you getting lazy?” Dazai scoffed. “Complacent, maybe? You could have razed the area to the ground with *Tainted*. What, you decided that autopilot to the cost of your bones is a good enough deal, and now the Mafia gets a dog that won’t even decide when to bark?”

A blink.

Chuuya heard water rush through his ears faster than he could stand up; the IV was ripped out of his arm, painfully fast, raining small drops of blood on Albatross’ beloved bed.

“Fuck you,” he snapped, stepping forward, *Tainted* glowing on his fingers. The rush in his skull was deafening; he didn’t even feel the tongues of ache flaming up his limbs until they rendered his jaw slack. “Fuck you *right* in that fucking *hypocritical* ass you have, I’m —“

*Professor N*, he thought.

It was a bubble in a blood vessel. Chuuya had no idea where it had come from — a flash of a disconnected memory, burned at the edges. Word association. A pointless name, stuck on his lips.

He understood too late — when electricity struck, right through the scar he still had on his chest — and then everywhere else, louder than thunder and hotter than lava, circling through his nervous system like something meant to reduce him to a vegetable. He didn’t have a tongue to scream — only pain and pain, and *pain and pain*, and he dropped forward, bruising his knees on Albatross’ beloved, *beloved* home — and then hands under his armpits and a voice by his ear, as he landed on the ground on his back with an exhale that was ripped like a robbery — and he couldn’t *breathe*, his ribs had grown ten inches and skewered his lungs, *pain and pain* and the devastating lack of air, the abundance of it in all the wrong places, *brusque impact might cause a respiratory crisis*, Boss had explained —

The second time, he opened his eyes to the *thump!* of book pages turning next to his head.

“...right, then,” Dazai was saying. “Yes, yes, I know, this call never happened. You ought to be less paranoid, old man — it’ll give you wrinkles. I’ll let you know if I accidentally snap his neck.”

Chuuya inhaled fully, attempting to sit up.

Hands pushed him down again — landing him on some half-soaked towel laid on the ground. “No, you don’t,” Dazai replied, distractedly, as he threw his own phone to the side by the charms. “I need to crack your back. You’re stuck.”

Perhaps it explained why he couldn’t talk — any attempt at mouthing words only got out a wheezing, horrible sound, and a taste of blood on the back of his throat.

“Alright,” Dazai said, again. Aggravated. As blank as a paper. Not taking his eyes off of him for a blink of a second.

It pissed him off. “I,” he croaked, fueled by pure rage, clenching his fists at his loose sides. “*You* — don’t —“

He snapped the book shut; before he threw it under the bed, Chuuya managed to catch one of the beautifully decorated rigid covers from Mori's collection — in golden, the words, *Medical Guide To Muscular Issues; Understanding Chronic Pain*. He had vivid memories of having stared at its spine for hours, the last time they had gotten stuck in his office — reprimanded for a destroyed restaurant.

“Did you —” he attempted. Fire climbed up his nape. At last, Chuuya realized it all came from the bundle of screeches in his lower spine — the flashes of pain it sent down his things. “*Shit.*”

“Ane-san's gonna be *so* mad if I kill you,” the other boy muttered — more of a mantra than a warning.

Taking advantage of his blinding pain, Dazai bent his legs until his knees brushed his chin, still laying down — and then, utterly calm, he crossed his own arms over his kneecaps, keeping himself a mere inch from laying his whole body on him.

“What the,” Chuuya tried to wheeze out. Then Dazai crashed onto him, and he saw stars.

He only realized the voice cursing out over the sound of cracking bones was *his own* when the world became less blurred at the edges — the ants crawling up and down his skeleton growing more and more hurried, until they leveled to something bearable.

“There, there,” Disentangling his legs again, Dazai shushed, inconvenienced. “Don't lean too much weight on that shoulder. I had to put it back in the socket while you were out.”

“I saw God,” he heard himself breathe out.

“That's nice, that's nice.”

“There's no way I have these many bones.”

“*Shh,*” Dazai insisted. He turned him to lay down on his face with humiliating ease, every inch of Chuuya's body reduced to jelly. “Could you wait until I can record it to be embarrassing?”

“I'll kill you,” he slugged.

“No,” the boy mused, a bit quieter. For the first time, Chuuya wondered what it looked like — from where it didn't hurt. Dazai's hands touched his nape; *quiet*, he thought, and *cold*, and *oh*. “No, I think that might be me.”

He breathed out. All was blurred. “What?”

Distracted, he insisted: “Do you think fascination is a crime?”

“I don't know,” Chuuya didn't quite understand a thing. “What isn't a crime?”

He studied him. “Because we're Mafia?”



“Because you’re you,” he mumbled. His eyelids were fluttering again. In the back of his mind, he knew he was tired of sleeping. “Because I’m me.”

Dazai didn’t speak.

He came down in fluttering, slow steps — by the time Chuuya could inhale and exhale fully with no firing pain up his lungs, the sound of the ACs on the balcony purred against his ears, and the coldness of Dazai’s palms was *almost* enough to ignore the stitches he was fixing on his back.

He paused.

By the time his mind wasn’t floating, he cleared his throat enough to wonder, only just *so* creeped out: “What am I, fucking dough?”

“You’re hallucinating,” Dazai replied.

“I’m not *stupid*.”

“No, no,” he humored. Some of his knuckles were working on a shrieking spot under his left shoulder. Chuuya gulped down the blood stuck in his throat — wondered if either of them had gotten burned by the explosion. “Does he ever listen?”

He started at the floor; counted to five, and pushed the boy’s hands off to sit up. “What?”

“You said he doesn’t talk to you,” Dazai insisted. The towel they were sharing was stained in blood and soaked in shower water. Chuuya had the feeling the boy would refuse to sleep on the guest futon. Chuuya couldn’t stop thinking about the roof of that shipping container, sometimes. “But does he listen?”

There was a bundle of frustration stuck in his throat, right over the newly pulsing muscles — the contempt of being *dependent*; even when his oath to the sky had been to give back ten hands to every finger pulling him out of the rubble. Of having his own limbs betray him.

Of it having to be Dazai, of all.

“Arahabaki doesn’t do shit, Bandages. He doesn’t care.”

“It doesn’t feel like it, though,” he insisted. “No one who cares that little would be so eager to see you destroyed.”

*Corrupted*, he corrected, in his head only. Destruction was death for men; nothing that could kill a living sin. Chuuya had to be something just similar enough, if they had wasted words on it. Born to corrupt, molded into something to protect — first children and then a decaying city and then whoever would ask nicely enough. He’d been born into the anvil of the world’s heaviest blade; he’d die in it, liquid fire and centuries old blood. *Corrupted, corrupted*.

“I don’t really believe in false gods,” Dazai let him know. He wondered if the fingers pushing hair off his forehead were an hallucination. “How unfortunate that you’re as real as it gets.”

His sole eye was tracing the decay on his arms. *I don't think we should do this.*

*Then what do I do with it?*, Chuuya wondered.

“Waste your pathetic prayers on deities that actually exist,” Shakingly, Chuuya climbed to his feet, surveying the mess of Albatross’ beloved, *beloved* room. Ōmu was singing. He was just out of tune enough — just *familiar* enough — to tighten his fists. “Come on. Who’s next?”

“Ah, that might have to wait,” Dazai said, scratching his nape. “Concern is devouring me. I wouldn’t be able to focus. You need to help me find Kazuko.”

He stared. “*Find?*”

“Quite. I’m afraid she disappeared a few hours ago,” he sighed. “Last I heard, she was in the process of strolling near the child park by the City Hall, but I sent a sniper from my squad to take care of the fireman called to deal with her. So we should — Chuuya, where are you going? *Chuuya*, don’t you dare crawl on the floor, you —“

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There had been a storm, once, in Suribachi City.

Few times a weather as disruptive had been registered in the records of Yokohama. It had torn the *metal-sheets-and-smelly-cartoon* roofs of the settlement apart, flooding the houses and the streets. Chuuya recalled the rumble of thunder making every wall dance — the nervous gulps most of the Sheep kids badly muffled. They had begrudgingly pushed themselves together under the safest house of theirs, waiting for the light to follow the sound.

*It's just light, isn't it?*, Yuan had asked him, squinting at the webbed sky behind the glassless window. *The most it can do it's destroy a few houses. Even I could do that. Nature is not that scary.*

*[“That’s Yuan,” the older girls explained, before abandoning him in her hands and her buckets of water. “She’ll clean you up. Be nice to her or we’re kicking your dirty ass out.”]*

Watching the six variables he’d put together crash and burn, Chuuya wondered if that, at least, would be a storm wild enough to scare Yuan off.

“This is Virgil,” he said, curtly, waving a hand towards the awkward frame of the man next to him. *Building Three’s* entrance was lit weakly, turning the other five’s faces haunted. One of the chandeliers had been shattered by the latest round of Dazai’s suicide attempts. *Nothing to worry about*, Mori had sworn. “He’s number six. Be nice, or fuck off.”

The man cleared his throat.

The rest of the squad’s jaws didn’t fall, but it was a near thing.

Noguchi — who still carried scratches in the shape of Q’s nails and Tsuchiya’s silences; who always stared into nothingness when Chuuya used his Ability — was, unsurprisingly, the first to start a fight over it.

The twins weren’t impressed.

“Fish face needs to tone it down with the attitude,” Kenta scoffed, extracting a shard of glass from his arm. The window Virgil and the man had destroyed while brawling — in the middle of a stake out that *would* have failed, had Chuuya not intervened — stared at them, mocking. “I won’t sit here and watch him kill someone over his girlfriend’s hurt ego.”

Chuuya *felt* the slap coming; clearly, the man lacked the intelligence to do the same. Stunned, he blinked at Tsuchiya, first, and then at his sister — looking somewhat conflicted, but not moving an inch to defend him.

“I didn’t ask for his grudges,” the once-vet told him, right as the handprint on his cheek started to spread. “Do *not* blame me for them.”

Even less surprisingly — because Dazai had the art of strategy down to a science, but Chuuya had *people* in perfectly clear graphics — Koda was the first to cave. He volunteered to join Virgil during the next mission, knocking their rifles together — and by the time they were all back to base, they were grinning in each other’s faces.

With one enemy down, Chuuya assumed the root of the problem was — him.

His two only open supporters both had a tendency to be silent, *wide-eyed* witnesses to every brawl that ended up blowing up during missions. Noguchi would somehow complain whenever the line of enemy fire appeared. Rin and Kento seemed to *love* bringing up the Sheep whenever he did something familiar to them, which never resulted in anything but a pissed off Chuuya. Tsuchiya was still learning to keep up with them with the eye disadvantage, which made her prone to explode in Noguchi and Koda’s worried faces.

“Stick them in a box,” Hirotsu suggested, over the furthest end of the *Old World’s* counter. “And shake the rebellion out of them.”

There was a strange tilt to his tone. “I don’t think that’s feasible,” Chuuya muttered, inside his glass of wine.

“Nonetheless, I dream of it being possible,” the man insisted, vacantly. Very slowly, he turned to stare him down, lowering his gaze to Dazai’s hair clip stuck to his sleeve.

Chuuya muttered into his glass some more.

After the *Window Accident*, Kento and Noguchi struggled to get along. It soured the air between Rin and Tsuchiya as well, despite their fast formed alliance — the first time they snapped at each other, Chuuya felt the placid desire to jump off the nearest bridge.

“Truly?” Dazai grinned, mischievous like a black cat on the roof.

Virgil and Noguchi had yet to say a word to each other. The Kure twins were the first ones to warm up to the last-comer, after Koda — perhaps understanding the feeling of joining the Port Mafia from an enemy organization. The squad tended to work better whenever Noguchi was too busy to intervene — unfortunately, Noguchi was also the most competent of the bunch, and Chuuya *needed* him around.

“But he’s a difficult card,” he explained to Tanaki, huddled up with her under the canopy of a sweet shop, waiting for Elise to pick her lunch. It was too warm to breathe in easily; the sweat rolling down the intermittent black stains on his arms was uncomfortable. “The more successful I let him be, the more advantage he has in the Colonel’s plans for him.”

Tanaki hummed. “I don’t know just how seriously you should take that threat, dear. It seems very clear to everyone in the syndicate — who the *actual* candidates are.”

Chuuya wasn’t so sure.

He didn’t meet the Colonel all that often — he was usually absent when they reported to the meeting room, and never spared him more than an imperscrutable glance whenever Chuuya appeared to pull Noguchi out of his grasp. *He looks at you like he can’t figure out how you’re still standing*, Rin described it as, once.

Most of the syndicate was too busy to give more than a fearful thought to Dazai’s orders and Chuuya’s paths of destruction. But they *knew* Noguchi — had trained with him; had seen him stand up to the unofficial commanders during the *Nine Rings Conflict*. And as much as people may have murmured when Chuuya passed by, they never did so when Noguchi was following.

The squad never stopped, though.

“They’re tense,” Koda told him, after a disastrous infiltration. Chuuya had had to tear the whole building down; Tsuchiya had called in some seagulls with her Ability to help. “The underground has been a mess, ever since the *Nine Rings* — Well. What does it matter, as long as they can shut up long enough to do their work?”

“Try not to exclude yourself from that list,” he grunted, scrubbing at the bleeding cut down his cheekbone. “I *saw* you join in when Noguchi and Kenta started fighting.”

He coughed. “I was trying to stop them.”

“Tense,” Scoffing, he kicked the ground. “Is that the polite way of saying, *you scare the shit out of half of them and the others want you under a train?*”

Koda, who had recently been tied to train rails — along with Chuuya himself and Rin, in some rather unusual circumstances — shivered. “They’re not scared of you.”

“*You’re* scared of me.”

His flinch was full body. “Chuuya —“

“I don’t care,” he interrupted him, staring forward. “At the very least, though, it’d be nice if it got you aggravating shithheads to *listen* to me.”

Days passed, summer rained down. *It was easier with the Flags*, Chuuya never thought — because it wasn’t about filling emptiness. The warmer it was, the higher the conflicts grew; the further they went from the center of the city — where the sky filled with stars and Virgil would sigh and mumble stories from his childhood — the more tentative the squad grew with each other.

“Have you considered taking advantage of the fear most of them have of —” Kouyou looked for words, as he laid face down on her office couch. “Your *other* business?”

It had been some sort of joke, Chuuya believed. Kouyou knew the frantic side-eyes he had received since Rengoku warranted anything but pity, especially if she didn’t want to deal with his anger — poking fun at the matter was her elegant solution to the issue.

*[Nonetheless, he did not try.*

*Corruption was the only topic the six mafiosi could talk about with the innate trust and ease of a real team. He saw them exchange heavy glances whenever he turned up to a mission with an imperceptible limp; saw their mouths open and close whenever the heat raised his sleeves and left his scars to the sunlight; saw them want to ask.*

*Chuuya didn’t care about fear.*

*The shift between wanting respect and settling for fright came gradually. Whispers grew the deeper the competition dug; gazes lingered longer the more often he was called by Dazai’s side — shoulders stiffened with every successful mission he brought home.*

Nakahara Chuuya, *he heard them say — like Yuan had those first days, but not quite; like Verlaine had, but not quite.* The god of the Port Mafia.

*On a day that was not different from the others — after the first time he picked a fight with a mafioso in the hallways and watched the crowd surrounding them fall into silent, petrified interim — waiting for what, he wondered, waiting for who — he scoffed and, like the ten years old he had been, the twelve and the thirteen and the fifteen years old, Chuuya breathed].*

Change knocked, eventually — slithering in with the suffocating air of August.

He didn’t know what sparked the change — what made Tsuchiya tell anecdotes of *this or that* particularly savage animal she’d healed, as they waited for Kenta to break into a warehouse; what made Noguchi offer them a drink after a mission, at the cost of a drunken Rin asking

Chuuya if he was *old enough to drink, Shrimp Boss*; what made Koda and Virgil's murmurs louder and louder.

In the end, with an ease that might have stunned him less had it been anyone else — *Kajii* was the one to offer the solution to his problems.

“What you *need*,” the man screamed, half of his lanky body hidden underneath some hellish machine in his *Scientist Mad Cave*, “Is to force them to associate each other to good things.”

Unimpressed, Chuuya pushed one vial to the ground. “Why does everyone assume I know what makes a friendship? Do I look *friendly*?”

“Not at all,” he confirmed. “But you’re a good lad, under all that — *that*.”

“What’s that supposed to —“

“Just get them drunk,” With some moving around, he managed to curl an eyebrow in his direction. “Bring them somewhere where they get to fuck each other up with no consequences.”

They broke into a high name restaurant, so that Chuuya could finalize some treacherous deal with an old woman covered in jewels — and when her men made the mistake of attacking them first, Tsuchiya’s panicked reaction was to use her Ability to order the octopus in the tank to get stuck inside their commander’s throat.

The sheer speechlessness that followed had no breaths in the room dare to be too loud. Then, uncontrolled and burning from new *Corruption* scars and holding a man by the throat — Chuuya broke into merciless laughter.

When the entire squad followed through, tentatively looking at each other, he remembered the *KK Company*.

He munched over the sheer patheticity of the idea for a full day, as he rode his motorcycle all the way to the rebuilt race route. The next night, after the train they had been tasked to track almost ended up blowing up to pieces because of a fight between Virgil and Tsuchiya — he took off his hat and dragged seven pairs of unwilling feet at the newly built *Underground Race Tournament*.

*You did it with the Sheep*, he reprimanded himself, making a bee-line through the crowd for the car Rin had mysteriously promised to bring along. *You’ll do it with these pieces of shit too*.

“*T-There* you are,” Koda exclaimed. He could have counted the steps separating most of them for eons. “Is this — is this a mission, sir?”

“Drop the *sir*,” he replied, eyes on the car — a BMW M2 that he didn’t question *where*, exactly, Kenta’s broken finances had found. He leaned his elbows on the roof. “Since acting like children has been you guys’ optimal summer job, *I* decided some entertainment might get you all to stick your thumbs in your mouths and shut the fuck up.”

Speechless, six faces stared at him.

“Well?” He paid little attention to the too-enthusiastic narration from the speakers; but the crowd roared, as some fan-favorite crossed the finish line. “I hope you brought more than one car. Your won’t all fit in here, and I’m driving.”

With no more words, he got in, and shut the door on their jaw-slacked faces.

*As far as terrible ideas could go*, Chuuya considered, as the group hesitantly divided itself — with Koda, Virgil and Kento opting to join him; leaving the second car, a blue twin copy of their own, to Rin’s hands and the ill-advised company of Noguchi and Tsuchiya — *this might not be too bad*.

*If* he didn’t get himself arrested, which would have definitely made Hirotsu roll his eyes. *If* Mori would accept his breach of the silent rule of, *staying away from low entertainments the higher you wish to go*. *If*, especially, he grinned, stepping on the gas, *he won*.

“Are you, ” Virgil gulped, in the passenger seat, *grasping* his seatbelt. He was whispering in a language Chuuya didn’t understand, tracing a cross down his chest. “Chuuya, aren’t you a bit too young to have a license?”

Even Koda and Kento shot him a disbelieving look at that. The man blushed. “I don’t *remember* most of my illicit background, mind you.”

“The question of your credibility remains,” Kento grunted, kicking the back of his seat. “Are you going to murder us, Kid Boss?”

His personality, Chuuya had come to decide after weeks of forced vicinity, could be summed up in a quote he’d inserted in one of his reports: *He doesn’t care for much, and it makes him the perfect judge on most things*.

He didn’t have the raging fire of his sister, always ready to pick a fight and always ready to pull his ears when he was wrong — but he was smarter and subtler. Apart from Noguchi, he had gained the respect of the rest of the squad via some well placed — well *forethought*, he guessed — *saving-in-time-of-need*.

“I’m still deciding,” he landed on.

Next to him, Koda coughed. As they made their way to the starting line, his in-ear creaked. “Don’t kill my brother, Naka — *Chuuya*, or I’m slicing your balls off.”

“Our almighty Boss,” Noguchi muttered, a moment later.

“By the way, respectfully,” Tsuchiya said, right as the makeshift referee ordered it to begin. “I’m gonna *destroy* you, sir.”

A bit quietly, Koda went: “We’re putting money on this, right?”

His bones had been looking for the vertiginous emptiness that abruptly filled them all their life — sheer ecstasy dripped down his throat the faster he went, the blurrier the road at his

sides became; the louder and less worried the screams from the other men in the car grew.

Chuuya laughed.

It sounded like something that Arahabaki might have carved in the sky — he *whooped*, grinning into Koda's face when the man started cursing his soul out, as they ran over the remnants of an unlucky car that had caught fire. His gloves scratched against the steering wheel, and his hair flew to his face with every violent dip of his foot, and *he needed to cut his hair, still*—

With startling suddenness, a familiar blue BMW slammed against their side, almost sending them flying.

The screech out of Kenta's mouth was high pitched enough to resemble Elise's. When Chuuya turned around — pulling to stabilize the skirting vehicle — Tsuchiya's smug grin was brighter than even the red lights embracing the route.

Somehow, the sun fell, and raised again.

Hostility did not quieten down. Noguchi was still a *dilemma* — Virgil was still the last to be chosen in pairs. But after every mission — no matter how many of her endless instants the moon had wasted watching them brawl — Chuuya dragged them to the outskirts of the city.

*Willingly or not*, he explained to his five fake graves, refusing to vocalize it clearly, *his worst habit arose from the depths of his ribcage, hidden under new dirt and old lessons*. Mocked by stones that could not talk, Chuuya was forced to come to a somewhat inconveniencing conclusion — no dust and no teachers were ever insistent enough to get the pendant for kinship out of his system.

“Even you would laugh at me,” Chuuya told Iceman. “Or — well. You would smoke very amusedly in my direction.”

The Kure twins had grown up in Suribachi City — just like him. Escaping from the crater had been a long lost dream of theirs; the GSS had pulled them out of a bad deal, giving both Rin and Kenta the chance to abandon their work at one of the shaky brothels in the lower levels. In the organization, they had been given two rifles and been told they would be killed if they couldn't master them in two weeks.

“We worked our asses off,” Rin told him, as she drove her — *stolen*, Kento had admitted with a giggle — BMW down the last curve of the race. She'd gotten herself a nickname across the usual audience of those illegal competitions — something that contained the word *argent*, from her hair. Chuuya had never managed not to snort long enough to hear the rest of it. “I used to scream into *Ken-Ken's* ear to wake him up in the middle of the night and train.”

“We had this final trial of sorts,” the man shivered, chin on the back of his sister's seat. “They made us shoot some prisoners. Pretty sure they were Port Mafia, too.”

“How old were you?” Chuuya asked.



“Seventeen,” They answered, in chorus. Then, in a fit of bravery that stunned him into silence for the rest of the race, Kento ruffled his hair. “Still older than you, Boss prodigy.”

He made a face. “*Fuck* that.”

Kento had a startlingly good aim, only second to Koda’s one. When they waited for their turn to race, Chuuya sometimes caught them shooting at empty beer bottles in the sidelines, discussing the war — the man had enrolled, but only for a year. “Missed my sister too much,” he explained.

“That’s a fucking lie,” Rin scoffed. “He missed his sweetheart. Shame that ended so badly. He tried to shoot you, didn’t he? Hey,” She wriggled her eyebrows. “Maybe you could put a good word with Virgil for him.”

If Virgil ever noticed the *attention* — that was probably a joke, but possibly *not* — he didn’t tell.

He had taken to following Chuuya around like a lost pup, rambling until his throat had to be hurting — as if years under the influence of Dante’s Ability had rendered him unable to take the weight of every emotion he felt on his own.

He talked about *everything*: his days in Rengoku, his days with Kouyou and the combat lessons she had been gracious enough to offer him, his discussions with Koda, his admiration of Tsuchiya and her job — *animals, aren’t they such inherently good creatures?* — and stories he used to write when he was younger. He had wanted to be a writer, he told him.

“Of course, that didn’t work out,” he sighed, sitting a bit too straight next to the driver seat. Virgil always looked out of place at the race precinct, as if he’d accidentally worn his best clothes to a field-work trip. “Dante knew, I think. My limbo — it was beautiful, in that sense. I had everything I wanted. My stories were very beautiful, too. Only —”

He was pale and thin, all long limbs and a composure that would have fit a little lord more than a mafioso. Nonetheless, he was nearly unbeatable with a knife in his hand, and scarily violent whenever a revolver slipped into his fingers. Terrified as he seemed of the fast cars the squad kept pushing him onto, every word he spoke felt like a pale imitation of a much augmented race behind his eyes.

*Too much to say, too little tongue*, Lippman would have said.

“They didn’t feel like I had written them,” he admitted. “What’s the point of a beautiful thing with your name on it — if you can’t even say you were the one to carve it into existence?”

Chuuya shrugged. “Ane-san owns this old scripture set. Ask her to give it to you. I’ll read your damn story.”

Virgil blinked. “You will?”

“Yeah,” Hands around the wheel, he thought of the glass elevators at the Headquarters. “Yeah. Fuck Dante and Beatrice, you know?”

They swerved across the route, the engine growling louder with each vehicle they managed to surpass. With a startlingly decisive expression, Virgil rolled his car window down, screaming into the lips-chapping wind: “*Fuck them!*”

Noguchi and Koda had been two familiar faces through bloodied roads in France — they’d brought him stolen wine on their way to a man they had to either kill or shake hands with; had offered every burden on their shoulder and every funny anecdote.

It was a confusing enough tendency. If anything about him had even been appealing, it had had Arahabaki’s name traced in red all over it. But *power* didn’t exactly attract that peculiar squad of his; they took a step back whenever his frame lit up, and they didn’t mention the scars — but they never quite grinned in the face of what he obtained with that Ability, either.

Chuuya had wanted to reassure them — Arahabaki was all but a messy eater. They wouldn’t remember enough to be enraged over it.

“*God of the Port Mafia,*” Noguchi mused, from the open window of the car next to his — because things could never be anything but a competition. “Because you’re better than us?”

He said it the way he’d said: *were you the most cowardly of them, or the only one who wasn’t?* He said it in a way that made a child’s mischievousness seem the reasonable answer — that made Chuuya want to remove his gloves and show off his decay like a trick.

But childishness was left for other targets, and his burned out matches for a badly lit room.

Unimpressed, Chuuya threw his half-lit cigarette inside his car. “Just than you.”

A bark of laughter cost him the faster start.

Astonishingly, Koda turned out to be the best driver of them all. Once they managed to drag him in front of a wheel, he left them to eat the dust of his stunningly *ferocious* moves — as if had been waiting all his life to relieve all that *something* inside his chest into the nearest car to crash.

He refused to get on the vehicle alone — and Chuuya knew it was because the starting gunshot always startled his *fight-or-flight*. When the *Tournament* came to the end of the first row of races — and the crowd celebrated with endless fireworks — Chuuya was the one to drag him behind the tallest vehicle, allowing him to curl up into a tight ball and stuff his ears with his hands.

“It’s funny,” he told him, once he managed to speak clearly enough that not every letter was a stuttering mess. It frustrated him; Chuuya waited. “I *k-k—murdered* countless people more than any exploding mine I can’t stop hearing. Shouldn’t *I* be scarier than *t-this* stuff? Look,” Koda sighed, watching the sky. “Aren’t they pretty, too?”

“Pretty my ass,” Chuuya scoffed, brushing dust from the swerving cars off his waistcoat. “All they are is *loud* as shit and endless. I’m about to go deaf here. You know, they’re bad for dogs.”

The man sighed. “You’re so unromantic.”

“*Unromantic?*”

“I’ve always wanted to bring my brother to the New Year fireworks show,” Koda smiled, a bit instantly. “I made him a promise when we were kids. One day, when I was rich and tall enough, I would bring him to the highest roof of the prettiest building of the city, and he’d climb on my shoulders to touch the fireworks.”

Chuuya raised his eyebrow. “Unrealistic.”

“Yes, *thank you*, ” He rolled his eyes. “There’s always been some mess or some work. But this year will be different. I’m confident.”

“Yeah? How come?”

Koda climbed to his feet. “Well, I’m friends with my *Boss*, for starters.”

The wildest of his cards was also, he learned, the quietest of the bunch.

Not that Tsuchiya was silent, *per se*. She roared with laughter with Rin whenever their paired up driving abilities left their counterparts in the dust, and she *never* refused a screaming match with Noguchi. The vibrant emerald of her hair matched the leather jackets she had taken to wearing during the *Tournament*, with the glittery texts on the back and the endless pins in the front.

She was *loud* and she was boastful — she never refused a challenge; she never accepted the hands offered to her stumbling steps. She never quite met Chuuya’s eyes when they talked.

“I didn’t think the Demon Prodigy would be such an avid texter,” Tsuchiya said, the first time the two of them found themselves alone in one of the cars. She was driving — Chuuya had been prohibited car access for a week, following his attempt to drag his motorcycle to the race.

Raising his eyes from the bright screen of his shattered phone, he curled an eyebrow. “Who says he is?”

“Aren’t you talking to him, right now?”

“I’m not *talking* to that walking umbrella,” Chuuya scoffed. “I’m responding to his stupid corpse pictures.”

The woman stared at the text he showed her, seemingly unimpressed by the pool of blood underneath a rather short man’s body. *Someone from your family, Chibi?*

“That’s nice,” she said, at last. “You’re always talking.”

“He’s always sending pictures.”

“You’re still responding. Is Dazai—“

“Why does everyone keep asking me about the shitty Mackerel?” Chuuya grunted.

Tsuchiya pressed her foot on the pedal, guiding them through the first curve of the second half of the route. Some nearby car tried to push them away, scratching down Chuuya’s side of the vehicle — rolling his window down, he tapped his knuckles on the other car, subtly and lightlessly sending it flying away.

Begrudgingly impressed, the woman concluded: “Probably for the same reason why everyone keeps asking him about you.”

Chuuya blinked.

“Well. Those who don’t piss their pants as soon as he opens his mouth,” Tsuchiya dragged her shoulder up, rubbing the scarred side of her face.

The way they were seated had left him on her blind side. She hadn’t complained, but Chuuya had felt it settle in some branch of his bones, ready to chirp in his ear at night. He only knew one other person who —

“I get the terror, I guess,” she added. “I’m fucking someone from his *Secret Force*. Apparently he’s — pretty unstable to work with.”

“He’s a pain in the ass,” Chuuya summed it up, after some silence. “Unpredictable and devilish. But he’s not crazy.”

Skepticism colored her next glance.

“I’m not kidding.”

“It’s hard to think of him as a human being, sometimes,” she admitted.

Chuuya was no target — whatever *thud* he thought he heard, from the depths of his hollow rib cage, was nothing at all. He wasn’t the target — no reason to feel unsettled.

“Don’t believe every nickname you hear in the Mafia,” he settled on, eventually, once his gloves were done creaking under his unwilling clench. “We’re a bunch of assholes with a thing for theatrics.”

“Still. Can you imagine just — going up to him and asking his favorite color?”

*It’s blue*, he thought about telling, just to be petty. But there was no reason for him to know. There was no reason for him to lie, either — Dazai had never asked for back up where open fire wasn’t involved.

“He’s not unstable,” he insisted, crumpling up an abandoned bottle of water at his feet. “He’s too — *purposeful* in every crazy thing he does to be crazy.”

“If you think so.”

He pulled at the laces of his boots. “Was shooting you one of those *unstable things* he did?”

They skirted down the road, raising a rainfall of dust. Too excited to care, the crowd cheered. In that moment, the woman reminded him of Kouyou — a statue of the finest marble; one someone had wasted too much time on to let her be modified by something as ephemeral as emotions.

“You know,” Tsuchiya licked her lips. “I used to work with a mechanic, before Mi and I joined the syndicate.”

He squinted. “Yeah?”

“I was damn good at it,” she confirmed. “You have that nice motorcycle of yours, I’ve seen it. Remind me to give you the name of the shop. If you ever need it repaired, that’s the place you want to go to.”

“You still in contact with the guy?”

“Oh, sure,” Her next glance was more careful. “He’s Noguchi’s father.”

Chuuya frowned, pausing, his shoelace abandoned around his fingers — a bad imitation of Kazuko’s slippery embraces. *He had too many pictures of the snake on his phone*, he thought, distantly. Dazai had somehow developed a father fever. “Noguchi’s family is dead.”

“Noguchi’s *sister* is dead,” Tsuchiya corrected him. “His mother has fucked off somewhere to America, with her rich boyfriends and her pearls. His father is a mechanic, who I coincidentally happened to meet before joining. I’m working on making them reconcile, even if... well. Not that easy.”

Pieces floated through his skull. He remembered Noguchi mentioning a sister in Suribachi City, right before he was interrupted. How could it connect to the guilt he remembered dripping from his lips?

“His sister,” Chuuya guessed. “Did he promise her to get rid of her Ability, somehow?”

Tsuchiya appeared surprised by how fast he’d pieced it together. He had been walking heavy steps all over the mystery of Noguchi’s hostility for too long, though; had been obsessing over the Colonel’s trust in him — over his other competition, who never seemed quite as taken with the challenge as he was.

“Not exactly,” she admitted. “Noguchi promised to kill her.”

He stared.

“I only know what he told me. Apparently, the poor girl was n born with a curse. Her Ability was strong — strong enough that his parents had sent her to live with some maid in the countryside, all to make sure she wouldn’t destroy the city in some outburst.”

He whistled. “That bad?”

“Something akin to your Ability, actually,” Tsuchiya tilted her head, still chasing the running cars. The scars down the side of her face were viciously bright against the night sky; Chuuya

wondered if it was why she never stared at his own quite as long as the others. “That’s how he describes it, at least. It would activate in the most unpredictable moments and — it hurt her. *She felt as if every crack she caused to the earth was matched by one on her body*, he told me.”

Familiarity tugged the strings of his throat. “She wanted Noguchi to kill her, so that she would stop hurting.”

“Herself and others,” she nodded. “She caused countless accidents, and even more victims. Noguchi did his best to hide the real number from her, but voices travelled too fast. The kid was always sick, barely able to talk or move. She begged him to do what she wanted. He begged her to wait until she was sixteen. If she still wished to die by then, he would have respected her wish. He made her a promise.”

Chuuya could see the end of the story. “He wasn’t strong enough to do it.”

“She had an attack right after the day of her sixteenth birthday,” Tsuchiya’s hands tightened around the steering wheel. He wondered if that was the tone she used when talking to the owners of her patients; her grieving to-go, *sorry, he did not make it*. “She destroyed more than half the village, including the maid who had taken care of her. The desperation brought her to the brink of insanity. She told Noguchi terrible things he refuses to forget — no matter how insincere they must have been,” A pause. “In the end, *she* took care of the promise he had broken.”

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. “And that’s why he was so insistent that you had done nothing wrong.”

Tsuchiya hummed. “I assume he sees me as everything he did not manage to be.”

He thought of Q.

Noguchi was a *stubborn* man in all he loved. He spent more time fighting with Tsuchiya than he did talking — he had seen him refuse to say a word to Koda for over a week, after the man had foolishly put his life in danger. It wasn’t hard to imagine he had hoped to find a better solution than what his sister had wanted.

“It’s not the same thing,” Chuuya exclaimed. “I know it’s — he loves you. Alright. I get it. I respect his insistence to defend you. I can even respect your desire to fulfill your sister’s last wish, no matter how — but that was a *child*, Tsuchiya. You’re an adult who made a choice. He should let you shoulder the responsibility.”

“You think I don’t know that?” the woman scoffed, skirting near the feet of the roaring crowd. “I am — beyond lucky. An eye is not even comparable to the price I thought I would have to pay.”

He sent her a glance. “You’re not that stupid.”

A pause. “The idea was to keep me alive to witness the organization’s rage against me. Is your friend expecting a full-blown conflict to explode?”

“Not my friend.”

“I can’t imagine what other situation might cause such a great number of victims that my faults would shine that brightly,” Tsuchiya straightened her back. “And his preemptive action is infamous throughout the syndicate. With your permission, sir, the day that conflict comes — I will volunteer to join our paramedics. My Ability might be useless on people, but — I *can* make amends.”

Chuuya clicked his tongue. ““You much of a doctor?”

“Mi taught me things.”

“*Things* might not save our men.”

“Things,” Tsuchiya repeated. She settled her eye on him, no matter the unhesitant acceleration of the car. “I know you’ve been ingesting poison, for one.”

He tightened his lips.

“High temperature and shivers,” she listed off, without his input. “You’re *freezing*, normally, but lately your temperature has been almost average. It’s also summer, and you’ve been lamenting the heat, so I don’t see why you should be shivering so early in the mornings. Irritability, drowsiness, breathing difficulties, those burns around your mouth and nose—“

“I’ve been training my Ability with your eye-ripper,” Chuuya replied, blankly.

“And Mi’s lessons did not cover what symptoms that might bring,” Tsuchiya agreed. “But you’ve been like this ever since you returned, and Noguchi tells me you were like this in France, too. Which means you must have started right after the *Nine Rings Conflict*. Your training surely isn’t helping your cause, but — why are you trying to build a tolerance?”

There was no resemblance between the headlights of the car rotating in front of them and the lightbulbs in Albatross’ bathroom. Still, Chuuya recalled blurred circles of colors — the cold ceramic under his fingers. What had Mori said? *Tolerance takes time*. He had put bottles in his hands and tapped the spot of his throat that would hurt the most — and then he’d smiled.

If food didn’t taste like blood, these days, it tasted like those little bottles. “Let me see,” he deadpanned. “Maybe because I’m tired of getting poisoned.”

“Does it happen a lot?”

“You’d be fucking surprised.”

“But why mix an already difficult practice with little eating?” she insisted.

Chuuya rolled his eyes. “I eat.”

“Clearly not enough.”

“Are you my mother?” he snapped, stunned. “Like, seriously. You want to ask how I’m going to school? All the teachers like me, don’t worry.”

Tsuchiya huffed. “I just—“

“*I just* — nothing. I’m your *Boss*, you know?

“Not eating enough is gonna bite you in the backside. *Boss*. ”

“I eat enough to kick your ass.”

“Barely, maybe,” She stepped on the gas.

Chuuya curled an eyebrow in her direction. “I *could* kick your ass. I don’t care how good you are,” And she *was* good, he knew. Hand-to-hand combat was her field of expertise — he’d seen her snap men’s throats with bare legs and arms, and kick them hard enough to break their bones.

“I know you could,” Tsuchiya conceded, honestly, in a tone that lacked the envy and skepticism of the *best martial artist of the organization* whispers. “I remember Rengoku.”

He blew air out. “Everyone remembers Rengoku.”

“Does it piss you off?”

*[He’d thought — just once — about bringing them to the Old World. He hadn’t. He never would. He didn’t know how].*

“You can volunteer with the paramedics,” Chuuya said, picking the cowardly route. “As long as you don’t stuff people with horse tranquilisers, I don’t care.”

For the first time, a smile graced her face. “It would surprise you how good of a sleep that shit gives you.”

His eyes widened. “You *shot yourself* with a horse tranquilizer?”

“Well, not *on purpose*, ” She blushed to the roots of her hair. Their car crossed the finish line; behind the referees, the rest of their squad was cheering, armed to the teeth and grinning from one ear to the other. With a sigh, Chuuya resigned himself to five graves’ *I told you so*’s.

“You see, what happened was—“

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The bathroom stall was cramped enough to make the smell stick like a blanket.

“Thirty seven seconds,” Dazai whispered, perched on the other side of the toilet, offering no explanation to how he’d calculated that information. “They’ll only turn off the cameras for twenty seconds, so we need to get out of here quick.”

Chuuya tried to shift on that unlikely spot, freezing when the creaking seemed to grow louder than the *suspicious* sounds from the next stall. The *pair* had stumbled there in a frenzy that seemed unfit of the *Gentlemen’s Club’s* opening hour — except that hour was midnight sharp, and it seemed to never be too soon for a quickie.

“I still can’t believe you couldn’t just get us the funds for the entrance,” he whispered back. They had been hiding for seven hours; only waiting in Lippman’s truck for an entire day of shooting had been more boring. “Some *Demon Prodigy*.”

“*Demon Prodigy undercover*,” Dazai didn’t blink. “I’m sorry to inform you that there aren’t any *allowed-to-all-clubs* VIP passes for Mafia dogs, and that neither of us can have this night on our channels. Should I remind you of how elated Mori would be to find us this deep in enemy territory?”

He moved a bit more. In the next stall, a high-pitched voice moaned a sluggish curse.

“It’s just the *Shadow Blade*. We have too much shit on them for any breach to ever matter,” Chuuya replied. “Everybody knows every gang in the city has been to the *Club* at least once. Worst case, I sicc Matsuda’s righteous palms on this...” Metallic, ground-shaking music rattled the walls, the guitar riff peaking right as the voices in the next stall did the same. “... fine establishment.”

Dazai’s shoes slipped.

He landed on the ground with a *thump!* that shut the people in the next stall right up. Then, extracting two black cloths from his belt hoops, he ordered: “Now.”

[“*The Shadow Blade is the city’s eldest child*,” Mori continued, dragging eyes full of distaste down the dossier marked in their seal. “According to the archives, there are high chances it was amongst the first ever organized-crime schemes in Yokohama. The men of the syndicate — *Blades*, as they refer to themselves — specialize in drug rings.”

*Which Mori, ever the doctor and ever the careful planner, despised. “They didn’t side with the Nine Rings,” Dazai commented, tapping the back of the man’s seat. “Why attack them first?”*

*The man hummed. Mere days ago, Chuuya had taken part in the execution of a Black Lizard who had been caught high on heroin; he hadn’t been on time to ask whether the rule had been put in place before or after the first Boss’ death. “To make sure they don’t get ideas.”*

*“More than a quarter of our buyers have had to regulate funds to deal with the Blades offers,” Chuuya intervened, recalling the documents Virgil had shown him. “They think the battle weakened us, and that this is the perfect moment to get rid of the competition. Last thing we need is addicted buyers with not enough resources.”*

*“They need a reminder,” The tapping fingers grew slower, then faster. Right as he was about to be distracted by it, they came to a stop. “Or an ultimatum. Whichever you two believe best.”]*

The cloth was an unbearably sweaty weight over the bridge of his nose, drowning the inside of the club in a deafening-music lined darkness.

Summer and a clear abundance of bodies pressed against every inch of him, insistent like actual cement walls. “How do you go all day with an eye covered?” Chuuya muttered, fixing the knot behind his matted hair. “You *must* be blind.”

“I’m exceptionally more talented than you in every field,” Dazai replied. His voice was right by his ear; startled, he almost slammed his elbow in his side, feet skiing on some drink on the floor. Peeved, the boy stuck a finger over his closed eye. “Stop *fiddling* with that. Last thing we need is for you to go on a murder spree,” He paused. “Well. An unplanned one.”

Right in that moment, the screech of vents opening drowned the music.

*They call it Flowers of Buffoonery, Dazai had explained, in the endless hours they had spent in that bathroom stall. Or — It has an uglier name, but I didn’t like it, so this is what we’re calling it. As far as everyone who frequents the bar is concerned, it’s merely inhaled euphoria. A little kick.*

He’d paused. *As long as it doesn’t get in your eyes, of course.*

“One hell of an Ability,” Chuuya mused, as he licked the sour taste off his lips. The cloud of smoke — *Chibi-motorcycle-pink*, Dazai informed him, through the opaque veil of his own blindfold — was strangely material; he felt it sneak inside his nostrils and stick to his tongue, relaxing his body just so. “Bar, first. I’m not doing this sober.”

The music was loud; Dazai’s next words were traced on the hollow of his throat, instead, with a perfectly cut nail surrounded by bitten skin. *You should give me your hand.*

“I was fighting gangs in Suribachi City’s blackouts while you were still pissing your bed,” Chuuya scoffed, gently kicking the ground with the tip of his shoe. He didn’t watch it come to life; he *felt* it, though, like bright obstacles in the night. *Everything is touched by gravity*, he had drunkenly explained, once, to a sharp-eyed Doc, *which means I can touch everything*. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you slip and fall, I’ll laugh.”

“If I *slip and fall*, I’m pulling you down with me, jackass.”

A deep sigh; then, because Dazai was petty, he intertwined an arm with his own. “This can’t be what partnerships truly are about.”

Since Chuuya was only slightly pettier, he led them to the bar all the same. “That’s because we aren’t partners.”

“As you say,” he patronized. “You’re on my blind side all the time, like some — some noisy, baby faced nurse. Be grateful I’m willing to return the annoyance.”

Chuuya’s jaw dropped. “I’m — that is *not* —“

With a hum, he pulled him along.

Despite being invisible, the atmosphere all around them was perfectly tactile and unavoidably familiar. The surge of smells reminded him of the worst sides of Ace’s Casinos, with the good quality alcohol in bad quality hands, the tinge of sex, and the bad breath of dazed crowds. Drugs added an oily sort of haze to the mix — something that Chuuya only vaguely recalled from his childhood in the Sheep, before he had managed to pull them to more decent levels of the crater.

Endless people danced to music Chuuya didn’t know and couldn’t quite follow; behind him, Dazai entertained himself with humming along in all the wrong rhythms.

*Flowers of Buffoonery* didn’t feel like much — perhaps the numbness of too little morphine, or whiskey that had been left in the fridge. Not nearly enough to make him lose his senses, but just enough to make his slide through sweaty bodies a little less disgusting and a little more hypnotizing.

Lips brushed the shell of his ear. “They’ve got eyes on us.”

Chuuya hummed, throwing his empty glass where he guessed the counter was. They had expected eyes, despite the secrecy surrounding the *Gentleman’s Club* uses — too much was a stake for it not to be guarded. It was why Dazai sported a blindfold all the same, despite being untouched by the smokey Ability.

*Where?*, he tapped on the boy’s shoe. The passing crowd had pressed them close enough for the smell of gunpowder that never left the boy to filter in his nose, *almost* drowning out the Ability.

He felt Dazai’s head move. He hadn’t seen him remove his head bandage, before putting the blindfold on. He wondered if he had a sweat patch, right under there. “There’s a mezzanine all around the perimeter,” he described. “They’ve got four suspicious brutes in every quarter. Horrible clothes. The barkeep stared at you for too long, and you left your hat at home, so I assume it wasn’t mere reasonable disgust. And a few people near the DJ system.”

“And the dealers?”

Tapped on his shoulder: *follow me*.

Chuuya disliked the idea. Nonetheless, his senses and *Tainted* couldn't let him locate specific faces — he wrapped the belt of Dazai's coat around his knuckles, and pushed the small of his back.

A huff. "I'm not the dog here."

"I'm not holding your hand," he replied, just loud enough to beat the drumming music. He couldn't see the lights; he could *feel* them, though, pounding like a headache against his patience. "I don't want to catch — whatever you have."

*"Whatever I have."*

"You know what I mean."

"No, why don't you enlighten me —"

"The weirdo genes."

*"The weirdo —"*

"Are you going to move?" he asked.

"I had my fingers in your viscera a week ago, you know," Dazai grumbled, as he threw the two of them inside the bouncing bodies of what he could only assume was the dance floor. "Whatever I *have*, you've caught it long ago."

It was a joke. Chuuya felt a spark of tension up his spine all the same; the echo of a white room, an hallucination bending to meet his eyes. *You and I are the same*. "Not in a million years."

The second part of the plan was the easiest — he had been familiar with pickpocketing since before he had been steady enough on his feet to run from Matsuda and Murase's police rounds. Darkness and haze in his veins didn't change much — Chuuya swayed his body along to the dancing limbs, and slipped his hands into the pockets and bags of the *Shadow Blade* assigned dealers.

Dazai was a steady weight against him, his glee at refusing to blend in by *pretending* to dance more than evident. The moment Chuuya held the transparent packages of white powder and pills, he slipped *their own* in their place — identical bags, only sporting the *Takasekai's* seal on them.

"It's actually sort of pretty," the boy said, at some point, ripping a package from his fingers. "I wouldn't mind hanging myself from this roof."

"You wouldn't mind hanging yourself in a public bathroom."

"There's something vaguely enchanting about being in a crowd of blindfolded people," Dazai continued, easily. "I get it's necessary, but it's an interesting taste nonetheless. They've put neon paint everywhere. Kind of a waste, given nobody can see it."

“That’s just club etiquette,” Chuuya said. “People are usually too drunk to see shit anyway.”

A curiously tilted silence.

“What?”

“You don’t feel like the clubbing type.”

“What the *fuck* does that mean?”

“You collect poetry books and drink wine that costs more than my salary. I can see you with Gramp’s monocle sooner than I can see you —“ He saw *the* quotation marks his fingers had to be doing in his mind; along to the music, in English, he said: “*Getting low, low, low.*”

Chuuya would have stared him down, had his eyes been uncovered. “You’re aware I grew up in a gang.”

“Sure,” Dazai agreed. “And what bedtime did you install, exactly?”

*Ten o’clock*, he didn’t answer, *not that anybody ever followed through*. “Whatever,” He slipped his fingers by the belt of one of the dealers, stealing a passing glass to throw on his shirt. Between fake sluggish apologies and an immediate disappearance through naked shoulders and sticky legs, he added: “Had to go and recover Shirase and the others from places like this a few times.”

Dazai stuck one finger in his choker, pulling him out of the way of *something* at the very last moment. “Not the Flags?”

His laughter almost ripped the stitches still on his body; the reminder that *thinking about it* would mean feeling like a living bruise had his steps grow more careful. “Too sophisticated. A good bar and a pool table were more their taste.”

Chuuya could see it, though — Albatross’ drunkest nights; an unwise idea Pianoman would not veto, because he would see the curiosity on all of their faces. Iceman’s ass stuck to the bar chairs; Lippman and Albatross’ eyes crinkling under the lights; Doc’s quiet acceptance of Chuuya’s head on his shoulder; Pianoman’s laughter. A possibility, in another world — a day he would never live.

Dazai stepped on his feet.

“*Hey!*” he cursed. “You *have* eyes, what —“

A whistle reached his ears. *Self-portrait on a cold night*, his nails tapped on his knuckles, before Dazai pulled him deeper inside the embrace of the crowd. *The eyes have started looking*. The song had changed to something low and bass-driven; it beat harder than his heart, rattling his entire body to the point of stumbling.

“What do people do in clubs, normally?” Chuuya heard him ask, as they stumbled into what *had* to be the center of that maze. Arms pressed against his back, sticky fingers dragging; hot exhales blurred his perception. “Since your baby-gang-raised self is such an expert?”

“Dance,” Chuuya heard himself answer, his fingers tense. *Tainted* was a speck of dust behind a door that was never closed; now came the difficult part. “Get drunk. Dance more. Stripteases?”

“Have you ever even *witnessed* a striptease?”

He spluttered. “Have *you*?”

“Don’t try to make educated guesses. You don’t have the brain cells. We need to blend in.”

“Dance,” Chuuya concluded, stepping just a tad too hard on the boy’s feet, as payback. “Would be easier if you stopped acting like the fucking *darkness* personified and actually *moved*. Throw up on the floor or something,” Goosebumps gathered on his skin. “We’re *not* making out.”

Dazai’s exasperation was tactile. “Who said anything about *making out* — “

Somewhere on their left, the DJ screamed into his mic — something about it being Friday. It got lost in the echo of his system, but the crowd screamed along with ease. The dancing grew more and more *frantic* — up and down jumps, hair whipping the air.

“Alright,” Chuuya sighed. He hid the last packages in his shoes; wrapped the end of Dazai’s tie around his free hand, and pulled him in with an ease that had him yelp. “Dancing, then.”

A hand appeared on his shoulder, the other reaching for his wrist.

He slapped them away.

In the hesitant, heavy silence that followed, Chuuya dared: “Did you just try to fucking waltz us through a drug ring’s dance floor?”

A breath. “I think your height is getting worse,” the other boy answered, gravely. “Oxygen isn’t getting to your brain anymore.”

“That doesn’t even *make sense* — “

Summer nights were still *summer*; it became clearer with every uncoordinated sway they awkwardly dragged their limbs through, bones knocking, eyes and hands subtly checking for free ways from the surveillance. *Tainted* appeared and disappeared with every brush of the few portions of Dazai’s naked skin, blinking like traffic lights, shutting the space inside his skull off and turning it on again.

“They could at least put some Hirose,” the boy lamented, at some point. Chuuya mourned the possibility to watch him fling his arms around with no perception of space.

“You think they have *Hirose Fumiko* in a place like this?” he screamed back.

“One can always hope,” Dazai lowered his head a bit; bumped it against his own. “Whoever steals more wallets gets Hirotsu’s new lighter.”

“Oh,” He sharpened his teeth; bumped against his head again. His nose landed somewhere on the boy’s sweat-matted cheek; he thought he heard his breath catch. “You’re on.”

Offhandedly — as they twirled their hands through nearby jackets and pants, throwing their trophies at each other to keep count — Chuuya put his hands on each side of his throat, heartbeat a fluttering beast, lowering him before a flying glass could land on Dazai’s scalp.

He felt the sweat on his nape gather on the naked tips of his fingers — tracing the rigged path of a scar Chuuya had given himself by climbing over barbed wire, under *Corruption*.

“Hey,” Dazai called, at some point. “Do you think Arahabaki likes me?”

*How stupid*, he thought. Arahabaki — who wasn’t anything; who couldn’t *hate* anything — despised Dazai Osamu with a passion that might rival his cage’s one. Jealous like a child. Cautious like a parent. Insistent.

*At the very least*, the *thing* considered, at times — like he might have hissed and whispered for long enough that Chuuya would have finally ripped his heart out of his chest — *one of them could watch his fingers trace their scars*. There was purpose in that, too.

*There was purpose in that only*, Arahabaki corrected him. There would be purpose in the corpse he’d make of the one person who kept the cage locked. *Aren’t you glad*, he’d ask?

“I don’t think anyone likes you,” Chuuya answered.

“Listen,” Dazai insisted, almost too low to find under the music. “I miscalculated something.”

His head snapped to him.

The fire alarm started ringing.

For a moment, nobody seemed to notice. But they had planned that part by detail — they waited. By the time the DJ had lowered the volume enough for it to break through, panic had already broken free — the mass of bodies shrieking and flinging themselves to an exit they couldn’t see was heavier than a storm, merciless steps forcing them to hide under the closest table to avoid being walked on. Still, no matter the urgency — none of them dared to remove their blindfold.

“What is it,” Chuuya whispered. Sounds merged over the barrier of his limited senses; steps disappearing, replaced by the heavy boots of men carrying guns. The humming music had lowered, but it hadn’t left; the smell of *Flowers of Buffoonery* seemed thicker than before. “What the hell did you miscalculate?”

Dazai’s shoulder pressed against his own. Seemingly somewhat entertained by the notion, he offered: “*Flowers of Buffoonery* not having any effect on me.”

He froze. “But —“

“It’s not an Ability User I can touch,” the boy insisted. “Given the current high I’m feeling, I assume — it’s a *substance*. In the *air*. I can’t exactly nullify a person who isn’t here.”

Breathing in, Chuuya dug his nails into the wooden floor, clenching his jaw shut. His eyes roamed under closed eyelids, searching imaginary exits and coordinates, shoulders relaxing with the promise of a challenge. “Mackerel.”

“Yes.”

“You said getting this shit in your eyes is the worst case scenario. That this Ability is meant to send people in a *violent* frenzy.”

“They’ll attack any perceived threat on sight,” he confirmed. It was amongst the reasons why the *Shadow Blade* was at the center of most Ability-related whispers in the underground. The potential of that rumored Ability User would have made even the Port Mafia hesitate. “It makes sense, if you think about it — ecstasy at its maximum potential *would* turn into viciousness. If eyes are the window to the soul —“

“You’ve been wearing a fake blindfold,” he interrupted, fists tight. “How much of that shit is in one of *your* eyes, right now?”

Dazai didn’t answer.

*If you start attacking at the mere sign of danger*, he didn’t insist, mind moving too fast, *how do we know you’ll be lucid enough to stop me?*

From a higher point of the dance floor — the mezzanine, Chuuya suspected — the voice of a woman curled into laughter.

“Be a dear and wait, Takahashi,” she said; a hum only *just* higher than the music. The sound of her voice felt like needles on skin, awakening some sleeping whisper inside Chuuya’s veins. The smoke grew thicker and thicker; with a curse, Chuuya hid his mouth and nose behind his palm, slapping his free hand on Dazai’s own. “We still have guests in.”

The sound of guns clicking tumbled on the ground — their trajectory, even with eyes closed, was doubtless.

Chuuya cursed, and cracked his knuckles. “Don’t move. And *cover* your goddamn eyes.”

Before the boy could talk, he jumped out of their hiding spot.

Darkness was a veil heavier than the sky; it heightened the world around him with nauseating ease, turning the lighting-quick sound of bullets fired in his way into a thunderstorm — turning the brush of them against his skin, slowed down like time by the layer of *Tainted* on his outer skin, into the pressure of a single hand on a bruise.

*This*, Chuuya thought, *this is it*. He kicked out and sunk his naked fist in a man’s chest; he sent their bullets back to them, sliding down their blood on the floor to climb over a missed man’s back, wrapping his legs around his neck to snap it in two. *Perhaps*, Chuuya thought, *perhaps it would feel less tempting if I could just do this all the time*.



*What's one lifetime of blood for another?*, Mori had told him, once.

A hand of steel clenched around his throat.

Surprise was choked out of him; before he could order *Tainted* to break the delicate fingers, manicured nails brushed against his forehead — ripping his blindfold off.

“Oh,” the woman said. “You *do* know what we’re capable of.”

Chuuya only caught a glimpse, before his mind had the quickness to slam his eyes shut — a redhead in a glimmering green dress, with lips too pink for her pale cheeks and one fist clenched on the back of Dazai’s collar, keeping him to the floor.

“Come on, now,” she sing-sang. “I came all the way here for you. Won’t you look at me?”

“*Bastard*,” he called, clawing at the hand around his throat. *Tainted* refused to act exactly as he asked; he bit his tongue to blood and *kicked*, attempting to reach Dazai’s limp body.

“*Wake — the fuck — up.*”

The woman tutted. Her every sound was a match being rubbed on gasoline — the number the smoke felt through his nostrils, the *stronger* it grew at the mere suggestion of her voice.

“The *Gentleman’s Club* is always glad to receive visitors, you know?” she sighed. “We have had many *Takasekai* men in the past, and they’ve all enjoyed themselves thoroughly. You could have done the same. What need was there to cause a mess? Did you boys want the dance floor all for yourselves?”

Chuuya’s mind curled back and forth with the little blood it was being offered; he sunk his nails in the woman’s wrist until he could feel warm blood pool down his fingers. *She’s mad about the fire alarm*, he mused, *they haven’t found the other drug packages, then.*

“You *guys*,” he struggled to stutter, breath stuck under his teeth, “*Need — a closed number entrance.*”

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said, with a hint of amusement. “You seem clever. I would have let you go, in other circumstances, but — you know. With all these rumors about *Takasekai* secretly helping the *Bishop’s Staff* out, I can’t just let you two go after you sneaked around so many poor girls, yes? Who knows what you were planning.”

On the ground, Dazai groaned.

“I,” Chuuya heard him force out, dazed in a slightly euphoric way — *hungry*, at the seams, for something uncharacteristic, “*Would never — to any beautiful woman —*”

Irritation pooled on his temples, pounding like a hammer. “That isn’t — *relevant* —”

Knuckles knocked on the wood.

He paused.

Undeterred, the Ability User chose that moment to pick up a gun from who knew where, firing it straight to the middle of his chest.

The impact landed Chuuya on the floor; the sound of upcoming steps told him the guards he had beaten had already been replaced, doubled up in their number — eyes on him. Teeth pressed against each other, he replayed the sound of the knuckles on the wood, and ordered *Tainted* to let the bullet in — only halfway.

*I hate*, he let himself think, as the bullet sunk, *this fucking strategy*.

A gasp of pain was dragged out of him, fake only at its very edges — he rolled on the ground until his elbow hit shattered pieces of glass. Taking advantage of it to get more believable blood on the floor, Chuuya bit his cheek and pushed his palms down, pretending to attempt to stand.

A heel landed on his back, hard.

“This is bound to be a terribly long night of damage control,” the woman sighed, much closer. A breathing pattern he knew all too well got even closer; Chuuya had never heard it so fatigued — so *resistant* to something. “We offer absolute peace on our nights, you know?”

*If Dazai’s touching her*, he questioned, forcing his eyelids shut harder, *how is he not nullified?*

*What we’re capable of*, she had said.

“It isn’t you,” Chuuya croaked. “You’re not the Ability User.”

A pause — barely a breath. “My, my, how clever,” the woman said, at last, over what might have been laughter, if kinder. “You’re one of those *Takasekai* bastards, aren’t you? You should know something about keeping your treasures away from your displays.”

He coughed a coagulation of blood out, feeling his neck pulse. A check of *Tainted* let him know they were surrounded by more than sixty men — the heartbeats outside the walls spoke of *double* that. ““Would have never guessed it wasn’t you. You fucking smell.”

The heel dug into a recently-stitched spot — between his fourth and fifth rib. Chuuya felt it all the way to his skull, sizzling like electricity.

A weight was dropped on his knees, right in front of him. “I have no time to deal with this,” the woman spat out, less pleasant. “I’ll just have your partner here tear you and himself apart. He just needs to look at you to do it.”

“You — *fool*,” he heard Dazai murmur, sluggish and whiney. “I want to kill him *whenever* I look at him.”

Chuuya’s forehead pulsed. “*Now, jackass?*”

With dreading, unavoidable certainty, he knew what was going to happen.

His eyelids refused to part — he could see it all the same. The woman’s manicured hands in Dazai’s hair, pushing his kneeled, mindless body forward — until he was bent right over Chuuya’s curled up, bleeding one. He could see the glint of Dazai’s braces, as he sunk his teeth in a corner of his lower lip — a nervous tell he never noticed.

“There,” the woman tutted, again. The sound of her hands over Dazai’s head bandages stiffened his spine. “Only one eye won’t do.”

The blood between his teeth tasted like vomit. He spat it out, again and again, choking on it. It had been a decade since he had been hit by a bullet. “Get your hands off him.”

“A good kill needs both eyes,” she insisted, sweeter than honey, “How else will you remember it?”

He could see it with utter clarity — the bandages pooling to the ground; the way Dazai’s pupils would swallow his irises, drunk with a mindless need to kill that Chuuya had only truly seen him drown in *once*. He could see the words perched on his lips — that *chant* only they knew, and that no strategist like Dazai would miss out on using, if mindless with need to succeed.

He could taste Arahabaki devouring him whole, stretching bone after bone into a fractured mess of hollow space — skewering his insides until they could spread across all the ground a god might want soiled and a code might not want at all, and Dazai standing there — watching.

“Look at him, dear,” the woman murmured. “Now.”

The bandages landed on the floor — and he *heard* it. Knuckled on the wood, again.

“No,” Chuuya had no time to say. “No, *don’t* —” His fingers closed around the biggest of the glass shards, right as Dazai’s hand stole it from him and stabbed — Chuuya *knew*; only by the squelch of wet skin and the *breath* falling from Dazai’s mouth — his unbandaged eye.

*Spring sun*, the knocking had said. Like his tut in the alley; *you were an indent bigger than the spring sun on* —

The window of action was thinner than a blink; Chuuya gulped down a shout of Dazai’s name — something soaked in shock and questions and curses and *something* — and curled his mouth around the chant the strategy had ordered him to use.

After that, it was quiet.

ability user: the moment you look at chuuya you'll want to kill him

dazai, about to literally stab his eye to stop himself from doing that, still refuses to admit that's why: jokes on you i want to kill chuuya whenever i look at him

hey there! the corruption training arc has started, at last, and chuuya's about not to have a good day for a bit — which, i feel guilty to admit, was some of the funniest part to write for this whole fic. at the very least, he cleared things up with tanaki and managed to get the band of raging chihuahuas to calm down. you go, chuuya!

i want to start by thanking you guys again for the support, and for enjoying this fic of mine — every single comment and every kudos leaves me grinning for the whole day, i hope you know. i'm always hoping this story will feel as realistic as possible (or, at the very least, not offensively different from how i think skk are) and now that corruption is in the game, that's certainly gonna be more difficult. i'm very curious to explore what skk's understanding of it might have been, though, before they fully got its magnitude.

and cliffhanger! how i love cliffhangers. 10/10 to skk for creating a strategy that's literally just “you start corruption and i do something absolutely unreasonable to confuse the enemy”. at least, by stabbing his eye, dazai managed not to look at chuuya and not attack him. isn't that romantic?

one thing i want to point out — “flowers of buffoonery” is, of course, an irl dazai osamu reference! funny name isn't it?

and that's it for today! see you next week. keep yourself warm <3

# BY

## Chapter Summary

*It takes him three goodbyes from the yellow thing in the sky to cave.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xv.*

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*Case number: 67560091*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Nakahara C. and Dazai O. we're assigned to [...]*

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*It takes him three goodbyes from the yellow thing in the sky to cave.*

*For a child who knows nothing at all, disgust is quick to sink its claws in his soft skin, covered in rubble and dust, pushing him further and further away from the crawling things in the alleys where he sleeps. There's a buzz in the back of his skull — a shivering creature that wants him dead and needs him alive, and it explains a concept his growling stomach could have probably reached on its own.*

*Anyway, the creature is always hungry.*

*He picks up the things, smashing them in his fist so that they stop moving, and his fingers glow red as he does. He slept on the tiled floor of an all white place for some time, with bright lights that looked both new and destroyed — but the color freaked him out. He was quick to leave.*

*White. It reminds him of cables and floating green numbers, and a place that must have welcomed him since the beginning — the screeches in the back of his skull keep calling it that; the beginning — because he can't remember anything else. The concept of memories itself is lost on him.*

*The reflections freak him out even more.*

*They follow him. There is water on the ground, either from the sky or from the metal tubes scattered around. He knows they're called pipes — the same way he's not sure of what the water-from-the-sky is. He knows the reflection is him the way he knows the shrieks in the back of his head are, too.*

*Not you, it tells him, testily. All you are is what I will leave.*

*The reflections freak him out, but it — it pisses him off.*

*He ends up throwing up. He resists the call until his body screams at him, drawing him to the concrete and promising, threatening, to leave him there, to let him rot and merge with the ground, to make those terrifying creatures that sometimes fly in the sky put their beak all over him and devour him. His bones are showing. It will be easy.*

*It is fear, mostly, with a hint of rage, that makes him desperate enough to try to eat his own vomit.*

*Cockroaches, informs him the space in his mind where he keeps the word pipes. That's what they were.*

*It's not always that. As untouched by taste or preferences the it in the back of his head is — Arahabaki; because he wakes, one day, and knows that name — the little pests bore it soon enough. Perhaps it's mere instinct — he likes to believe he isn't alone, though.*

*Arahabaki, who isn't real, teaches him to throw rocks at bigger animals that make the mistake of circling the alleys; then it teaches him how to light up the rocks in that consoling shade of red.*

*The red water that abandons the animals' carcasses doubles with each trick he learns. He tries to taste that too, once. Arahabaki roars. He stops doing it.*

*Cockroaches become meat, meat becomes things he steals from the first people he sees. The memories he doesn't have call the white thing in the sky moon — and it takes him another two nights to have the courage to approach those people and their bags.*

*It is not the first time he eats food, nor the first time he kills. He does not know this. The ground he lies on at night would not exist if not for him; his favorite fruit used to be peaches. He does not know this. He lives with the shrieks in the back of his skull — and he lives, insistently, because Arahabaki doesn't want him to, but needs it.*

I will escape you.

*Loneliness is not something a boy who was always alone can feel; as such, he feels nothing at all. If Arahabaki will kill him, it means he's alive, still.*

He —

*"Nakahara," Yuan reads, bent over him, running fingers over sewn letters on his chest. She is tasked with cleaning the red water and the vomit off him, and she does so with little complaint. She says his name as if he's supposed to know it. To be it. "Nakahara — what are the others calling you? Chuuya, from the missing children lists?" She smiled. "That's a pretty name."*

*"No it's not," he's quick to snap.*

*They're not the first words he says. Very clearly, he can remember biting growls of what is that, what is that, what is that to the boy who brought him here. The Sheep, they call themselves, and Chuuya is too stubborn to admit he can't quite recall what a sheep is supposed to be.*

*"Yes it is," Yuan insists, squinting at him. She is one year younger than the age Shirase had decided to give him. She keeps waking up at night when he does, but Chuuya knows he doesn't scream, so he doesn't understand how. "You're going to be a pig head, ain't you?"*

*When they drag him to the flames for killing a kid, doe eyes waiting for his hands to light up red again — and Chuuya doesn't understand, he doesn't understand, because it's not the first person he kills; and he doesn't remember, but the place they call home is soiled from the rage of the shrieks in the back of his head, and it's just red water, because they haven't bothered to tell him what it's called — it's Yuan who calls for a Council meeting.*

*“Cockroaches?” she echoes, endless days later, as they drag a sleeping Shirase back to base. Her nose scrunches up. Chuuya hates that she saved his life. Chuuya hates that they all did. Chuuya will gladly leave his carcass to those terrifying birds, if his blood will be spilled for them. “That’s disgusting.”*

He knows, *he assures her*. It took him three days to cave.

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*What is the aim, here, exactly?*, Kajii had asked, the upper half of his body hidden under one of his work tables. Chuuya loathed and appreciated his weekly visits to the man’s floor; there were only so many lemon-flavored smells and discussions on the nature of divinity he could take. *You’re training this hyper-secret Ability of yours. It debilitates you for days at the time. Why?*

Chuuya hadn’t answered. There had been options, of course — *Boss ordered it*, would have shut him right up; *it’s not as under control as they want everyone to believe*, might have sealed his lips out of awkwardness. *I want to. It calls me when I don’t. I don’t know how to stop wanting to.*

Easier: *there might be a solution I’m still not good enough to grasp.*

Even easier: *there has to be a point.*

He had healing and doomed scars on every inch of his flesh, curling like mocking grins from a creature he only saw in mirrors — he hadn’t slept a full night since the beginning of June, haunted by the pounding pain in his muscles. And yet.

*What would they say*, knowingly, Chuuya never wondered, *if they knew I’ve never felt better?*

“Oh,” Dazai exhaled.

The sound bounced off the moss-covered rocks caging them; his eye, eyelids stained in blood, was set on the moon at the end of the well. “Oh, is this it? It wasn’t meant to hurt this much.”

Still pressing a white-knuckled grip on a spot right by the boy’s clavicles, through the beating white noises in his ears, Chuuya heard himself snap: “Don’t be fucking dense.”



It was a set out of some bad horror movie; the smell of blood was so thick Chuuya couldn't quite inhale without retching. The fall into the well had lasted eons and seconds; they had both scratched themselves on the landing, staining the circular floor ever deeper. Rat corpses decayed away near the perimeter, framed by trash and pennies — Chuuya'd heard something *hard* shatter under his weight, but he had refused to check.

Curled up like a corpse, under the layer of Chuuya's own blood and badly sucked-in wounds, Dazai had been slowly bleeding out for the past two hours.

"What," Dazai croaked. Clarity spread like a veil over his one good eye, dissipating the petty bliss that had been relaxing his traits; a bit more frantic, he attempted to look around. "What —"

"Stay still," Chuuya ordered. His hands had gone numb with pressing on that singular wound on his chest — the other was clenched around his own side, steadfastly growing surer to be holding his insides still. Every word out of his mouth had his vision turn blurrier. "The *Gentleman's Bar* is gone. You stopped me. We're stuck here. Nothing to do."

A pause. "I don't — remember that."

Death looked strange on Dazai. *He would hate to know that*, he thought, a bit delirious — but there was no denying. Chuuya had crumpled up his coat in a makeshift blanket, given his shivers — it barely hid the ripped crimson stains of his ever pristine shirt; the way his tie had gotten stuck on the edge of a linear wound by his waist.

His face was paler than moonlight; his hair, still too long, stuck to the sweaty bandages soaked in blood he hadn't had the heart to remove. *He didn't hit his eye*, Chuuya reminded himself. *But was he trying to?*

He wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

"I'm not sure how either," he offered. "I opened my eyes on the floor. You were passed out —" *Hand on my cheek*, "Touching me. You —" He wiped a drop that was too red to be sweat and too clear to be blood from a strangely soft spot under his eye; pretended not to hear his *maybe-broken* leg scream when the boy pushed into the touch, bumping his cheek against his knee. "I dragged you out. We couldn't stay. They either called for backup, or the *Special Division* heard and came by — I didn't see well. You were — badly wounded."

His blink was slow. "By what?"

Chuuya pressed until his arm ached. "Me."

He had known it the moment his eyes had managed to focus on him — Chuuya recognized the brand of destruction Arahabaki liked the most; *knew* what his fangs and claws looked like, both on concrete and flesh. He had had to extract glass pieces from his body one by one — all of them as precise as a bullet.

Dazai breathed out again — a wheeze.

“That’s so embarrassing,” he whined. The only real sign of delirium were the spasms of his hands; the unrelenting tremors of his body. “I can’t let anyone know. I’m supposed to have you house-trained, or Mori won’t let me keep you.”

He didn’t answer.

“Well, then,” he sighed, again. “This will be a pain to stitch up. I’m awake now; get us out.”

Chuuya gritted his teeth. “I can’t.”

His eyebrow curled. A bruise was forming right under it; the blood from his self-stab pooled on it like webs on a window. “Actually, how are you awake?”

He shrugged. He didn’t know either.

The boy’s eyebrow curled ever further — a bit less sarcastic. “You’re wounded too.”

“No shit, genius,” Chuuya spat out. It had been easier not to think about it before; now the idea pressed valiantly against his skull, reminding him that he had never felt colder, and that this was the part where he *passed out*, usually — that he had his viscera in his hands and the remnants of a starved, desperate thing curling into black lines all the way to the tips of his fingers, *begging*. That he hadn’t found his gloves. “It’s the usual. I can deal with it. I’ve had worse.”

“Chuuya.”

“Worry about yourself.”

“I’m *trying*,” Dazai replied, blanker than a canva.

“The great Dazai Osamu,” he spat, with venom that fit nowhere in that tight space, and that it crowded against his teeth like a flood. “Dying because of a pathetic Ability that — turns out — *can* touch him. Who would have thought.”

A breath passed. There was no spit to tie the boy’s lips together — only dried blood and ripped skin, that seemed to sing along to a velcro-like sound when Dazai parted them.

“If you’re about to ask me not to tell anyone,” Chuuya cut him off, staring straight into the wall — fingers so tight around his side he could only feel up to his elbow — “You can shove it.”

Dazai stared right ahead as well — right into the half circle of the moon. Gentler than a butterfly on cracked glass, his heartbeat seemed to slow under Chuuya’s palm — to wonder.

“We can’t do anything if we’re stuck here,” he insisted, eventually. “If you really wanna play the hero, suck it up and fly out of here to throw me a rope.”

The air under there was exactly the same as it would have been outside, Chuuya knew it — it still seemed harder to inhale. “You can’t climb.”

“I’m not a crybaby,” he let him know, easy. There was no *unlike you*, surprisingly — his shoulders stiffened all the same. “My ideal suicide doesn’t involve wells or *you*. Stop trying to bait me into —“

“I can’t.”

“Would you listen to —“

“It hit your artery,” Chuuya snapped. The boy’s jaw made no sound as it shut. “My hand is the only thing keeping it from bleeding out. I can’t fucking let go.” He gulped years old drool in — refused to even blink, as he stared at some indefinite point in front of him. He hadn’t taken his eyes away from it in two hours. “I can’t let go,” he concluded.

Dazai said nothing.

Distant sounds pooled down the walls of the well, filtering from the emptiness outside. The *Gentleman’s Bar* had stood proud and infinite at the outskirts of the city, surrounded by nothing but old fields and farms; the occasional car passing by made him stiffen. Chuuya had had no time to cover their traces — he’d barely had time not to let the two of them bleed out.

“Well,” Dazai resolved, at last, between one crumpled up breath and the other. “Let’s just give up and die.”

His side hurt with the effort it took to grit his teeth. “Fuck that,” he growled.

“What’s your plan, then?” the boy insisted. The curve of his mouth was shaky and dried, torn at the seams; *mocking*. “Call Hirotsu? Kouyou? Any of your latest goons? Don’t make me —“ His next exhale came out with a shrill, barely-there whimper; Chuuya pressed harder on his wound, pretending the rush in his ears wasn’t there. The time for rage could never be unplanned. “Given your canine tendencies, I doubt you’re unfamiliar with orders. Nobody will help.”

Chuuya squeezed his side, wincing against the bolt of pain — waking himself up again. “It’s not like Boss would let us die.”

A sprinkle of humorless hilarity twinkled in his eye. “Have you ever gotten the feeling Mori has any particular desire to own people who *can* die?”

*Nobody needs those*, he thought. The Sheep hadn’t. The Flags hadn’t been supposed to ever — “You’re a piece of shit.”

“And your naivety is disgusting.”

“*Naivety?*” He barked out a laugh. “You’re fucking suicidal. You don’t get to call me *naive* for being willing to believe death isn’t the *point* here.”

“Then get out of here,” Dazai taunted. He could *hear* his blood circle under his palm; he could hear every breath swimming in his lungs. He knew Arahabaki had, too — he knew he hadn’t cared. “Or it’s nothing but pretty words.”

His heart beat in his ears. Summer was sticky and always there; the chattering of his teeth mocked his very being. If he didn't focus on his intermittent blinking, he knew, he would pass out on a corpse. "That sounds like the type of shit someone suicidal would say."

Something like curiosity gathered under his blood-sticky eyelashes. "What do you even care?" he asked, as genuine as the few stars in the sky.

*I don't*, his lips shaped up. *Corruption* was a blink; stolen minute after stolen minute, waking him up in a pool of his own blood and the mirror of his own destruction inside a singular eye. Dazai had been there each time. He was the least bloodied thing Chuuya associated to his fading heartbeat — the one, *still* frame in the kaleidoscopic storm of white noises and caged screams his eyes opened to each time. The one, still thing Arahabaki wasn't meant to touch.

*Perhaps*, his lips didn't dare mouth, *perhaps I can't forget the weight of corpses*. Perhaps he had too many debts. Perhaps Arahabaki would always be able to touch.

Moving as imperceptibly as the house of cards allowed, he curled his legs closer, and laid Dazai's head on his pounding thigh.

Some bird passed by the circle of sky. The huff out of Dazai's mouth wasn't mean. "You didn't take off my bandages," he noted.

Chuuya glared. "Don't be stupid."

*Don't say anything else*, he begged. He had not seen what face he had made before stabbing his own eye — the clever glint of a plan, or the vacant depth of improvisation. There existed possibilities that were too delicate to survive between Chuuya's decaying hands; things that made no sense and too much and that *shouldn't have*.

*Nonetheless*, Kouyou had said, undeterred, *you will thank him*.

"Hey," he asked. They were curled around each other like a death grip; Chuuya didn't dare try to straighten his spine. Their puffs of breath were the only warm things. They were not the same, but they were selfish like puzzle pieces. "What was your favorite thing in Rimbaud's house?"

There was something — something *relevant*, that he could not quite recall amidst the shivers. Something about the way a prodigy said some prodigious hymns; something about the quicksand way the word *favorite* tumbled down his chapped lips, chased and unwanted. He'd sat with him and watched him order fifteen different types of ramen, eating one spoon off of each. He had killed ten men in ten different ways. He had never said a single word, and Chuuya had watched his face and felt like throwing up — like shaking him awake.

The grip of his palm had to be too hard; he was struggling to speak. He was unable to quieten hurried efficiency; he forced himself to be kinder. "He had a whole shelf full of poetry books."

"Why do you like it, anyway?"

Chuuya shrugged — breath catching when it rattled his ribs. “Sometimes it’s amusingly shitty. I admire the audacity it took to publish it.”

He peeked up at him. He really needed to cut his hair. “You don’t seem much like a poet.”

“I would say you don’t look like an asshole either, but I’d be lying.”

“It just feels insincere,” Dazai insisted. The absolute lack of tone in his voice was chilling; he wondered if it helped forget the pain. *If he feels any*, the mafiosi liked to whisper. Chuuya never knew — only suspected. “No one’s immediate thoughts are that refined. How can it claim to be honest, when it’s shimmering intrusive thoughts at best?”

“No one likes spontaneity. It’s called having a *filter*, which I assume you don’t know.”

Something bubbled between his lips; Chuuya pressed harder, stubbornly pretending it wasn’t blood. His phone had fallen somewhere outside the well. No one would answer. Someone would come. Like his own delirium, Dazai insisted: “Exaggerated refining is bound to transform. What’s the point of an idea, if you sculpt it until it doesn’t even resemble itself?”

He shook his head, exasperated. “Then it means whatever it was at the beginning wasn’t worth existing. Tough shit.”

It was quiet. It reminded his bones of their own fragile state too soon. “Hey,” Chuuya added, “Were you lying?”

“What?”

“About the nanny thing.”

Consideration blinked at him. There was a constant drumming on the left side of his head; the usual spasms of his fingers weren’t helping with their current job. He set his eyes on a mole right by Dazai’s ear. “She wasn’t exactly a nanny.”

He perked up. “You were just looking for a fancy word for babysitter?”

“She wasn’t *paid* to stay with me,” Dazai’s voice was carefully devoid. If he hadn’t seen his mouth move, he might have thought the sound to be born out of the rush of the heated wind from outside the well. “She just wanted to.”

“What happened to her?”

Like Judgement Day, he replied: “Why did the Sheep give you a funeral when you were eight?”

Chuuya wanted to be surprised. “Is this a slumber party?”

The boy fixed his weight on him. He turned his cheek on his lap, hiding his one eye from view entirely. His bandages were so red it was hard to believe they had ever been clean. Chuuya was angry, and there was nothing to be angry about.

“The first time I used my Ability on a wider scale,” he said, eventually. He looked everywhere but at his soaked hands — the mold on the walls; the widening stain of blood Dazai’s head was leaving on his thigh; the one hair clip to have survived their trip. “I killed one of the kids.”

Dazai didn’t move. Behind it, eye or not eye, was the face he always wore when the Sheep passed by their conversations — a mixture of contempt and superiority, stained by a flicker too intense not to be childish. The joy of stolen toys; the tantrum of jealousy.

“It was an execution, actually,” he added. He thought the rocks were dancing along to a fire that wasn’t there — thought he could see the dirty fabric of Yuan’s favorite jacket. “But they worked the same. They would light up a fire at the bottom of the crater and throw the person. Of course, they feared my Ability might activate and get me away, so they — dragged me to the fire instead.”

Shamefully — or something more *numb* than that; something too distant — he couldn’t even recall the kid’s face. He hadn’t done anything particularly remarkable. He had just been sitting too close. All Chuuya remembered was the heat, closer and *closer* — the way he had felt as if he should have cried.

“The Council had a last minute meeting, though,” Chuuya shrugged. “They told me that if I trained, I could stick around. But I wouldn’t get a second chance.”

Car honks rained in, occasionally — taunting their hiding place. It happened three times before Dazai said: “I find it hard to believe *even-smaller-Chuuya* would have simply accepted execution with his head low.”

He made a face. “They had saved my life, like, two days before. I *tried* to escape, but —“

“Stupid.”

“Fuck you.”

“Trust is the stupidest thing to offer.”

“I was *eight*. ”

“I was nine when my nanny died.”

“What, did you kill her?”

Bruised knuckles tightened on his side, half hidden under his motionless chest — few things managed to make him react that vividly. Dazai didn’t answer. He hadn’t expected him to — he had offered that truth just to watch him tear it into pieces. Balance was something he understood. He just wasn’t willing to make it fair.

Chuuya tightened his lips.

Wind drooled in, raising goosebumps all over the skin his ripped clothes couldn’t hide. He bent himself further over Dazai; when his thumb moved a *inch*, his wound made a wobbly

sound — a wet, gurgling moan — and the boy froze.

“That’ll scar,” Dazai commented. His eye was still hidden; he was still breathing. “Mori might just give me a golden star for it.”

*This isn’t fair*, Chuuya let himself think — only for five seconds. They didn’t even know if their stitches were done correctly. They hadn’t meant to cause troubles, *Nine Rings* and Beatrice and *Souls* — they had just wanted to be listened to. *This isn’t fair and we brought it on ourselves.*

“I’m gonna heal, eventually,” Chuuya managed to say, voice a thread. He couldn’t feel the skin around his own wound. “I’ll — figure it out.”

A huff. “I’m the plan guy.”

He huffed louder. “Was *this* planned?”

“Yes.”

He stilled. “What?”

Dazai didn’t answer.

“Bastard,” He nudged him as much as he dared to, given his trembling knuckles. “Hey. What do you mean? You’re kidding, right?”

It took him centuries to speak again; when he did, his voice was muffled by Chuuya’s body. “The next step is *Takasekai*,” he offered. “I needed access to the office of the *Gentleman’s Bar*’s owner. After you entered *Corruption*, and that woman saw I had kept myself from fully seeing the smoke, she ruled me out as useless and locked me in there as she ran from you. You must have found me there — she probably assumed you wouldn’t leave any survivors.”

Chuuya’s head was spinning. “You did all of this for some papers?”

“A pendrive, actually,” Dazai corrected him. After a pause — “I swallowed it, I think.”

“You think.”

He tilted his head back — just enough to lay a too peaceful, too careless eye on him. There wasn’t mockery in it; there wasn’t even blame. It curled around his blood vessels like raining alcohol on a ground set on fire. “I knew you’d find me.”

*I did*, Chuuya didn’t confirm. He feared he might scream if he opened his mouth; feared he might finally give his ribs the push they needed to drill his lungs. *I did, and I almost killed you.*

When his lips parted, the only thing that came out was laughter.

It was a horrible idea — the jolting strikes of pain running down his spine painted the world blinding white and starved scarlet, rattling him from head to toe in a way neither of their

wounds could afford. He couldn't stop, though — couldn't hear anything but the heart beating under his palms, darker than ink, and the certainty that it still wasn't enough, that the thing in his veins was hungry and *would be* —

“Over here!”

Flapping his arm up with a groan of pain, Dazai slammed his hand on Chuuya's mouth.

Hurried steps surrounded the ground near the well — heavy and metallic and unmistakable. Their rifles and hidden guns made no sound; the smell of their suits widened Chuuya's eyes.

“It's just a phone, sir,” a woman reported. She muttered something into an electronic radio — the *exact* kind, he knew, that the Yokohama PD used. “This is a famous spot for open night parties. Some kid must have dropped it.”

“Maybe,” a man replied. He didn't speak like a police officer — too attentive in his syllables. The hard line of Dazai's shoulders said enough. Still, he tapped one of the fingers on his mouth — *Division*. ““You guys ever had a specific brand of troubles around here?”

“The bar was well controlled,” the woman replied. “But everybody knew there was a shady business behind it. I'm not surprised it ended up like this,” A pause. “I'm not sure why the *Division* is getting involved, though.”

The man paused. “We have our reasons.”

“Let go of me,” Dazai whispered.

It took him a minute to hear it — Chuuya had clenched his eyes shut in an effort to focus on the faraway sound of the voices, dimming the fire lines of ache pulsing through his muscles. “No.”

“They're gonna *look*,” the boy hissed, as he attempted to remove himself from his grasp. Chuuya didn't let go — tore his hand away from his own side with a gasp, and slammed both hands on the wound on Dazai's chest. “*Listen to me*. If they start shooting, you can stop them.”

“They want me alive,” he said, undeterred, the edges of his eyes burning with effort, his jaw aching, “The fuckers won't shoot.”

“Chuuya, don't be childish —“

“Fuck you.”

“— any nearby hiding places?” the *Division* agent was wandering. “We have suspicions on the identity of the culprit — if it is who we believe, he couldn't have left so easily. He would have needed time to... recover.”

A sharp lighting streak exploded on some indistinct point of his arm; Chuuya only managed to connect the shape of that pain with teeth when he looked down, where Dazai had resolved to the last solution possible to get him off of himself.



“Fuck you,” Chuuya hissed, as low as his heaving chest could manage, digging the heel of his palm deeper into the wound — unsure of who was trying to hurt who more, unsure of why he could see Albatross’ blood-stained braid in the corner — could hear those words that words *were not*, because Arahabaki wasn’t anything Chuuya wasn’t — and there was nothing Chuuya hadn’t let claw marks on, *nothing* he — “Fuck *you*, fuck you, I’m not fucking letting go, *you absolute piece of* —“

“Sir!” A voice called. “Over here!”

The franticness had a petty, desperate note to it — kicking limbs wasting blood with each hit; mouth suffocating gasps on the skin of their own cheeks. It took Chuuya more than a moment to figure out he recognized that one voice; it took Dazai a mere second to widen his eye, lips shaping around the word: *no*.

Before either of them could breathe, Officer Matsuda’s head peeked from the edge of the well, setting horrified eyes on their bloodied bundle.

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Existence restarted with his nails digging in the creases of Matsuda’s uniform, feet slipping on the blood he had left on the concrete.

“*No Hospital*,” he managed to gape — and it surprised him, given how tightly his teeth were clenched, fighting against the swarm of flies inside his skull. “No — *No Hospital*, listen to me, we can’t —“

For some reason, Matsuda was shaking from head to foot. Chuuya couldn’t quite get a look at his face, through the blurriness of his own eyes — but the hands he put around his arms to hold him up were harder than ice.

“We can talk about it later,” he promised. A distant shrill reached Chuuya’s ears — sirens. He turned around frantically, searching for a familiar bundle of black the only two officers the man had allowed to remain had dragged off his hands — he had a vague memory of punching them; a *vaguer* memory of tearing his nails apart in an effort to keep his hands on Dazai’s chest. “You need help.”

“I’m fine,” Chuuya replied, sluggish.

“You’re not,”

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “We were just — I’m,” He needed to go back to Dazai. Nobody else would help. Dazai wouldn’t, but nobody would help *him*, either, so it was better to sit and wait together, at the very least — debate on the taste of miso soup, and figure out a way to stitch him up, because that was what *Dazai* did to *him*, and Chuuya didn’t have enough hands to worry about more debts or graves. *Boss would kill him if he lost sight of* — “Are you listening to me? *No hospitals*. The Mackerel is — No —“

Something sharp dug a hole in his nape.

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When he woke up, he was in the Hospital.

The circular *beep!* of the heart monitor was a scalpel in the middle of his forehead — it blinded him more vividly than even the snow white ceiling of the room. Casts and bandages and stitches; his left arm was numb — all the pressure pooling on the hole of the morphine IV, forcing calmness up his throat.

The plastic seat next to the bed creaked, only a bit — Chuuya *knew*, all the same.

His jaw was aching too insistently for him to clench it. His voice came out in a too-weak snap: “I *told you* not to bring us to the Hospital.”

The seat creaked a bit more. “And what,” Matsuda said, utterly toneless. “Leave you to bleed out in the grass instead?”

*Oh*, Chuuya thought, wincing — and then wincing again, when his entire back seemed to screech along to the motion. *He’s pissed*.

“This wasn’t your business,” he said.

“*You’re* my business, Chuuya —“

He barked out a laugh — did nothing more than stare him down when the man snapped his head to him, as the sound turned into a coughing fit. Chuuya sat up. “I’m really fucking not.”

“You’re a sixteen years old who’s getting torn apart weekly, according to the doctors,” the man replied, infervorated. He had eyebags wider than the baldness on his head; the click pen in his pocket was the same as his blurred memories from the well recalled — it had either not

been a day, or the man hadn't been out of the Hospital. Chuuya knew he put a new one in his pocket everyday. "I'm gonna fucking make it my business, kid."

*Shit*, Chuuya thought. And then, just right behind that, *Boss will skin us alive*.

"The doctors are wrong," he concluded, as he tore the IV out of his arm. He needed to thread this carefully — needed to be more serious than he would have been with Murase, because only one of them had enjoyed sarcasm from the bottom of the barrel. "We had an — unpredicted accident. It was bad. We needed to hide somewhere. That's all. Extenuating circumstances, not habit. Thank you for getting us out of there."

Matsuda stared at him.

Chuuya held his gaze until he had nothing to lose. Then, quietly, he began climbing out of bed.

Routine was the same no matter the room — he stuck an invisible layer of *Tainted* to his feet, making sure he wouldn't stumble; looked around for his destroyed clothes, thanking the forethought not to bring Pianoman's coat; thought about nothing but the convincing words he would type into the reports.

Trying to figure out *what*, exactly, the doctors had done was pointless — he felt both more kept together and torn apart than he had in a while; littered in eerily uncomfortable stitches that didn't bear the familiar touch of Dazai's hands? and pumped with heavy morphine that didn't taste like the alcohol they had stored in their safehouses.

Abruptly — too petrified to check if his arms were onyx; teeth clenched too tight to recall just how many scars it was better if *normal* doctors didn't know and shouldn't know and *could they?* — he realized the pressure on his chest was some sort of panic.

*Fuck that*, he considered, coldly.

The seat only creaked again while he was in the process of buckling his choker on.

A hint of helplessness crawled in, turning the Officer's voice too quiet: "Chuuya."

"You don't know anything," Chuuya said, a tad too quick. He dragged his eyes down the low curve of his shoulders; the crinkles of his uniform. *Had he slept there?*, he wondered, and then, *why would he?* And then, *would they tell him if they figured it out?*, and, *is there anything to figure out?* "I know what this looks like. I know what you're used to seeing. You've got it all wrong. I'm —" He cursed. "I'm learning to deal with a *situation*. This is the only way."

"And this situation requires you not to be taken to the Hospital?" Matsuda echoed, disbelief in every syllable. "You were nearly delirious. Your friend lost so much blood the paramedics had to operate him on the ambulance —"

His skull cracked.

Chuuya was nose to nose with him quicker than he could realize. “Dazai,” he said. His fingers had been trembling since he had woken up — for a single, blessed moment, they couldn’t recall why they felt the need to *press*. “Dazai, *where* is —“

“I just checked him out,” a new voice said, sweeter than a breeze. “Forgive the priority. I heard he was troubling the nurses with his usual proposals.”

Chuuya deflated in one breath, eyes filling themselves up to the brim with Kouyou Ozaki’s marble smile and petal-tinged kimono.

“Ane-san,” he breathed out, hurrying to her side. “Is the bastard okay?”

“Awake and whining,” she promised — her eyes watched him get closer with bone deep focus. “Lamenting the lost opportunity to *gain ultimate freedom* — his words. I assume he’s never felt better.”

Her fingers were pillow-soft ice around his cheeks; she held his head still as she studied every inch of his face, thumbs sweeping absently at the torn seams of his mouth. Chuuya couldn’t read a thing in the sunrise-shade of her irises — she was the calligraphy strokes on the walls of her villa, beautiful and immortalized. Unneeding motif.

Slowly, she curved her lips.

“There you are,” she said. Calling it *relief* would have been naive; *satisfaction*, perhaps. The sigh of a jewel recovered through in the waves. “We should go home.”

“Yes,” Chuuya nodded — didn’t stop, and couldn’t quite *stop*, and couldn’t stop thinking about the moment the officers had managed to tear his nails out of Dazai’s chest. “Yes, this shitshow has been — Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. All that matters is that you boys are alright,” Kouyou let her fingers fall. Then, her smile just as pleasant as an inhale: “A good number of things to be grateful for.”

He hesitated; straightened.

Behind them, Matsuda cleared his throat.

Finally, deadly purposeful, the woman let her gaze graze him too. Her smile didn’t change a bit — though one would have had to be blind to ignore the distinct unfriendliness framing it.

“How nice,” Kouyou started. There was no order; Chuuya knew to move himself behind her, all the same. Unhesitantly, she offered her hand. “You must be that officer my Chuuya has told me much about,” She said *officer* the way one might have called out a fallen tree branch, blocking the one way in. “Kouyou Ozaki. I apologize for any trouble this situation might have caused you and your colleagues. I will handle it, from now on.”

Matsuda wasn’t stupid. His bow was only enraged at the seams, when he offered it — he kissed her pale hand with a venom only years of watching him stare down at his red-thread

maps let Chuuya recognize. “With all due respect, Miss — it was no trouble. Someone needed to get the boys out of that situation.”

*Since you didn't*, he didn't add — Chuuya heard it so loud he barely resisted glaring.

“Rather,” the woman offered, untouched. “How comforting to know our city can count on people like you.”

“Rather,” he echoed, eyes unmoving.

“If I may, though,” she continued, one hand on Chuuya's shoulder, “Perhaps you should spend less funds on your criminal chase and *more* on throughout checks around your territory. One wonders how two boys managed to get trapped inside that old, abandoned well. Aren't there some regulations on these dangerous infrastructures?”

“There are, Miss,” Matsuda assured. With painstaking intention, his gaze moved to Chuuya. “There are quite a bit on child safety as well.”

Kouyou's smile widened. “How nice.”

The same helplessness as before wrinkled the man's eyes — Chuuya tried not to think of a man bleeding out on the concrete; wasting his last years on the irredeemable. “Chuuya,” he called, again, as a last resort.

He held his gaze. “Thank you for the help,” he offered. *Be grateful*, she had said. “I'll see you.”

The Executive didn't bow; didn't do much more than nod in the man's direction, and smile like a cat escaping over a too high wall. Chuuya felt the weight of her hand all the way to the car.

The parking lot was overpopulated — rows over rows of cars burning under the midday sun, surrounded by relatives and discharged patients in various states of damage. Kouyou did nothing but hum as she led him to the widest of the black vans, parked right by the entrance. The Hospital wasn't theirs, obviously — it was clear nor her nor the driver had any particular desire to spend more time there than necessary.

*A self-sufficient microsystem*, Doc had once described the Port Mafia as. *Why leave?*

It was hot enough to pant. Chuuya waited for the ache in his legs to fall to the background to offer: “I know what you're going to say.”

“Whatever you may mean,” Kouyou's head was tall and untouched. “I have nothing to say. I'm sure Boss will take care of it for me.”

He took the hit in silence.

They reached the car, at last — a faceless driver bowed his head the moment they entered his vision. He opened the car door to let Kouyou in the passenger seat; then, he moved to get the

back one for him. Fists clenched, Chuuya insisted: “Listen, I really tried to tell him to keep us out of the Hospital.”

The door opened.

“She knows,” Dazai let him know, huffing, from the further seat. The sight of him seemed to whip his skeleton straight; like fading ripples in the water, Chuuya recalled the sound of glass piercing his body. *Not yours to remember.* “Haven’t you heard? This sanctimonious syndicate is officially a *no-mistake* land. We should all kowtow under the blinding light of our Kouyou’s peerless inability to perform any result other than impeccable success.”

Offering them a blank gaze from the rear view mirror, the Executive merely hummed.

“Quite,” she agreed.

The van grumbled to life right as Chuuya slammed his door shut.

The silence choked him. No position was comfortable on his bandaged wounds — he ended up with his knees against the front seat, chin so low the edge of the belt risked slashing his throat. Arms crossed, he dared a glance to the side. Curled up on his own seat — newly coated back to the car door, and the uncomfortable redness of sunburn and ignored fever on his cheeks — Dazai was already staring back.

He curled an eyebrow.

*What?*, the boy mouthed. Then, numbly tapping his fingers on the middle seat between them. *I was trying to get to your room to escape. She came earlier than I predicted.*

*Didn’t you say sleeping drugs don’t work on you?*

*Didn’t you say you could handle shorter recovery times?* Dazai poked his tongue out.

Unsurprisingly, he didn’t particularly look like someone who had been almost skewered by a boy with an overpowered Singularity in his bones — hard to, when Dazai hardly ever *didn’t* look on the brink of death. The bandages around his head were clean, now; the ones around his arms had been wrapped in that one specific formation Chuuya recognized as his own handywork. He wondered how he had bribed the nurses to let him do it.

The entire lower side of his face was covered in bruises; his shirt and tie were too well done to catch a glimpse of the artery Chuuya had held in his hands. A new stitched scar matted his forehead — it disappeared under his bandages.

Chuuya felt his fingers spasm.

Wordlessly, he reached forward — poking a crease that wasn’t there, between his eyebrows.

Just as wordless, Dazai stretched one of his legs forward, settling his ankle where the closest of Chuuya’s knees bent against the passenger seat — brushing a spot of naked skin, the pants ripped from *Corruption*. It was a spot too small to warrant anything but an added warmth to

the suffocating air of June. He recalled, a bit distantly, the rhythm his heart had drummed under his white knuckles.

Holding each other's gazes, they each came to their conclusions.

They set their eyes elsewhere.

It seemed stupid to ask, but once the Ferris Wheel came into view, he still dared: "So, how did you find us?"

Eyes still on them in the rear view mirror, Kouyou didn't answer until she was done murmuring indistinguishable orders into her cellphone. Chuuya felt the curve of his own in his pocket — he fished it out, studying the luckily *few* charms ripped off by the fight. The screen had been cracked even further; he patted it, sighing.

"We do have eyes everywhere, little god," the Executive said, at last, pleasant enough. "Even more now that you boys' little competition is in place. Everybody is interested enough — or betting enough — to offer their eyes to the cause. Not all of them belong to our Demon Prodigy."

"No," Dazai agreed, distractedly. Chuuya didn't know where he had grabbed the console from — he could only assume he had stashed one in every Mafia vehicle. "Only the best ones."

A spark of irritation curled her eyebrows. "You *are* aware, then."

"Obviously. Chibi, wait for you turn —"

Undeterred, Kouyou insisted: "You may want to be more careful with them, then?"

Dazai's gasp was obnoxious. "Ane-san, were you *worried* about me?" Despite the clear mocking, nothing in his gaze seemed particularly friendly. His hands still tried to rip the stolen console off Chuuya's hand — he didn't let go of Kouyou's scrutiny, though. "You mustn't. Odasaku might get jealous if somebody else cared about my Hospital stays."

"You two aren't *supposed* to have Hospital stays," Kouyou reminded him.

"It was out of our control," Chuuya broke in, eyes on the loading screen of the console. "We've been dealing with training the entire month — we've been taking care of it ourselves. Matsuda was —" He set his jaw. "He was unplanned. But he won't talk. The old man had a soft spot for idiots. He was worried; that's all."

She didn't seem convinced. "No police officers should be *that* deep in our affairs," she said, more to herself than to them. "What were you two even doing in the *Shadow Blades*' territory? Mori ordered you two to wait until September to begin planning interventions against the *Five Moons*."

Neither of them answered.

Her pause was heavy. "Boys."

“We will discuss this with Mori,” Dazai cut in, clearly dreading his own words. “We respond to him before we do to you, Executive. You can take care of whatever calligraphy lessons he’ll order you to force on us.”

Chuuya groaned. Wisely enough, Kouyou didn’t add another word — perhaps she wouldn’t dare question Boss’ authority in front of his petty, unofficial right hand man; perhaps she wasn’t sure about the optimal procedure either. Dazai kept his attention on the console; he whined and whined and lamented his lost opportunity at a suicide, and the refusals to a *double* suicide the nurses had spat to his face.

The very picture of carelessness; he didn’t drop the act once — not even when the stone stairs of the Headquarters appeared in front of them.

Energy gathered under Chuuya’s nails. He waited and waited and *waited* — came up with words and scrapped them, and stared at the new scars climbing up his naked hands. He was too lazy to memorize them all; he felt like doing it was too important to miss. He wanted his gloves.

“Dazai,” Madame Tanaki called, eventually, from her spotless desk. A nervous twinkle stained her eyes; she smiled, nonetheless. “Boss wants to talk to you.”

Chuuya frowned. Immediately, the boy dragged himself up the couches at the entrance, sighing deep and long — walking bored strided to the elevator, like he couldn’t be bothered.

“Dull old man,” he grunted, waving his hand in that dramatic way that allowed him to hide a sickly cough behind it. “Why doesn’t he go bother Elise and her new dresses, instead?”

“Hush, now,” the woman replied, patting his head as he passed. “Don’t be mean.”

“Tanaki,” Chuuya called. “Not me?”

Her blink was confused. “No,” she offered — checking the paper in her hands. “No, dear; he said to compliment you on your hard work. He only wants to talk to Dazai.”

He stared. Every new bruise in his body seemed to pulse along to his uncertainty — pointing to all the reasons why Mori *should* have wanted to watch him kneel. “But —“

The glass doors of the elevator opened with a *ding!*, dragging Dazai’s exasperated twirls inside. Coy, the boy offered him a wave, only minimally stumbling on weak feet. “Go, go home!” he called, as the doors closed. “Not all of us are important enough for *face-to-face* reports. What’s that lovely French expression? *C’est la vie*.”

Chuuya spluttered. “*You — !*“

The doors closed in his face. Behind them, only for a blink — he could have sworn he had seen Dazai’s hands reach for his pockets, where he stored the last of his headache pills.



Hirotsu and Kajii found him under Tanaki's desk, throwing leftover food to the *Spider Eyes* episode playing on her laptop. "Here," the younger man said — hopping on the counter to teasingly dangle the hems of his scarf over the secretary's face. "Look at what the revolutionary cat brought to the door."

The flier was muddy and crumpled up, like a quickly hidden dare that might have said more than it meant to in the wrong hands. The style was unmistakable — the mockingly elegant strikes of most graffiti in the underground of Yokohama.

"Is that the bastard?" Chuuya questioned, squinting at the doodled figure in a tie. Dot-filled lines probably represented his bandages — he was hanging from a rope made of severed forearms, the hands sharpened into bloodied nails. Circling the figure like a spiral, the words, *LET HIM KILL HIMSELF BEFORE HE KILLS US TOO*, were scribbled again and again.

"Dear," Tanaki scoffed, with distaste, as she leaned over his shoulder to study the flier. "These buffoons truly have nothing better to do."

"Perhaps you should teach them a lesson," Kajii encouraged, batting his eyelashes behind the goggles. "I *yearn* to see you fight."

"I'm subtler than that, sweetheart," she replied. "There's a reason I have access to all of your addresses."

The scientist pretended to swoon.

He traced the *X*s drawn where the Dazai's eyes should have been, feeling his eyebrows twitch. It wasn't the cruelest joke at Dazai's expense he had heard since joining — but it gave him a sort of limp discontentment. *Possibly*, he told himself, a bit uncomfortable, *rage at not having come up with it first*.

"Well," he concluded, crumpling it up, "At least they know who the better option is."

"You do have unbridled support from the lower ranks," Hirotsu confirmed, blankly, around a mouthful of cigarette. He had dragged him out for drinks, two nights before — had sat through Chuuya's mistrust with relaxed shoulders. "Everyone who's ever fought with you is ready to show their appreciation. The higher ranks are with Dazai, though."

"They want Boss' favor," Kajii huffed. Chuuya dragged one gloved finger down the top of his new shoes, tasting the leather — thought of Dazai disappearing in the elevator. "It's clear they think this is how they'll get it."

“Boss doesn’t play favorites,” Tanaki said, with a nasty glance in the man’s direction. Kajii lowered his eyes immediately, chastised. “If he’s offered both Dazai and Chuuya the possibility to get to the seat, it means they both have the same chances,” A pause. “And the same critics.”

Chuuya frowned. “What do you mean?”

She bit her lower lip, exchanging a *glance* of sorts with Hirotsu. When she reached into one of the drawers of the desk, the cell phone she handed him was the same gentle pink as her nails.

“They’re already cleaning them off,” the woman informed him, zooming on the picture she was showing him — a shot of the stone walls of *Building Five*. “Ryuro here tells me somebody put them on *Building Three* too, though.”

The graffiti lacked the rough mastery that only starving hands knew how to channel — they were a bit too straight, and too simplistic. Still, they were unmistakable — black and red *kanjis* that spoke of annihilation and betrayal; sheep horns and the word *Rengoku* and *Flags* and the question *how many more of us will he kill?*

Chuuya studied the swirling lines and felt nothing at all.

“It’s not even an election, anyway,” he said, eventually. He could feel all three pairs of eyes on him, as cautious as feet on webbed glass — he knew, somewhere deep, that anger was not the right reaction for the circumstance. “They can talk shit as much as they want. The Sheep don’t even exist anymore —” He gave the cell phone back right as the secretary one started ringing, startling Tanaki badly enough to make her jump. “If they want to believe the bastard wouldn’t just use the seat to sleep in it, they can. I’m still winning this.”

The Commander’s eyes studied him, over one layer of smoke. He was a strangely receptive man — he saw new scars like they might bleed out in front of him.

Over the buzz of Tanaki’s customer voice, Chuuya met his gaze over the monocle, and curled an eyebrow, challenging.

The man huffed.

“Hey, man, that’s the spirit — *hey*,” Kajii tapped his hat, crouching down in front of him. “I want *privileges* when you get there, alright? They’ll pay you, like, a *disgusting* ton of money, right? Get the two of us to Brazil for a week and I’ll forgive you for destroying my *Lemon Pistol Prototype*. ”

“It exploded in my hands,” he reminded him, fixing his hat in place. Tanaki, still smiling at no one on the phone, directed him as *shh!* face. “It almost tore my face off, too. You don’t get any recompense for attempted murder.”

Another overheated laugh. “Isn’t that our whole job?”

Another hiss escaped Tanaki's lips. Kajii blushed. "Yes. Sorry. I'm used to French people, you know? How rare it was to find a distinguished Frenchman speaking Japanese. Although, I do have this story about —"

"If we're talking gifts," Astonishingly, Hirotsu spoke up, "I would very much enjoy a trip to Italy."

"Italy?" Chuuya blinked at him.

"Miranda surely misses her home, by now."

"What did I do to *you*?" he asked, before he could think about it twice.

A beat of silence. Merciless, an invisible web of cracks appeared on the man's monocle, divinely inspired by the bone chilling glance he directed his way. "Chuuya."

"As if you didn't deserve it," he grunted.

"Should we start from the most recent ones?" The sun had certainly loosened his tongue; usually, the commander preferred to hide any and all frustration he felt regarding the two of them. *Scared of them*, he thought. *Mindful* of how easily they dealt with people they didn't like. Aware that there was trust, there, somewhere — he just had to grab it by the throat. "Surely you won't ask me to assume Dazai managed to tape all those unflattering pictures of me on the ceiling of my office *by himself*?"

Chuuya's mouth opened, then closed.

"I heard about that!" Kajii snorted, crossing his arms over Chuuya's knees. "I know this dude from your squad, right, because I'm *full* of friends — and he was telling me you sleep in a purple Englishman gown? But the *beret*, old man —"

Wordlessly, Hirotsu looked at him.

"— Is extremely tasteful," he concluded. Fanning himself with one hand, he was quick to mumble: "Why, it sure is hot today. Melting the skin off my bones and all! Making me say stuff I *obviously* don't mean —"

"Not to mention the *hyper-solid* glue all over the sets of my Camaro," the man continued. "And then the wild raccoon under my desk, the needles on my office seat, the glassless monocle on the day of that important meeting in Tokyo —"

"I keep losing the last round of *Drive Fast*," he muttered, crossing his arms. "But he *cheated*, like, one hundred percent, so I don't even get why that should be counted as *my* fault —"

"Aren't you and the Demon spending a lot of time together, lately?" Kajii questioned. "Didn't you hate the guy?"

"Yes, I do. *No we aren't*," Chuuya replied. Then: "I need him to train — a thing. There's only so many times I can push him into the river."

“You pushed him into the river *again*?”

“Ah, yes, your secret training ,” Kajii cut off Hirotsu’s exasperation with wiggling eyebrows. “I know it’s all secluded information and everything, but — *how* does he help you, exactly?”

“Perhaps the nullification Ability has something to do with it, lemon-fucker?”

“I have *never* put anything even vaguely lemon shaped near my intimate parts.”

“I believe that tons.”

“Scandalous,” the scientist huffed. “*Still*. You’re telling me the guy just — slaps you in the face and leaves you to bleed out in the dirt? I’ve *heard* the stories.”

“Kajii,” Hirotsu admonished.

Pointless.

Decay tickled. Chuuya knew that, because even the brush of fabric from his shirt made the onyx skin of his forearms tingle — encouraged by remembrance and by the summer wind, fading and stubborn all the same.

“I don’t remember much,” he grunted. Glass piercing flesh. Pulsing arteries under his palm. The temptation of being blamed, again and again. “He stays there. Probably draws dicks on my face. Drives me home, as well as his shitty ass can direct a steering wheel. I don’t — remember much.”

Tentatively, Kajii dared: “Really?”

*Really?*

Hands and blood. Slaps on his cheeks to keep him awake, gentler fingers lingering to check his temperature. Rough nastiness, because there was a job to do and Dazai did it with little formalities — because Chuuya had bled all over him more than he had thanked him for letting him. They didn’t work like that. Hands and blood and whispers. *You’ll die a clean death, one day, Slug.*

Like a curse coming true, a head of too long hair and one big eye appeared over the edge of the desk, bending to meet Chuuya upside down. “You traitorous simpleton better have not made Tanaki continue *Spider Eyes* without me.”

Kajii’s startlement rang with a yelp, as he almost fell onto Hirotsu’s unbothered frame; Chuuya turned, shoulders tense.

“Well?” he questioned.

For a single beat — the silence so tangible, even Tanaki only directed wide eyes their way, the phone still held by her ear — it seemed as if Dazai would answer. Then, boredom dripped down his cheeks, crawling over eye bags and a tad too visible cheekbones; he shrugged. “Qualified.”

His fingers twitched. “It’s about *me*. ”

“It’s about anything but that,” the boy let him know, clearly annoyed. *Don’t act as if you haven’t realized it yet.* “And clearly, Mori knows who can give him a better picture.”

He climbed to his feet so fast that the world turned red. “What the fuck is *that* supposed to —“

A second head peered over the desk.

“Stop screaming,” Q ordered, looking back and forth between the two of them. “It’s boring.”

At that, even Hirotsu’s blankness vanished.

Dazai was holding their hand. It was unclear just how pleased he was by the fact; but Q, with round cheeks and unsettlingly shaped eyes, was looking at him like they would have rather tore him apart with their milk teeth. At some point, over their unofficial imprisonment, someone had gotten rid of the overgrown shirt that was their sole outfit — now, a blue primary school uniform sat tight around their small limbs, completed by a little hat over bicolored hair.

“Where are your manners, Q?” Dazai tutted, shaking them by their joint hands. “You’re in the presence of a Commander, a mad scientist, the most important woman in our syndicate, and —“ He glanced in Chuuya’s direction; then, down at Tanaki’s cellphone, abandoned with the graffiti picture still on. “Well. A possible traitor. Is that how the joke starts?”

Chuuya clenched one fist around his dress shirt, pulling him over the desk. “Listen here —“

“Hello,” Q said, shortly. Their eye contact was utterly serious; unshakable. “Chuuya *-niisan*. That hurts. And I can’t kill you for it. Stop.”

A breath of silence passed by. Kajii leaned a bit forward, as curious as he was horrified — in a pointless whisper, he asked Chuuya: “Is this the psycho brat you mentioned?”

Tanaki was hastily hurrying to end her call, panicked eyes going back and forth between Dazai and Chuuya’s stare down and Hirotsu’s observing eyes. He squinted, meeting Q’s vacant face. He followed the line of their hand, still clenched on Dazai’s own — still pulled by Chuuya’s own grasp on him.

Under Q’s sleeve, blood-soaked bandages dragged his thoughts to a halt.

Dazai was saying something, underneath — he was taunting him about his weak grasp, maybe; answering Hirotsu’s questions on their mission for that night as petulantly as possible. Chuuya couldn’t take his eyes off the bandages — couldn’t shake off Q’s gaze, euphoric at the edges of boredom.

“Don’t worry,” they said, low, giving him all of their attention. It was devastating, somehow — the weight of every building he had ever allowed to fall in Suribachi City. “I asked for it.”

He frowned.

“ — wants to talk to you.”

Chuuya blinked.

Dazai hadn't removed his shirt from his grasp; he seemed fine enough with their uncomfortable position. When he realized he had his attention, he insisted: “Something about your Amazing Six, I believe. Pass by his office, one of these days,” He was still holding Q's hand. Like it was supposed to explain it, he spelled out: “Better not to make Boss come up with *his own* solutions, yes?”

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His best efforts to live his mornings like Dazai Osamu didn't exist were faint weapons. The boy was *everywhere* .

Sometimes he disappeared for days at the time — presumably to offer his widest eyes and sincerest grin to Oda Sakunosuke — but when he existed, he existed to haunt him. Among the main secret missions against the *Five Moons*, and their quest to test how far Chuuya's flesh could stretch — *all for the sake of competition*, he would reinstate, whenever murmurs in the halls grew too loud — Mori found some sort of delight in laying unimportant matters in their hands.

“All doctors are sadists,” was Dazai's only comment on the matter — eerily serious.

Chuuya flicked his cheek, removing a fallen eyelash. The thing in his veins seemed to beg for a lingering touch; for sharper nails. “Shut up.”

They ran around on the longest day of the summer, looking for a local gang that had been busying itself with graffiting the Headquarters, — *how do you know so much about graffiti*, Dazai asked him, with a tone that said he already knew, and Chuuya cleared his throat in the face of one particularly old *Fuck The Port Mafia Fuckers*, signed by a skull sheep — and they threatened this or that shop who'd been too late with protection payments, watching their owners' disbelief at the teens the syndicate had chosen to send their way morph into terror — *look at this, you made him bleed on my shoes*.

When it got warm in that *insufferable* way only the clothes they had no choice but to wear made possible, they would stumble to *The Alley*, and fight for the jet of water from the broken pipe. Then — because they were either too efficient or not enough — they would use the funds for the *Five Moons* missions at the Arcade.

Chuuya never thought about it too long.

About any of it, truly — their intertwined shadows on the concrete; the betting murmurs in the hallways; the almost daily occurrence of having the boy break into Albatross' apartment, ready for Chuuya's training lessons that *weren't*.

*The one thing Arahabaki couldn't touch.*

It was the quietest hour one could find at the Headquarters — right after lunch, when the sun was warmest; *The Empty Hour*, Tanaki called it — when he stood under the jet of the communal showers of *Building Three*, and realized he had spent almost all of June studying the boy's profile.

"It was childish, what you did," Dazai said, squirting soap in his hands like he just wanted to waste it. His bandages were soaked. Chuuya could never bring himself to say anything about it. "And mean. And badly forethought. And I *will* put hair dye in your shampoo for it."

"No," Chuuya replied, distractedly, staring at a hair stuck to the tiled wall. "You don't do old tricks twice," He reached back to clean the space between his shoulders; a lightning strike of pain reached his entire body, constant like a clock. "You need to cut your hair."

"You need to stop projecting. I can't believe you seriously left me to be tortured. They didn't even plan to kill me — I couldn't even hang onto that hope!"

"As if the *Hounds* did more than tickle you," he replied, flippant. "Should have thought about it before you locked me in that room with the bomb, assface."

Dazai muttered.

The greyish tiles shone weakly, illuminated by the little light managing to sneak in through panels of opaque windows. No other lights had been built on the ceiling; it drowned the room in a sluggish haze, making his bones feel heavier than they were.

Sometimes, when the stable melody of water became too relaxing on his tired eyes, he focused on the faucets and the mirrors on the other side of the room, pristine and shining. He remembered countless missions he'd returned from — stumbling inside and leaning crimson hands on that white ceramic, meeting a reflection that wasn't *him*, but wasn't anyone else. It always woke him up.

Water was splashed into his eyes.

"I'm *talking*," Dazai said, piqued. "Dogs are supposed to listen to their masters."

With time — and enough occasions not to even be startled by the paleness of his skin, or his strangely placed moles — Chuuya had figured out that the boy wasn't actually covered in bandages from head to foot. They circled non visible parts of his body seemingly at random — one around his waist; two around the high spot of his thighs.

They didn't look *mean* — but Chuuya wouldn't have known how to explain what that meant.

“My eyes are up here,” The boy snapped his fingers. The tips of his ears were red. He never did seem very glad when Chuuya wandered around naked, all shame lost. “Don’t objectify me.”

“Was trying to find scales,” Chuuya replied, automatically. Then: “Where the fuck is you tattoo, anyway?”

Crossing his arms to his chest, Dazai’s chin touched the stars. “In an *insurmountably* smart location, thank you very much.”

“Really.”

“Really! Perfectly hidden when necessary, perfectly visible when even more so. Truly one of my least recognized successes.”

He squinted. “You didn’t tattoo it on your ass. I would have seen it.”

“No, but I’m sort of regretting it, now.”

An idea breached through. “Is it under that toilet paper you cover yourself with?”

“Oh,” Shrugging off water, he reached up with two fingers, turning his neck to the side. The loop of bandages on his throat stayed unmoved; nonetheless, when he tapped his digits at the edge of the white road on his nape, pushing his soaked hair up with the other hand — Chuuya saw it. “*Bingo.*”

He curled an eyebrow. “That’s dramatic.”

“Is it?” Dazai played dumb — the Port Mafia’s flowers, a weight on his nape.

*Bow, when necessary*, Kouyou had told him, on that first day of his, as she pushed and pulled his skin to readjust him — to make him something that would keep his mouth shut long enough to live to see twenty. He could have told her it was stupid; so he had. *Or you will die because of it.*

“You’re suicidal,” Chuuya spoke, before he could taste his words again. “But you wouldn’t let him kill you.”

His smile was a complicated thing. Too well rehearsed to be real; too *correct* on his face to be a play pretend. Chuuya had been eight, torturing the faces of the first men he had killed, because he didn’t know bread but he *did* know corpses — sinking two little fingers inside their mouths and *dragging*, making them smile.

The water under their feet turned redder with every breath he took. He watched it float to the drain; some stranger’s living source to fill up the Headquarters’ sewers. *There’s more blood in there than there is shit*, Tsuchiya had once said. He wondered if Dazai only ever showered there; if the words *shipping container* would have closed off that minimal window of sincerity he had been scratching his nails against for all of June.

“When’s the last time you showered?” Chuuya asked, squeezing shampoo in his hands.



Dazai shook his head like a dog, offering a third jet of water. “When’s the last time you ate a full meal?”

It screeched across his ribcage; nails on chalk, a blanket on overheated limbs — something he hadn’t asked for and didn’t know how to change. Selfish as it was, Chuuya had learned all his languages — he hadn’t wanted to be learned in return. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“Why is there a bag filled with Mori’s poison collection under Albatross’ bed?”

*My bed*, he thought about spitting. The house was a ghost he never allowed to linger; he walked through its floors with his head raised, lest the man got a laugh about it in the afterlife. He sat on the floor, sometimes, and he just stared at the ceiling. *My bed. My bed. He can’t sleep anymore.*

Chuuya increased the intensity of the shower, drowning his voice out, blurring him from the other side of the waterfall. His mocking scoff was anything but ignorable. The anger pooling in his chest was half self-blame — *haven’t you learned a thing?*

*Stalemate*, he thought. Perhaps it was just delirium. Day, evening, and night, barking along to his taunts and studying the scars Chuuya had given him and Mori hadn’t let him erase — perhaps one ought to die alone, sometimes.

They washed in silence.

Dazai snatched his shampoo.

He reached for it. The boy moved his arm out of his reach. Squinting, he tried again — only to be left jaw-slacked when Dazai put his arm up, dangling the bottle too high for his fingers.

Through the curtain — freezing on Chuuya’s side, burning on Dazai’s own — they stared at each other. Distant, on the other side of opaque windows, the sounds of traffic filled the azure sky.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he asked, a bit too honestly, detesting the string of exhaustion to leave his mouth — and then, he slammed his leg on the back of the boy’s knees.

He dropped with a help.

A slippery surface and two overfrustrated teens didn’t make for a good combination; hair was pulled and feet went skiing down the tiles, bruising knees and thumping bones against the shower heads, landing on the floor and struggling to get up again.

“*No, no, no, don’t, hey!*” the boy cried out, stuck in a headlock in Chuuya’s least scarred arm, as he dragged him under the sprinkler, fighting against the surprisingly resilient grip of his feet on the floor. “I don’t want to smell like a dog! I don’t want to smell like a dog, *I don’t want to*, let go of me, *let* —“

“That’s what you fucking get,” Chuuya breathed out, harshly, rubbing his shampoo-filled hand on his knotted locks. “I’m fucking tired of you smelling like shit! *Start fucking showering!*”

“It’s not my fault if I — *ouch, ouch* — *Hey!*”

The world spun and spun, natural light like cement blanket on his pained eyelids. The month had left so many bruises Chuuya had reached some sort of cathartic lack of pain — when he fell, one knee sinking in Dazai’s thigh and the other almost smashing a tile, amidst the boy’s whine and his own curse, he didn’t feel anything but the breathless slow down of their franticness.

The shower heads still rained. If he listened carefully, the sound of steps echoed on the other side of the doors.

“Jerk,” Dazai heaved.

“Bitch.”

The *tip-tap* of closing water twirled around his possible answers. He put his palms on the boy’s ears, shivering at the gentleness of it — made sure to be a little less merciful when he muttered under his breath, reaching for one of the hairdryers hanging on the wall — turning it on.

*Eye for an eye*, he reminded himself. Dazai’s hand was on his thigh, tracing a scar. Chuuya didn’t even remember where all of his wounds were.

They were still like that, when the doors burst open. Hirotsu — edges of his pants and scarf soaked — seemed to take in their naked silhouettes and gain ten more years of life.

“Boys,” he sighed, eventually. “Come out. You flooded the hallway.”

Sunlight — unlike the way the moon pressed against Arahabaki’s wide open eyes — was for sharper consequences.

“This is so unfair,” Dazai whined, kneeled by one of Kouyou’s *Chashitsu*’s fine tables like a vulture. An astonishing number of completed papers dried under his elbows, dotted with *kanjis* that showed off his calligraphy. “I was supposed to help Odasaku bring a package to a *serial killer*.”

Chuuya huffed, blowing strands of hair off his clammy forehead. “Yeah, well,” he grunted. “The Kure twins were supposed to teach me how to sail a boat. And it’s *your* fucking fault we’re here, anyway.”

They had been abandoned in one of the glass cages — *green houses*, Kouyou would tut — surrounding the main building of the tea house. A touristic little treasure, surely; shaped like a birdhouse and decorated with tingling amulets — but Kouyou had *locked* them inside, and the recycled air of their tired breaths was a weight on Chuuya’s constantly recovering lungs.

His offended gasp was uncalled for. Curled up in a scaly, threatening ball, Kazuko laid her chin — or the closest thing she had to it — on the table, staring Chuuya down. “That’s *so* not true. How was I supposed to know the car we hotwired to the *Gentleman’s Bar* was one of Ane-san’s?”

“Hot wired and *blew up*, ” Chuuya noted.

“Still not my fault.”

“I’ve never even seen her drive it.”

Clearly spurred by the support, Dazai fired on: “That’s what I’m *saying*, there was no reason to get *that* mad —“

Gentle fingers knocked on the glass squares of the greenhouse. Kouyou’s eyes were remarkably similar to her demon’s ones, when they settled on them. Two fingers tapped her under-chin. She smiled — walked away, twirling her umbrella.

They exchanged a glance. For once, when they both sighed down at their papers, Chuuya knew they were thinking the same thing.

*Calligraphy is a means to discipline*, she would tell them, each time she managed to catch them doing something bad enough — and *personal* enough — to demand the rights to a punishment to Mori. And, *it is meant to quieten the mind and the muscles, to sharpen the gaze, and to fix your posture*. And, *Chuuya, darling, are you intending to mock hunchbacks?* And, *demon child, stop laughing, here are several texts more*.

“Why did you even bring the damn thing,” Chuuya questioned, nodding towards Kazuko — who was currently slithering over their table, ink and papers to be damned.

Given she had a tendency to settle over the least optimal parts of his body, he moved a bit to the side. Dazai huffed, somehow managing to grab her by the tail and the head — and allowed her to wrap around himself like a scarf.

“I told you,” he said, mildly exasperated; as he had each time the *pet* had sneaked under their legs in the meeting rooms, giving Ace the heart attack of a lifetime — or staring Chuuya down while he worked in his office, Dazai nowhere to be found. “She likes to follow me.”

“*She* is not a dog. She’s a snake.”

“Of course not. I already have a dog. And she’s a *boa constrictor*, thank you very much.”

Dazai was an uncomfortable sight under the sun. Too pale and too bruised. Chuuya hated looking at him — it scratched some part of his brain that couldn’t help the irritation. When their knuckles brushed, he could count every bluish vein down his hand; walk all the way to the border of the bandages.

Eventually, he questioned: “Chibi, why did the chicken cross the road?”

Unimpressed, he asked: “Why?”

“To get to your paper.”

“Hilarious.”

Clearly, Dazai thought so. He sipped idly at the tea the woman had been so magnanimous as to leave to them. “You might want to check with an actual doctor if your fingers’ motor functions are acceptable.”

“*What* doctor?” he mumbled. “We’re not allowed to see one.”

His tongue clicked. Kazuko tightened her grip around his torso. “Still. Poor Kouyou’s heart will fail when she sees that.”

“If it doesn’t fail when she sees your ugly mutt in the sunlight first —“

“At your big age, you still don’t know how to write the word *Courage* —“

Chuuya scoffed, almost tearing the paper with the tip of his stylus. “Says the dipshit who can’t read, anyway.”

A pause.

He had always had good reflexes. It was the only reason why he managed to catch the flash of surprise that lit up the other boy’s face.

“*Clever slug,*” Dazai chirped, tracing his still-wet brush strokes with a finger. The smile he wore was mocking — as fake as the simulation of wind from the dangling dreamcatchers. *He needed to cut his hair,* he echoed. “Is what I *would* say, if it couldn’t all be accounted to your obsession with me.”

“*My* obsession with *you*?” he spluttered. It only strangled his neck in fear for a moment — the idea of having been caught while he stared, counting lines of scars and wondering, *just how mad will he be when I kill him?* “If I could scratch the sight of you from my skull, I would.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Kazuko’s fangs gripped a fallen stylus; Chuuya *temporarily* wondered about corrupting her with a rat to make her do his work. “Doesn’t change the truth, though. What gave me away?”

“Apart from your stupid refusal to do reports?” Chuuya muttered. “Iceman was like that, too. You take too much time to read stuff, but talk shit in the meantime so nobody will notice — and the private documents in your office are all white-letters-on-black-pages. Iceman used those. Also, *that* —“ He nodded towards the brush he was holding. “He had something like that too.”

The hair tie had been stolen from Chuuya himself, even if he couldn’t quite remember when — Dazai had knotted one side to the tip of the brush, and wrapped it around his wrist.

“Taking the detective route?” the boy considered. It didn’t seem like the revelation was displeasing him — like an addict staring at a pill bottle closed wrong, Chuuya wondered how many more things about him he was *allowed* to find out, but not to be told directly. “I don’t think the good side would suit you. But be my guest.”

“Still,” he sighed, a moment later. He wore discomfort like he wore Mori’s coat. “It’s kind of embarrassing that you can’t even beat the guy who can’t read at *writing*, you know?”

Chuuya gulped his tea and burped in his face.

Dazai groaned, batting the air away with one hand. Even Kazuko seemed displeased, rolling off his body to threaten to nip Chuuya’s calves. “That’s absolutely *disgusting* —“

He did it again.

“Excuse you —“

“What, you think you can do better?”

“I don’t *want* to, thank you very much.”

“You know,” He dropped his brush, leaning forward. “I was the undefeated champion of burping competitions in the Sheep.”

The glance the boy sent his way had rarely been as revolted. “And that must have been the pinnacle of *pride*, in your little gang, am I right?”

Chuuya grinned. “It was a monthly event.”

“Of course it was.”

“Bet you can’t even do a *tiny eenie* burp.”

“Of *course* I can. I just don’t want to.”

“Prove it to me.”

“I don’t have to prove —“

“*Boo-oooh*. Coward.”

“*Coward?*”

“Coward little princess.”

“*Princess?*”

Kouyou came back, some lifetimes later, umbrella tracing patterns on the grass. She found them like that — paper and ink on the floor, coats and jackets removed, sipping tea as a means to an end, vocalizing burps with a solemnity that didn’t fit the situation.

Summer did to Dazai what the heaviest rain of the season did to puddles. It was imperceptible — and, consequently, a testament to the forced attention Chuuya had had no choice but to pay to him.

*Perhaps*, he liked to lie, *it was the bandages*. They had to be hell with that heat. Perhaps it was the endless quantity of dossiers Mori tended to drop in his hands in the morning, smiling proudly down at him, — something no wise person should want, but that Chuuya found himself envying.

Perhaps it was the perpetual sunburn on his crooked nose, giving him a younger touch and a sickly aura. Perhaps it was chasing Kazuko around the city, her eyes mischievous and impersonal. Perhaps it was the fact that Oda Sakunosuke was incredibly busy, and apart from tapping away on his phone and disappearing every Friday night, all he could do was lament. Perhaps it was summer, in its easiest shape.

Summer made Dazai worse.

*Worse* was a redundant term. Dazai was always *worse*; than *that person* or *that time*, than he could have been and that he might have wanted, than he truly was and than he needed.

Chuuya watched him slit men's throats slower and slower, as if savouring — as if meeting their eyes and extending their end would give him *something*. Chuuya watched him browse through the yellowish pages of that suicide guide of his, like a schoolboy who'd been reprimanded one time too many. Chuuya watched him stare longingly at every corpse they left on their way.

*(It was an uncautious move on his part — making someone whose skin spelled temporary a pillar of reassurance. Dead men could not save anyone. But summer made Dazai worse, and as things went these days, it dragged Chuuya down with him.)*

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Over the background noise of the television playing Lippman's first A-list blockbuster, *Bones*, Kouyou eventually asked: "Why do you only ever eat half, anyway?"

When Albatross had dragged Chuuya to the apartment under his own, he had decided the opportunity to renovate was a call too hypnotic to ignore — a mixture of, *I'm merely welcoming you with style*, and, *what do you think about matching furniture?*, that had ended up being mostly useless. As the Flags knew, if one wanted to find Albatross — with Ōmu on his shoulders and traces of blood under his shoes — *Chuuya's* was the place to check first.

It had made the man's apartment a dubious location — a beacon of wild stories spreading all over the syndicate. Some said he had a sauna — some, that he had built a room specifically

for his torturing needs. *As long as they don't think I'm boring enough to have a built-in office,* Albatross used to scoff.

*You're all wrong,* Chuuya could have told the admiring whispers. *He's a bird, and he lives in a cage.*

"I get full easily," he shrugged, eyes running down the lines of ink of Koda's latest report. Ōmu was gingerly picking at his leftovers on the vanity desk, feathers ruffled. Her hand pulling the fabric of his kimono over his shoulders, Kouyou looked at him with strange fascination. "'Want some?'"

"No, thank you," the woman replied. *Are you lying?*, Lippman asked, on the screen, eerily close to a chin-up woman in blue. "But you always seem ready to offer some."

He shrugged. "No point in wasting."

She met his eyes in the mirror, unblinded by the star shaped lights framing it. "Rather."

Untouched by her tuts to stay still, Chuuya spun on his stool, getting lost in descriptions of promising deals and piles of *yen*; his shadow broke the kaleidoscopic light mosaic on the floor, as the squeak of the metal sang along to Ōmu's words — *good morning* and *did you call* and *fuck*.

*Don't corrupt my angel,* Albatross used to say, crouched on the edge of his window next to the bird. Chuuya used to sit on the floor — he liked looking up; studying how the buildings made cell bars behind the man's frame. *My home is the sky and my home is the street,* he would tell him, *don't tell me you don't understand.*

*Liar,* Chuuya never said.

Albatross hung pictures in his home — he plastered Lippman's movies to the ceiling; he kept Ōmu there. He had brought Chuuya to the closest place to his door, when he had thought he needed something better.

And yet he never slept — wandered down into Chuuya's empty apartment at 3 A.M; refused to put a mirror in his bathroom. And yet some spots of the floor were a bit sunken in — like he had paced, and paced, and *paced*.

Chuuya knew he had. He remembered the sound like a broken record. He had walked over his invisible footprints, like he might fill up the void.

*Albatross needs something to come back to,* Pianoman — who always saw, and never told — had explained, once. *Be it people, be it home. I think that's why he likes you.*

"*Do you think birds ever learn to love their cages?*" Chuuya recited, reading along to the quote some gang they had taken care of had graffitied on their base. "Downright poetic. According to what Virgil looked into, they were referring to Abilities."

Kouyou tilted her head. "It's not a bad way to describe it."

He studied the curling lines of the fabric she had forced him in — a quality so far from what he had grown up around that it almost scratched his skin with its softness. Waves over black fabric; the lines of red on the sash. “Who’s caged?”

Her fingers hesitated by his nape — then, with newfound calm, she sunk them in his hair, fixing the strands. “It’s curious, don’t you think?”

“What is?”

“Abilities are undoubtedly our greatest strength,” she explained, pulling his hair from the sides, studying his uncovered eyes. *I rather like the mismatch*, she had told him, once. *It’s always useful — having something to make people look twice*. “At the end of the day, still — they’re nothing but infinite bursts of power kept in chains. Well fed — but imprisoned all the same.”

*All you are*, he recalled, *is a cage*.

He munched on a cuticle, tasting the raw skin from a near-stitch. Kouyou slapped his hand away right as Lippman got back-flipped by his co star in blue. “You believe so?”

“I believe darling Elise has never said a good word about our Mori. I believe *Golden Demon* despises me,” The smile she offered him was mirthful, but heavy. “Not that I would ever blame her. Would you feel particularly favourable towards someone who can decide when you get to exist and when not?”

Chuuya frowned, throwing the reports on the vanity desk, startling Ōmu away with a *fuck!* He perched on top of the television, instead, quite offended — underneath his claws, Lippman was sporting fake blood on his face and a grin. He fit in Albatross’ apartment like a glove, because he had belonged there just as much as him — he looked nothing like Chuuya’s memories.

“They’re not sentient creatures,” he settled on saying. “They just *are*. ”

A dimple appeared next to her mouth. He recalled, suddenly, the first time she’d stabbed him — one of the few times she had managed to beat him when Abilities were involved in training. “That mentality surely won’t help your case.”

Chuuya stretched his arms out, studying the sole, thin line of black he could see between his gloves and the edge of the sleeves.

*Your arms fade to that shade after roughly forty eight hours of no Corruption*, Dazai had theorized, after close analysis. They had attempted to slow it down by activating it and immediately nullifying it, in *the Alley* — after Chuuya had nearly knocked him out and ran faster than Dazai could almost catch up to, they had abandoned that theory.

“I don’t know if my case can be helped,” he confessed. *Control the things in your veins, or they will control you instead*, the Colonel had said. “I did nothing but live with it for all these years.”



Kouyou's fingers were gentle, but never to the point of sacrificing efficiency. She did her best to tame his mane; Chuuya cringed at the sweat he could feel gathering on his nape. He grimaced at the thought of what another cutting attempt — one not sheltered by rage-trembling fingers and the strand he'd burned — might produce.

*Perhaps he'd ask Kouyou*, he considered, sneaking a glance in her way. Would it be weird? *Could* you ask your Boss for a haircut? The kids in the Sheep used to do it with him — still, probably different. He imagined his own cut strands on that floor, with its tacky carpets and parrot feathers. *Home*, he tried to taste. *Home. Home.* Thievery was only so when it wouldn't be forgiven.

"Living can only grow easier," she offered, eventually. "As long as you do it where there is no comparison. Darkened roots shouldn't long for the standard set by trees; it would be senseless."

"Always with the plant metaphors."

"Always with the belief the haunted can't be taken advantage of," Kouyou replied.

"I was a street kid, Ane-san," Chuuya reminded her. "There isn't a thing in this world I haven't taken advantage of."

"Then perhaps you should stop saving up your meals for winter days that aren't coming," *You will pay for this!*, Lippman promised, eyes twinkling in amusement. She stretched his kimono on his shoulders again. "Here. Ready to go."

Hesitantly, Chuuya studied his reflection in the spotless mirror.

Ever since opening his eyes to an unnatural grin and unfamiliar features had grown into the norm, he had mostly avoided the sight — the last few weeks hadn't exactly helped his case. The skin over his cheeks was a mosaic of blues and purples, heavenly matched by the healing bruises rendering his skin a painful yellow.

Scars peeked from the collar of the kimono, sunburned against freckled skin. "Black fits you to a fault," Kouyou complimented. "I'd encourage you to wear it more, but we don't want the demon child to accuse you of plagiarism."

He huffed, blowing a strand of hair off his burned eye. "I should have never told you that *Shichigosan* story."

"And allow me to miss Lippman's most genius idea?" the woman accused. Her photo camera had materialized from nowhere at all, dangling from her arm — he stole it, raising it to study the living room through the lens. "I would have haunted you to the ends of the earth."

"It's ridiculous."

"It's sweet."

"I'm too old for this. It's not even the right month, November is —"

“We won’t tell anybody.”

“You just want to take pictures —“

“A stroke,” she insisted, “Of *genius*. ”

Chuuya turned on the stool, curling an eyebrow. “High praises. Didn’t you have a whole rivalry thing going on with the idiot?”

She sniffed, chin high. “As if I would have ever wasted time battling such an — individual.”

He observed the chandelier through the camera — shards of finely-cut crystal reflecting off the posters in the ceiling; then the collection of souvenirs on the kitchen counter, and Doc’s face in one of the hung photographs, then Lippman’s fake corpse on the television screen.

His finger spasmed on the button. He took a picture of Ōmu — then, he turned to the blurred corners of the Executive’s frame. “One word?”

Kouyou leaned — closer and closer; just enough to fill the circle of the lens. When she winked, he took a picture. “Bottle blond.”

As only the unlucky knew, one of the more modern temples in Yokohama had been built with the first *yen* the Mafia had ripped from bloodied hands and spiked ground — *an attempt*, as Mori had once described it, *at giving back what they had taken. Not regret, though — perhaps fear.*

These days, it was mostly used for introits — it was rare for the higher ups to actually visit the structure, despite the coveted honors most guards would offer anyone to show a *Silver Oracle* or a mere Port Mafia tattoo.

“Why didn’t we come here for New Year’s?” Chuuya questioned, Kouyou’s arm over his own — head tilted back to stare at the structure at the end of the natural stairs. “Feels like the sort of power trip mafiosi would enjoy.”

“It feels cheap, though, does it not? Praying on ground built with the blood we spilled?”

He shrugged. “Feels cheaper to linger on it.”

“Perhaps. We used to, with the prior Boss,” Kouyou admitted, dragging the tip of her umbrella behind them. The sun was high in the sky — there was very little crowd, though; mostly gathered under the patio of the temple. “He would tell us the story of the temple’s construction each festivity — at first in mere pride; then, out of delirium. He had a taste for the fruit on the altars — swore that we all deserved to eat some, given our merits.”

Chuuya scoffed. “Blasphemy sounds like the least interesting part of him.”

“What *were* the outside voices like?”

“Merciless,” He fixed his foot deeper inside the wooden sandals, doing his best to pretend not to use *Tainted* to find his balance. The kimono felt weird on his skin — it curled like a

forgotten idea at the end of his skull; the same tickle of *something* that always turned into *too far away*. Many things had that smell — homemade food; house gardens; salsedine. He recalled his lost picture — his face, young and already vacant, holding N's hand. "He was the plague of the underground."

"He was," Kouyou agreed, eyes distant — fingers curled forward, sharpening claws she didn't have. "Did you ever see him face to face?"

He shook his head. "Only the corpse inside Rimbaud's Ability."

"He always did look like a corpse," she said, not amused and not reminiscing. "Even before he was old and wrinkled — There was something in his eyes that never seemed quite with us."

"Some stories said he bathed in the blood of his own traitorous subordinates."

"Hilarious," Kouyou commented. "No. He did bathe in their material possessions, though."

The entrance of the temple appeared in all its might — red roofs and golden linings, with a pavement so clear it was almost reflective. Studying the kneeling crowd near the few altars, scattered across an empty room so wide it beat even Mori's office, Chuuya blinked. "Material possessions?"

"*Be drunk with power, and treat gold like poison,*" Kouyou recited. "That is what he used to tell me. His predecessor had been killed over a trap, saturated by his own greed. He believed a taste for riches might kill even the strongest man. You must have seen his pictures — the clothes he wore, his disheveled hair."

"He looked homeless," Chuuya said.

She laughed. "Quite. *Mind those suitors and their pearls, little Ozaki. They only want you to be blinded,*" Her curled lips stretched into a less amused line; she tilted her head back, studying the decorated ceiling — raised her hand to brush one of the lanterns. "Want to know what I did the day I got the news of his death?"

He waited. Effortless, lighter than a leaf, Kouyou gestured to some discreet guard near the entrance — immediately, they set to emptying the temple out.

Hiding her mouth behind her fan, tilting his way, she said: "I emptied out all of my accounts — *all* of them. Down to the last yen."

Chuuya stared. The bloodied skin under his nails seemed to itch. "All of it?"

"*All of it,*" she swore. The guard closed the doors of the temple behind him, once everyone had left — not before bowing, and offering them a, *Executives*. Most men of Kouyou's did, lately — the others spent their time gossiping about the little of the competition that had filtered through the doors of the meeting room. "It was maybe the longest day of my life."

She let go of his arm; twirled a bit under the sun-hit lanterns, painting crimson shades on the wooden floors. Humming to that dance, she closed her eyes and sighed. "I can't even

remember all of it. I bought the finest dresses that had ever been imported into Yokohama, and I wore them with my girls — and I tore them all into pieces, because I had just *so many*, and — And then —“

Hurrying toward the altar, she picked up a shawl some devotee must have left behind, pulling it over her shoulders. “I bought food,” she said. “I bought so much food I couldn’t have starved even in my seventh life. Never again. I ate until I was sick, and then I went out all night, and bought all the best cars in the market — and drove to all those fancy buildings they used to kick me out of.”

“Did you kill them?” Chuuya wondered, picking at the petals of offered flowers, unable to take his eyes off of her.

She bent back until her pinned up hair was dangling dangerously, smiling at him upside down. “Not that night. That endless night was for my joys and my desires.”

“You don’t desire revenge?”

“I deserve it,” she replied, easily. “There’s a wide difference.”

He tried to imagine something similar — a few hours forgetting what the Sheep’s faces had looked like on the harshest winters; a few hours not scratching at the good, *too good*, suits the Flags had bought for him. Everyone in the Port Mafia bled for power and hedonism; Chuuya never knew if he lacked hunger or direction for it. “Didn’t you need the money?”

“Oh, I *knew* I wouldn’t,” Kouyou said. She looked at him funny. “The Boss’ doctor swore the Boss had died of natural causes. He swore the seat had his name on it. I didn’t care much, either way — A new reign always means a cleanse. And I was way too close to the top,” A shrug. “Everyday was a race for survival, and my feet were naked in the sand. Starving. If it was the last day of my life, why not devour it?”

Chuuya hummed. He stretched his legs out in the kimono — exercised makeshift kicks, and kept his eyes on the ceiling, breathing in the smell of incense. *Devour*: “But you didn’t die.”

“I didn’t,” she confirmed. “And you know what I learned?”

Arms pulled onto his sleeves — with a yelp that was more of a curse, Chuuya was pulled into a dancing position, sandals slipping down wooden tiles and fallen pieces of paper. “Ane-san —“

“Spine straight,” Kouyou ordered, with the voice she used in the dungeons. “Chin up. Always look the enemy in the eyes.”

“You’re not the enemy,” Chuuya protested, trying to keep up with her elegant dance.

“Then look at your own reflection. Want to know what I learned?”

He slipped over a wet tile; held onto her a bit tighter, frustrated, and snapped: “What.”

From up-close, a few freckles decorated the bridge of her nose — only in the summer, he knew. He had studied her too purposefully not to have noticed that constant. A strand of hair was trapped between her eyelashes; somehow, she made it look put together. *Elegance*, he thought, but it was the wrong term, always — *untouched*, maybe. *Still*. A pillar not even Arahabaki would have scarred.

She knocked her forehead against his own, only once. “That my soul was rotting inside me,” she answered. “And that I was letting it.”

Chuuya set his jaw.

“I know you understand,” Kouyou called, as tentative as a gun under his chin. Her feet never slowed down once; dancing under the shards of reddened light, she insisted: “I know you know what it means to live with your nails bitten to raw skin. You exude strength. You elude *power*. At the end of the day, though — you’re just as scared of starving as your bones used to be.”

“I told you,” he said, stupidly, “The food thing isn’t a *thing*. ”

“I’m not talking about food. I’m talking about roots,” She spun the two of them around; studied the contrast of her skin with his gloves. “I’m talking about tiptoes.”

“I can fly.”

“How did you spend your first pay?”

Chuuya made a face. “The bastard and I basically got it sucked out by the Arcade.”

“The second?” she replied. “The third?”

“You know I have accounts —“

“I know they’re mostly untouched.”

“Precaution isn’t stupid.”

“No,” she confirmed. “But you’ve taken a liking to wine, have you not?”

He blinked. “What’s the point?”

“You like wine,” Kouyou listed off, between one step and the other — subtly fixing his posture with every turn; raising his chin until it stood as proudly as hers and softening his grip until it seemed natural. “You like that motorcycle of yours. You look at Albatross’ priciest furniture with this *face*. When we visit the *Pomegranate*, you let the girls show off their best fabrics with no complaints.”

“I complain,” he protested.

“You *want*, ” she replied. “And you could have it all — down to the last indulgent inch,” She tightened her grip on his hands. “Don’t you get it, Chuuya? It’s what I knew when Mori made

me an Executive — I was here to stay. I was here to climb higher and higher, or die trying. ”

Chuuya scoffed. “You know I am —“

“Then *commit* to it,” Kouyou cut in. “Buy the most expensive wine on the market. Get those cars I always see you gape at. Finish your meal. You know what will happen once the money is over?” She leaned down; whispered, low and tempting: “You will get more. Because you’re *stuck here*.”

They danced.

Chuuya gulped words he wouldn’t know how to shape — tried to find a way that was hard, *unshakable* enough to explain that the Sheep had been meant to be his grave, and that the Flags had died for nothing, and the Port Mafia was —

*You wouldn’t know where to put your hands around those fancy guys*, Shirase had laughed, once, after he’d muttered a story about an assassin who went around calling himself *Iceman*. It had been a mistake on his part. Chuuya — whether pulling on the loose threads of the pockets of ripped apart jeans, or tracing stitchings across suit pants — had always known where his hands belonged.

There had been a night, countless sunrises away — washing his hands in the communal bathrooms, watching the blood rush down the sink, when he’d realized he *liked* being there.

Betrayal, he had found, smelled like blood and diluted shit.

Chuuya hadn’t betrayed anyone.

“It’s too endless,” he settled on, eventually, kicking away a fallen candle as they stepped on it. “It’s too endless to last.”

The woman hummed. “See, that’s the piece you’re missing,” Another spin; a step right into the widest of the gaps, where the sunlight streamed with such unguarded freedom it felt like a sin. It was pure summer warmth — it rained down his kimono, sticking it to his skin with sweat.

“You and I will never belong anywhere but here,” Kouyou said. “It doesn’t have to last, little god. We will end with it, or not at all.”

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Chuuya had thought about killing Mori Ougai exactly three times.

The first of them had been inconsequential — the mere rage of a starving, learning child, being told to associate a symbol to a syndicate and then a syndicate to a bloodbath and then a bloodbath to a single man. The prior Boss had already been sick by the time Chuuya came to power — the streets used to curse out the doctor who was keeping him on his feet more than they did him.

Then there had been his boot on a boy's disgustingly clean dress shirt, and cubic handcuffs around his hands — and Mori's face, *smiling*, as it played a recording of the Sheep's prayers.

The third one had lasted less than a broken inhale — a blink of an idea; the crack of his knees right before he bent, new hat to his chest and new loyalty in his voice, as he swore himself to a cause.

*You could kill him*, Chuuya had heard his bones whisper, each time. The one thing he had never had any doubts about was his ability to put an end to existence. *You could do it right now*.

“And this is Tanaki,” Elise explained, as she raised one of the dolls from the pile abandoned in the hallway. “The plan is to set her on fire.”

It *burned*, strange and unavoidable, to tear his eyes off Mori's framed picture on the wall — he slid them down to safer lands. The awkward way he had posed in the picture of the Mafia's youngest; the statuary calmness of Elise, in the seat in front of him; Dazai's obnoxious grin. His hands, under his chin, were crossed just like Mori's.

He looked away, dragging his fingers down the doll house he had been assembling for the past half hour. “What the hell did Tanaki do to deserve that?”

Elise pouted, cheeks red and round. “I told you,” she whined, “She disobeyed Doll Rintarou's orders for the beach party.”

Chuuya thought about it, nodded. “The Mafia code *does* need to be respected.”

“Yes!” She picked up another doll from the floor — one dressed in black, covered head to toe in toilet paper. “This is Dazai. He's ugly.”

“At least you're true to your sources,” He took the doll from her hands, studying the upside down smile the girl had forcefully drawn over the doll's pink lips. Elise's red gowns looked like blood polls on the floor; the door to Mori's office was still just as closed as it had been when he had arrived. No guards, strangely — only Elise, solitary and humming and ten; haunting the halls. “Don't I have a doll?”

Elise fished out another doll from the lower floor of the house. “Of course you do. I'm true to the —” She paused. Sighed, frustrated.

“Source?” he suggested.

“I know,” she huffed, directing him a gaze so nasty Chuuya was taken aback. “Rintarou likes it when I struggle. Here, your doll.”

The words were strident only by the edges; a meaning not meant to be thought about, either because of irrelevance or danger. Elise hummed a melody he didn’t know, and Chuuya scratched his nails against the plastic red strand of his doll — the little summer hat over them. One of the blue eyes had been drawn over, turned into a monotone shade of brown.

The strangest detail, though, were the vibrantly scarlet lines covering certain areas of the doll’s skin. “What are these?”

“Your marks,” Elise explained, as if it was obvious. She always spoke with a cadency of lithe irritation — as if perpetually several steps ahead. “I remembered the places you had them in that time Mori was making you better.”

In the framed pictures, Chuuya’s serious face cracked and turned and twisted — a grin met his gaze, leaking blood from the corner of its lips.

His skin itched. Pulling the fake hair, he commented: “They’re a bit ugly for a doll, though.”

Elise’s frown fit comically on her face; he couldn’t quite help himself from reaching forward and pinching one of her cheeks. “It’s *your* doll, Chuuya. I can’t *not* make it look like you.”

“*Mmh*,” he confirmed, distracted, biting down a smile. She reminded him of Yuan, at times — even if they didn’t have anything in common. Something in their eyes; something in the way they both held onto the laces of his shoes. “And where is *your* doll?”

Other times, she reminded him of Dazai.

The sound of the office doors opening only deafened the airplane-like ones out of Elise’s mouth for a moment; the light it cast over her hands, wrapped tightly around the pink toy vehicle, made her skin glisten with the same texture as the moonlight outside. “I am the doll,” she let him know, distractedly.

“Chuuya,” Mori called, peeking from the ajar doors. He was in his doctor lab coat; he didn’t seem to notice the unforgivably complicated way Chuuya was staring at his Ability child. “Forgive the delay. Come in.”

The office was bathed in the way the moon reflected off the gold-lined couches; the shadows on the floor followed old furniture and Mori’s too tall frame, as he led him to the metal stretcher in the dead center of the room. When Chuuya lowered his eyes, the sheet over the stretcher had been removed, revealing a corpse.

“Not dead yet, actually,” the Boss said, as if he had heard, snapping plastic gloves on. “Close to it, but not gone. Dazai knows better than to get rid of good evidence so easily.”

*Easily* seemed a strange way to describe it. The man’s skin had been nearly entirely torn off his body, melting by the hinges of his limbs and the base of his throat. His eyeballs peeked over crimson flesh, littered in mucosa and what may have been tears, on better skin. Both of



his arms had been ripped out of the shoulder sockets; crossed at the wrists, they stood over his open ribcage, showing off pulsing viscera.

“I wanted to apologize — personally, sir,” Chuuya started off, hands crossed behind his back, head low. “For the accident. At the Hospital.”

“*Mmh?*” Mori called, distracted. “Oh, that. Dazai already responded for it. No need to worry.”

He frowned. “But he —“

“I apologize for the odor,” he continued, undeterred. “He’s ingested something we need. Plus, Dazai’s always rather methodical with it, isn’t he? He tortures like a doctor would. Wonderful to study. We do have entire archives on the matter.”

If he squinted, Chuuya could see it — the back of Dazai’s coat, as he leaned over the chair that man had been tied to. The unenthusiastic light in his eyes; the clever way his hands worked over wounds given too fast.

*I wouldn’t say he enjoy it*, Kouyou had said, once. *I wouldn’t say he doesn’t take some pleasure from knowing he’s good at it, though.*

“And he’s writing them?” he asked.

Mori shrugged; winked. “At least he isn’t under a bridge. Don’t you agree?” Chuuya didn’t speak. “Look at this. Revolting, isn’t it?”

He crossed his arms over the cold metal of the stretcher’s side, studying the imperceptible rise and fall of the man’s chest — the way the motion leaked some more blood from the gauzes Mori was pressing on it. “I think I’m a bit desensitized to it.”

That was how Doc had always talked about it. *De-sen-si-ti-zed*. It was a good thing, according to him — *better than being horrified by your own living*, he would say, whenever Lippman attempted to philosophize about it.

“Certainly,” Mori conceded. “When you first awoke in Suribachi City, were there bodies?”

Something in his tone caught him by surprise — the earnest curiosity; the *longing*, almost, sharpening his tongue. A fool raising cocoons inside a sealed glass, only to sleep the whole day when they became butterflies.

“Not really,” Chuuya offered. The planes of bones peeking from the man’s body could have been metal roofs and the roads of a crater. “Most of them were covered by debris and remains. Limbs, maybe. Lots of blood. But I —“ Those first days were as blurry as he imagined birth itself must be to those who remembered it all; only the claustrophobic, starving feeling of *climbing out*. “I think I stayed under the rubbles for a long time. There were already people working on getting the ruins off, when I got out.”

“It was all volunteers, wasn’t it?”

He scoffed. "Everything that happens in Suribachi City *is volunteers*. The Government hasn't given a shit about us, ever," Chuuya picked at a loose leather thread of his gloves; when it was ripped off, he said: "About them."

*Them*, he thought. A jacket from a kid much taller than him and six feet under; the way Shirase hadn't turned back even once, after he had gotten on that boat. *Them, them and you. You were never one of them.*

Mori's amusement came out of a single huff of breath. "I saw you boys' fliers. And the graffiti."

He attempted to sink his nails in the metal. "Well," he said, curt. The idea of Mori staring at the sight Chuuya's name made next to the words *traitor* and *killer* and *Mafia's most unsuited dog* wasn't particularly gratifying; the rage it would take to convince him it wasn't true would mean too much. "Unfortunately for the artists, this isn't a democracy. They don't get a vote."

A nod, distracted. "No, they don't. But free propaganda isn't always useless. I'm sure our Dazai will take plenty advantage of it."

"I'm sure Dazai commissioned the fucking graffiti," he muttered, eyes on the corpse's shattered teeth. The bastard couldn't even punch — no way he hadn't asked someone from the *Secret Unit* to do it for him.

"*Mh*," Mori echoed, like he didn't exactly agree. "Why do you think it isn't, anyway?"

"What?"

"Why aren't we — or any syndicate in the underground, to be fair — a democracy?"

The idea seemed laughable. He tried to give the picture justice — a crowd of the Mafia's suited, sharp-teethed bodies lining up to put their votes in a box. The idea of any head that hadn't bent to write Mori's name not being cut off.

"Your Sheep had something of that nature, if I'm correct," Mori recalled. "A Council?"

He kept his eyes on the wet bones. "Yeah."

"Why don't we?"

*The Executives are there*, he considered saying. It seemed even more laughable — no one would compliment a king's jewels, if not to gain something from the king himself.

"Because people don't really come here for power," Chuuya concluded, at last — recalling, for a moment, how endlessly sincere the weight of the ground had been under his knee, after a life spent being pointlessly called a king. "They come because they want to be given a direction."

Mori's scalpel didn't pause; it was clear his answer had caught his attention, though. "Then why do you want the Executive position?"

*Be grateful*, Kouyou's tone tutted, clear as the starry sky. *Be careful*.

He shrugged. "Because the view is better from high up."

The man tilted his head to the side. Blood had reached the edges of his gloves; never his white sleeves, though. "The view of what?"

Chuuya thought of Ōmu's wings spread over the one window Albatross had never gotten to fix; thought of the stranger crowds at the *Old World*, and how gently they stepped over tiles he had watched his friends bleed out on. That was the life of the Port Mafia — constantly moving on.

"Everyone," he said.

A hum of consideration. "Here," Boss said, handing him a strange toll. Chuuya got the feeling of having passed; he just didn't know what kind of test. "Keep these two sides of skin separated. Not like — Yes. Like that. Wonderful. And how's your squad?"

"They're..." The memory of Noguchi and Kenta's destructive arm wrestling competition from the night before, as they waited for the girls to be done with the infiltration, came to mind. Chuuya had beaten them both. "Working on it."

This time, Mori's curled eyebrow was more teasing than anything. "Your missions have been more than successful."

"They work fine together," he muttered, not quite meeting his gaze. "Some of them are a bit resistant to the idea of collaboration. Or orders. But I'm working on it, sir."

"I'm sure you are," Passing by his knuckles, Mori tapped on each of them, before going back to his work on the intestines. "It must feel strange."

"What must?"

The doctor studied him in that distant way of his — a fortified glass between them, and no guarantee on whose protection it was ensuring. The scalpel was abandoned on the stretcher; Mori set to removing his gloves, a half mocking smile mercifully tilting his lips up.

"You know, Chuuya," he started, "You have always given me the impression of someone who could not stand holes in the fabric."

Chuuya detested metaphors. "You should have seen my clothes in Suribachi, Boss."

He laughed, which felt good enough. "Not quite what I meant."

A screech. "I know, sir."

"Well," he echoed. "There is this *rampant* need in you to — have everything covered, let's say. I understand how the Flags' absence might have put you in need of a — different support system," His smile grew slightly too kind. "That's why I suggested to Kouyou that this little project might help you out."

He could do nothing more than stare.

*Not everything has to be rage*, one of Verlaine's diaries had sworn, in lines written in skeptical ink. *Arthur swears so. Some of it, he says, can simply not have a correct answer.*

Chuuya felt eight again — full of things to explain, full of accusations to defend himself from; incapable of shaping up even a single one. He was too short compared to all of them; he didn't know enough words. They wouldn't believe him, because people believed what they saw only — a bloodied thing swearing it hadn't killed. A questionable being, swearing it knew how to mourn, and not just how to lose.

His voice sounded miles away. Blankly, he said: "My squad isn't the Flags."

Boss made a sound, waving one hand. "No, no. Don't misunderstand. I'm well aware. I merely feel like this might be a good chance for you. A second one," His smile was kinder; he studied the hesitant downfall of Chuuya's stiffened shoulders, and added, soaked in a regret he didn't know if he should call sincere: "I am sure the Flags are more than proud of you."

"I'm not sure the Flags can be proud of anything they're not here to witness."

Mori hummed, pulling new gloves on. "I think you're underestimating the faith the Flags had in you," When his eyes flew up to his face, the man pointedly, teasingly directed his own to the gasping body between them. "I have many proofs of it. They came forward with — well. Several and more opinions on you and your future."

Chuuya frowned, dubious. "The Executive position was meant for Pianoman."

"Yes," the man confirmed. "That isn't quite what I'm referring to. But — *Oh*, look. Look, it's happening."

All his attention was stolen by the body — the uncontrollable spasms that were going through its exposed viscera, wetting bones and drooling red blood and yellowish liquid onto the stretcher. The man's expression was hardly findable in between the ruined flesh and the blood tears; the whines out of his lips were infernal. When his rolling eyes managed to find Chuuya, they begged.

Curiously, Mori pinched the edge of his lower lip. The whine grew into what *could* have been a scream. Chuuya tried to look away.

"Isn't that marvelous?" he commented, all rationality and uneuphoric glee. He grabbed one of Chuuya's hands; didn't wait for his hiss to lay it on the trembling organs under the first layer of ruined flesh. "Look at this. Despite it all — alive. Some call it the miracle of life — I don't think it's the right terminology. It's purely a good machine."

Mori's fingers curled around his knuckles, pressing a bit further into that nauseating warmth — he looked up at Chuuya like he knew he found it *familiar*, in that way that Arahbaki poisoned each time.

“All that is life,” Mori insisted, refusing to let go of his eyes, “Is breathing and beating. There is nothing to fear as long as that exists. It isn’t a miracle. It’s only the art of being clever enough to make sure everything *keeps* breathing, and *keeps* beating, and keeps *being*.”

He couldn’t look away.

Viscera twirled underneath his gloves, only the naked tips of his fingers sinking in the meat. It made the blackened lines hidden under his sleeves retreat, he thought — made the constant ache of his teeth grow more *stubborn*, aware of the vicinity of *something*. There was no point in ruining the already ruined — Chuuya had sworn and sworn it, hanging from an electrical spear and meeting N’s eyes from behind a fortified glass.

When Mori asked, eyes still on him, hands still on his, “How’s *Corruption*, then?” Chuuya didn’t feel an ounce of surprise.

*How* was *Corruption* — always the same. The studies in *The Alley*; the missions Mori could not know about; his decaying arms. They had been gathering data on healing and fighting times, and whenever it seemed better, it changed again. It was too late to accept inconsistency as a factor, though — too late to accept that all those corpses and all those new scars and Dazai’s eye as he bled out had meant nothing at all.

“Nothing I can’t take, sir,” he offered.

Mori nodded, slow. “Your body is more than capable, despite — the circumstances. I was referring to your mind, actually.”

Chuuya made a face. “‘S fine.”

“Dazai seems to believe you —” A pause. The Boss seemed to consider something; at last, a tad too casual, he concluded: “Nothing, I guess.”

“No,” he insisted. Dazai had been in that room, days before — called in for a crime they had both been guilty of. Who knew what kind lies he had spread to save face? “I would like to know.”

Mori waved the matter away. “Ah, nothing, nothing. If you tell me you’re fine, I believe it,” He removed his hand from his own; it took Chuuya a beat too long to take his, as well. “Should you not be, though — If something about this ordeal is making you hesitate —”

“I’m not.” Was *that* what Dazai had said?

“I know,” the man assured. “But should it happen — Just remember what I told you.”

His hand — wrapped in bloodied rubber and bad intentions — reached over the corpse; it pressed flat onto Chuuya’s chest, fingers spread and palm weirdly still over the summer sweat stains of his waistcoat. The sound of the man’s heartbeat echoed in Chuuya’s throat; he clenched his hands around the stretcher.

“If it breathes,” Mori said, low, the infinity in his eyes tasting like every road in Yokohama. “If it beats, if it moves — it is *life*,” Even lower — as if walls and little girls that weren’t real

could snitch, he added: “No matter what any sacrilegious deity might whisper in your ear.”

Chuuya felt his jaw twitch. He wanted to look away; he couldn’t.

“He’s not a god,” he said, because he said it every morning and every time he was about to fall asleep. “Nothing about this is holy.”

*This*, he thought — destruction and blood and chronic back pains and Dazai’s face and the way Koda never stood too close after *Corruption* and Verlaine’s diaries under Rimbaud’s bed. Nothing was holy; it merely was.

“I think there’s something holy in everything that has power,” he replied, with the ease of someone who had been cursed before. Chuuya had thought about killing him three times, before. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t look for it. People come to the syndicate for a direction — not for power,” Mori shrugged. “Isn’t there faith in that, as well?”

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The *Sparkling Twilight* was a mess of fireworks, parades and running children in kimonos, blurred by the windows of Takasekai’s most famous casino — and the *one* establishment in the city not owned by the Port Mafia — *The Flower*.

“I’m pretty sure Ace has a picture of this place printed in his office,” Dazai’s voice offered, from the in-ear. It sounded muffled; Chuuya bet it had to do with the dog sticker the boy had stuck on it with hyper-strong glue. “*He throws darts at it whenever Mori forgets to scratch behind his ears at the end of the day.*”

“Gossip later,” Chuuya ordered. *Darts?*, he wondered, subtly. “Worry about actually telling me the plan.”

“*I told you I have four bullets,*” The sound of a rifle being cocked rumbled through the in-ear. “*I told you you have only one. I told you the KK Company has an Ability User they call Godai. You can make up the rest. On your right.*”

“*Ah, thank you,*” A woman in a blindingly shimmering green dress offered, appearing from his right, grabbing a glass from the silver tray in Chuuya’s hands. “May I ask after the appetizers?”

*The Flower* had slippery white marble floors and lights shaped like blooming petals — a beacon of strangely intense light, twirling all around the men’s jewels and the women’s

gowns. Tables over tables of tricking games surrounded the dead center of the room — a bar platform, its counter climbing inside five floors of open balconies.

From the outside the place was shaped like an upside down flower, edges lit in floor lights — it made the walls sunken, tilted in strange angles, giving the whole place a sense of tightness Chuuya couldn't help but frown at.

Perhaps it was the waiter uniform. Papillons weren't exactly his style.

A shape at the corner of his eye caught his attention.

"There's *Bishop Staff's* members here," he *tsk-* ed into the in-ear, subtly, making his way over to more crowded tables. "You'd think the assholes would be inconspicuous enough not to wear those weird capes in the open."

They looked like a small group — the more he searched, though, the more scattered silhouettes in white tunics and greyish hoods, covering the back of their heads all the way to their shoulders appeared. White masks hid any thought on their traits; their body motions were extremely calm.

Chuuya would have recognized them with one both eyes missing — the subjects of one of the many pictures Kouyou had hung to her office walls with sharp knives.

*"I think that's exactly the point," Dazai replied. "As for them being here, I'm not surprised. Takasekai's possible alliance with them is not confirmed by any means, but I believe nights like this are trying grounds. One deals in bodies and the other in faith. Quite similar, yes?"*

He grunted.

*["Takasekai is the richest of the quartet," Mori said. The dossier he was scamming through overflowed in macabre, furtive photographs of beat up, vacant-eyed people, staring straight into the camera. "They didn't outrightly support the Nine Rings, but we have suspicions that they might have freely offered them weapon funds, right before the attack at the Headquarters."]*

*"Each minimally high-placed member of the organization was once a Senator, or a Governor, or some vaguely relevant name in our panorama," Dazai intervened. "It certainly doesn't bode well with the human trafficking accusations the current Government wing faced in the last decade — but it makes it difficult to act against them. They're all beloved public figures."*

*"Beloved politicians?" Chuuya echoed. "Nice oxymoron."*

*Dazai made a face. "You know what that is? You were serious about liking poetry?"*

*"Boys," Mori sighed. "As I was saying — Their support to the Nine Rings is still a dubious tassel, but my instinct tells me it is a correct one. The Port Mafia's relationship with Takasekai has always been the most conflictual. They would gladly welcome a chance to bring us down."*

*“And, well,” the man added, some moments later, turning his head to study Elise’s pale fingers — twirling around the house doll she had dragged to the meeting room. “I am rather curious about these rumors about a collaboration in the Bishop’s Staff’s thievery.”*”].

“Well, what did the pendrive say?” Chuuya questioned, swiftly abandoning his filled tray in the empty hands of a passing waiter. He reached for Hirotsu’s stolen lighter. “How involved are we supposing *Takasekai* are in this girl-stealing business?”

“Seriously, Slug, you shouldn’t smoke over innocent people’s *amuses-gueules* —“

“If you think a single asshole inside this room is *innocent*, you seriously need to brush up your people-reading skills,” he replied, blowing out a mouthful of smoke. It was barely heavier than the smell of the atmosphere — the crazed haze all over losing hands; the mercilessness of the faces announcing punishments.

Executive Ace’s Casinos granted jewelry collars and a Port Mafia ownership to whoever was stupid enough to accept the bet. *This place*, he considered — watching as a screaming, wide-eyed couple in clothes just a tad too *nice* to be truly a good brand got dragged towards the backrooms — *had no use for people who weren’t good at cards*.

“Do you think they’re giving them girls?” Chuuya muttered, more to himself than to Dazai. “Or doesn’t it count if the *Bishop’s Staff’s* isn’t the one to get them?”

*“I doubt they’re concerned with merit,”* Dazai sniffed wetly, as he had relentlessly been doing ever since *The Well Accident* — a mixture of a fever he wouldn’t admit he had, and his tendency to wipe his nose on the back of Chuuya’s coat. *“On the pendrive — Well. Look.”*

On the small wooden stage on the other the end of room — the wall it leaned against a floor to ceiling screen, psychedelic in its jumping images of cartoonish suited men signaling the highest win of the hour — a condenser microphone was being swung around by a grinning woman in red.

Her words were a compact, gleeful knot Chuuya couldn’t figure out — eventually, though, she waved her hands to the screen, where the picture of a blank-faced woman in a simple white dress appeared, framed by a randomized number.

Chuuya felt his brain screech to a halt.

“ — only *twenty one years old*, sirs, still in her prime!” the red-dressed woman was saying. All the crowd of Champagne-drinking people around the stage *aaah-* ed in awe; the *Bishop’s Staff*, though, had their arms crossed. The presenter’s eyes were only on them. “Daughter of a wealthy master down at the oil factory, she —“

“These pieces of shit are betting on the girls,” he said.

“According to the pendrive, they’ve got six hundred and forty two faces to pick from, this month. Only twenty percent of them Japanese,” the voice in his ear offered. Then, a bit distracted: “You know, this roof is very high. I don’t think I’d get away with a few smashed bones *only*, for once.”



*Tsuchiya had gotten the pendrive out of him*, Chuuya recalled, in a fruitless effort not to blow them room up. She hadn't said a word while she did it. She hadn't let him die either — Chuuya didn't know if he was to blame for it. Maybe she had simply felt too merciful to kill a man who had willingly let her sedate him.

Maybe Chuuya had just stood too close to the basement table they had laid him on.

“Those four bullets of yours,” he heard himself say. A new picture had taken over the screen; the round-faced girl pictured in it couldn't have been older than sixteen. “Who's lucky enough to die that easily?”

*“I already told you, Corruption isn't a good idea tonight.”*

“The whole point of these missions is —“

*“ — not this.”*

“You're playing sniper with a broken arm,” Chuuya snapped. “I'll decide what's a good idea.”

*“And you breathe like you have a broken fan in your ribcage,” Dazai replied, unimpressed. “I don't exactly know how to tell you this, but you're no use to the syndicate if you're a bundle of viscera and squeaking dog noises.”*

He set his jaw, eyes searching across the crowd of suited men. Five bullets in total — *Godai*. A way to make sure the *KK Company* would be blamed for what had happened. An excuse to use *Corruption*; an excuse not to use it. A way to make sure Dazai wouldn't be at reach when —

*Don't be stupid.*

“This isn't the night to take down a whole syndicate alone,” Dazai concluded.

Chuuya threw the cigarette on the ground, stepping on it, before making his way to the stage. *Godai*, he insisted. Where had he read about that name? Why would a *KK Company* member ask to be referred to as such? “Who better than us.”

The other boy huffed. Then, the in-ear went silent.

Given he couldn't be certain he hadn't just ripped it off and threw it off the roof, Chuuya set to exploring the ground floor, looking for a flicker to awaken the answer on the top of his tongue.

It would have been easy to blame drunkenness for the sheer volume of laughter and bets raining down his ears, the deeper he travelled inside that betting crowd — but each glass a man or woman took from Chuuya's tray stayed filled. Most of the attempts to claim by people who weren't *Bishop's Staff* went nowhere; whenever one of the quiet, hooded silhouettes raised their hands, though, the girl immediately disappeared from screen.

They had a tendency to pick women with a strong background — girls the red-dressed woman described as Ability Users, good fighters, or a bit too stubborn to tame.

“Your prizes will all be waiting in the vans outside the Casino,” the presenter assured, with a wink, when one of the winners demanded to give *a real taste test* to his latest buy. “I can assure you, our pictures do not lie.”

It was right as he started to get bored — spitting in the Champagne glasses before giving them out — that he saw the first man.

Irritation choked him.

He pressed his hands on the in-ear. “A joke on fucking *elements*, seriously?”

No answer came. Chuuya had the feeling it was more of a decision than a necessity.

From then, it was easy. His eyes traced the lines of the flame-shaped tattoo on the man’s nape — thick lines of black curling in a style too similar to the *Takasekai’s* symbol one, barely bigger than a palm — and memorized it; then he set to go look for four other signs.

*The fucking text Ane-wan had us copy in the green house*, Chuuya seethed, by the time he had managed to find a woman with a water tattoo on her arm and a man with a stylized current of wind on his cheek. *Godai — the five elements in Japanese Buddhism.*

“You’re telling me this *KK Company* freak goes around killing people related to these five elements only?” Chuuya whispered, as he made his way between two tables of bets, following a thick glasses-sporting woman with an earth-like symbol on her knuckles. “What does that even mean?”

*“I know a girl in the Port Mafia who only kills people with a numerical tattoo somewhere on their body,”* Dazai answered, finally. *“It’s not good manners to judge others’ obsessions.”*

*You started laughing like crazy*, Dazai had explained, after one of the dead-on-start attempts at controlling *Corruption in The Alley*. Chuuya’s body had been mostly irresponsible from the sudden shock of silence. The boy’s hands were under his armpits. *We don’t have funds for mental breakdowns.*

*We don’t have funds for fucking aspirin, you simpleton*, Chuuya had replied, biting his lips not to laugh — or curse out. One of the stitched up holes in his chest had reopened slightly. It *sneezed* whenever Chuuya breathed. *Worry about your own psyche.*

*I am*, the boy had assured, panting. At last, he had landed him on the stairs. *You’re deteriorating it. My brain cells, too, but that’s not —* And then it had been too uncoordinated, and the wrist bone Chuuya had only scratched broke for good, and whatever sound had left his mouth had shut Dazai up.

“I swear to God, you goddamn mummy,” Chuuya hissed, looking around for the last tattoo. “You need to learn to simply *tell me* —”

“Oh,” a voice spoke up, somewhere behind back. *“Le Roi des Assassins.”*

On the stage, the red-dressed presenter cheered, as the golden-eyed teenager on screen got sold off to a bored member of the *Bishop's Staff*. It was a wonder, — Chuuya thought, as distant as the waves from the heart of the city — how many girls could simply be erased. How many screws and mechanisms kept a city alive; how many things he couldn't see coming.

The man was white, and older than time. There was a strangely grainy texture to his eyes — something blurred and candid. *Blind*, Chuuya concluded.

“Oi,” he answered, brusque. “You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“No, no,” the man assured. The tilt of his tone was unmistakable — a badly accented, French lined Japanese. When he stepped forward, he made his way to Chuuya with no hesitation or cane; on his chin, blurred by rolls of wrinkled skin, was the tattoo of a black filled circle. *Fifth element — void*. “My eyes may not work well anymore, but I never forget an aura. *Roi, es-tu venu pour me tuer?*”

His mouth was dry. There was a hiss in his ear — Dazai's voice. Chuuya knew the taste in his mouth too well — knew that old man wasn't his brother, and knew the floor didn't even *look* like the *Old World's* one, and knew Murase had died for something, but wasn't quite sure *what*.

*King, have you come to kill me?*

“I'm not him,” Chuuya concluded. Again, like a mantra: “You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“You are him enough,” the man insisted. “I am hardly picky. Do you mind offering me your arm? I would like to converse with my Reaper.”

“I'm not —“ *going to kill you*, he was about to say. It died on his tongue at the last moment; he studied the calm lines of the man's face, unhurried and certain. A man who had met Verlaine and had survived — in the past months, Chuuya had slowly come to decide that wasn't quite possible.

*Aren't you alive?*, Tanaki had argued, when he had offered that concept, once. Chuuya lacked words to say — *whoever met him, isn't me*.

He could hardly afford that old weakness — could hardly afford a body that had only fought back at the last moment.

“*Chuuya*,” Dazai called, from the in-ear. It was clear he had his eye on them, through the rifle — it wasn't clear how much he knew. On the stage, another girl got taken. “*Don't forget.*”

*How can I?*, he wondered.

He offered the man his arm.

Swiftly, they ended up on the first rows by the stage. It was clear the man could only follow the descriptions the presenter was enthusiastically following — his lips were pursed in a

whistle that grew a bit more curious whenever another girl was sold off. His arm was an unshakable weight.

“It’s not an easy feat, surviving him,” Chuuya ended up saying, once he got tired of attempting to read the scars under his eyes. “Why would you risk meeting him again?”

“You couldn’t kill me,” the man replied. “I made more than sure of that. You took my eyes, yes — a terrible disgrace for someone with my gift. It was made for savouring, you see — And you made sure I never would again,” He tilted his head up in his general direction; offered a smile of teeth that had to be fake. “But I scared you, even just a bit. I think that it is much to ask from a god.”

“He wasn’t a god,” Chuuya spat out, a bit angrier than he had intended to. “You’re ancient, old man. You should have seen enough in your life to keep from divinizing every idiot who’s capable of spilling blood.”

The man hummed. “Are you a god?”

“No.”

“Could you be?”

“Is there a need to?” he questioned. “Will you only accept to be killed by one?”

Another girl appeared on screen. She was the first of the bunch to be smiling, even if just an inch — a clearly panicked expression. Yuan used to laugh nervously at every shooting attack; she used to cover her ears and only ever look at him.

“My name is Leconte de Lisle,” the man offered, once the applause had died down. “I am not very good with religious zeal. But I am good with regret. Aren’t they quite similar?”

*Think*, Chuuya hissed at himself. The name was too familiar. *Takasekai*’s Ability Users were international — they had allies everywhere, as long as the money kept flowing in. A man who Verlaine had met. A man who hadn’t been killed by him. A man relevant enough, that his and four more kills would equal, to *Takasekai*, what the destruction they had caused to the *Shadow Blade* and the *KK Company* had meant.

“ — next one will leave you quite shocked!” the red-dressed presenter was announcing. “A face well known in the underground of our lovely city; a name few haven’t heard, if involved in the affairs of Su—“

“*Death of a Poet*,” he said, suddenly. The pile of documents on Kajii’s desk; the blurred lines in one of the least controlled pages from Verlaine’s diaries. “You’re the Ability User who was expelled from France.”

“My lord, you know that already,” Leconte replied, only barely surprised. “You were there when they exiled me. Heavens, I believe you might have suggested it yourself.” He looked around the room; sighed, a bit dejected. “Japan is a good land, luckily. But any place is the

same. Regret is the one thing men carry around wherever they go. More than love, more than hatred, more than fear —“

When he looked at him, for a moment, Chuuya got the feeling that he could really see him — *him*, or whatever was closest. His smile was kind in the way of tiredness — pity for blood he had walked over again and again. “You can never escape the sound of those you’ve left behind, can you?”

“Look at those eyes,” the presenter said. The jingle playing under her words was strangely familiar. “Look at the *stubbornness* in them. Don’t we all need a fighter, these days?”

*Death of a Poet*, Chuuya thought. *Death of a Poet. Death of a Poet.* What did the paper say? It manifested something. It turned the world until —

His in-ear creaked. “*Now.*”

The sound of glass breaking barely echoed under the music of the Casino — the breathless *thump!* with which the man with a fire symbol on his nape fell to the ground didn’t either.

The shouts out of the people around him seemed to shake the earth.

“Perhaps it isn’t that bad,” Leconte offered, pensive, like he hadn’t noticed. “I don’t believe regret means we ought to believe our actions wrong. Sometimes you just run — Sometimes you find other things to fight for. It’s in the nature of this world. Someone lives, and someone dies for it. Someone dies, and someone lives for it.”

The presenter was still talking. The jingle in the air was still familiar — a hum shaped by known lips; broken by the shimmering metal of braces.

*The dance in Albatross’ kitchen*, he thought. *The night I came back from France.* Dazai had been humming that exact same melody. But how had he *know* —

“Do you have a point?” Chuuya asked. He tried to extract his arm from his grip, amidst the screaming. The woman with the water tattoo fell next — the blood leaving her skull splattering on a game table. “Or are you one of those Gramps who spends hours talking about ridiculous hypotheticals?”

“Did you have a reason for it all?” Leconte replied, easily. “Or did you just *need* to have it?”

A third body fell from the balcony, pierced once in the throat — it landed on the bar counter with a sickening crack, scattering the nearby crowd like terrified rats.

“I’ll tell you, don’t worry,” Dangling a bit forward, the man’s warm breath washed over his face, blurring his vision. As one, his nails seemed to tear the fabric of his waiter jacket — sinking into his skin. “It doesn’t matter, *l’Inhumane*. Reason or not reason — it will never matter.”

A gunshot broke through the screams — the last man, right by the first row, fell, staining the presenter’s dress in a different red. Her scream was ear-shattering — she and the crowd ran off, feet and shoulders bumping against Chuuya’s still frame and Leconte’s sweet smile.

Chuuya raised his arm, still bleeding from his nails and still trembling out of his control, and sunk it through the man's chest.

He fell utterly easily — a strange feat, given the solemnity with which he had spoken. His eyes stayed white, and staring at the nothingness with the same sweet-lined, tired smile — Chuuya's arm dripped blood and remnants over his suit, and on the lips that had never traced his name.

"I'm not him," he snapped.

Leconte didn't answer.

Chuuya shrugged the blood off his arm.

"We're done here," he said, pressing on his in-ear, scrutinizing the nearly deserted Casinos — only the last hurried steps and terrified screams racing to the doors, distant like an echo. Behind the glass doors, the black vans the presenter had been talking about were leaving the parking lot, braving the chaos of the festive city. "We need to go. I destroyed the cameras, but we shouldn't —"

He trailed off. His eyes found the stage — its blood stains and abandoned microphone; the screen, stuck on the latest picture of a girl, framed by a six-numbers long code. 424933.

Chuuya had it memorized long before his eyes managed to meet the girl's ones — framed by reddish, short hair that reeked of dye even from a photograph. He recalled — like a street sign to slow down registering when he was already driving off the bridge — the presenter's praises. *If involved in the affairs of Suribachi City.*

*They called her, I hear — the Queen of the Sheep. Isn't that just inviting?*

Chuuya ran.

*["The Bishop's Staff is a religious organization, although not one of any religion we have been able to identify," Mori explained, at last, settling his finger on a pentagon-like scribble on the map. "Their base is a Christian Church, but the facade only lasts for the morning. At night, they worship who they refer to as The Creator."]*

*"Sounds very Beatrice-y of a concept," Dazai yawned, gaining himself a stoic — pointed — look from Kouyou.*

*"The Creator isn't God," the Boss insisted. "None of the Staff cares about humans. In fact, I'd go as far as to say they feel nothing but contempt towards them. Their Creator is the artigian of something much more precious, in their eyes: Ability users."*

*"According to Odasaku, their life mission is to gather enough riches and enough power to force the Creator into returning to the world," Dazai explained, much later, eyes settled on the falling sun at the edge of the ocean. "With his return, a new wave of Abilities will be bestowed upon the disgusting cockroaches they believe normal people to be. A foolproof plan, certainly, if their stories didn't depict The Creator as an apocalyptic beast."*

*Hearing his name was enough to make him pause. “He knows of the Bishop’s Staff?”*

*“Oh, yes,” Dazai nodded, livelier than ever. “Dealt with them, once. He won, of course. They’re interestingly useless people, according to him. That makes me cautious. I can’t even imagine what kind of lunatics would manage to interest someone with such an exciting life.”]*

Outside it was summer — in its sweetest, most burning shape. The *Sparkling Twilight* had been going on for two days of relentless fireworks and laughter, caged by the ragtag swarm of teenagers, families and couples filling the streets to the brim. He and Dazai had thrown rocks to the performers on the ships, only yesterday — and now Chuuya was running and was *running*, and the black vans were driving just a tad faster, and the sea of colors was never ending.

He tried to focus on any particular shard of that kaleidoscopic scenery — stalls of festival games and sea-food, vendors with shaved ice and sweets that would have sent Koda into a frenzy, lights hung up in intertwining threads across the square and the minor roads, lighting every inch of his eyes in fire.

*No*, he thought. His teeth creaked with the forcefulness he snapped them shut; a guttural, low sound abandoned his chest, the groan of machine and forced silence. There was no time to scream. *No*.

*“Chuuya,”* his in-ear called. *“Chuuya, there is something wrong —“*

“Don’t you fucking say,” he snapped.

He jumped over a bench; walked to the top of a street light, surveying the oceans of peoples in kimonos dragging each other into spontaneous dances — the stumbling children and the blooming flowers of light in the sky, bloodless explosions. The cars were getting further and further away.

*“No,”* Dazai insisted. There was an odd sound in the background — as if he was running too. *“No, listen, I think it’s the —“*

He bumped against a child in a dragon costume. One of the car windows seemed to lower only an inch — Chuuya saw red, and didn’t know how much of it was his.

A ship parade greeted him on the other side of the railing, marching through the reflections of fireworks in the water; a *mikoshi* one, blinding him with the golden portable shrines — tree frogs, mythological lions and boats. A marine rescue demonstration attracted kids at the end of the bay, scenic screams from fake victims and heroic climbs from colorfully dressed heroes.

That was when Chuuya felt them.

*“They’re caging you in,”* Dazai called. His breath was tired. He was still running. *“Little dog running to a dead end — Oh, won’t this be fun.”*

He met the unfriendly eyes of a suited man mere seconds before a firework exploded behind his head. The crowd pushed the space between the two of them; Chuuya turned again and again, until he saw more suits than kimonos — *realized*, at the very last moment, that there was no fighting that wouldn't tear those festive people apart.

"A5158," the closest of the suited women spoke, his fingers on her in-ear. "Begin."

"Dazai, follow that van," Chuuya said, mind running. He could crack the ground — it would get the civilians to move. But there were too many costumes and too loud sounds — they would never make it in time. "Are you listening to me? *Don't lose that fucking* —"

Something fell on him, pushing him to the ground.

It was a confusing material — so heavy it mercilessly pressed his chest against the concrete, but filled with holes his fingers somehow didn't manage to crawl through. It was the same feeling he had gotten the first time he had forced himself to stay underwater longer than necessary — the utter silence; the mind-numbing pressure.

Abruptly, Chuuya knew that *Tainted* wouldn't work.

Legs surrounded his body, their shoes too shiny and bloodless for the words he could vaguely hear over the head he couldn't raise. He bared his teeth, uselessly attempting to fight the weight off of himself — a hand stuck something to his side, *tickling* in the way the scar on his chest and his spasming fingers knew too well.

Chuuya tasted nothing but lighting.

He didn't know if he screamed — he knew the tasers kept landing, and the voices kept talking, and Dazai's breath was a heartbeat in his in-ear. He kept his eyes on the van, driving away and away and *away*.

"Shit," he heard himself beg. "*Shit!*"

"*Get yourself out*," Dazai ordered, in his ear, in between electric shocks. The festive music filtering through his in-ear was too similar to the one Chuuya could hear under the *Special Division* men's voices. "*I'm almost* —"

"Don't —" Chuuya growled, quicker than even his lungs could bear. The lump in his chest was thunder — he recalled the moon from the end of a well, and a heartbeat under his palm, and *Arahaki touches it all*, and that stupid van — "*Don't come too close*, you —"

The taser struck again. The net shook with it, shakingly sizzling with electricity over every inch of his skin it was touching.

*Van wheels*, he thought, delirious. *Gunshots*. The men's shoes — their bodies, dropping on top of him. A single voice. *Van wheels. Van* —

Chuuya opened his mouth, and *Corruption* was the last thing he felt.





*[Chuuya was eight, was twelve, was fourteen, was fifteen — was trying to stay awake. There was a blade in his side and blood on his hands; there were familiar eyes piercing him from thrones he couldn't remember watching them build — but they were too well crafted and too never ending, and no rancor could be born from thin air.*

No hatred so deep, *he thought.*

*But Chuuya was eight and twelve and fourteen before he was fifteen and alone, and he remembered watching the sunset, every single day, sitting on the walls upside down. A golden fireball that leaves and comes back every single time, they had explained to him, when he had asked. We call it the sun.*

*Sometimes she would join him. When she was feeling particularly whiny — when Shirase had pissed her off; when Momo was too busy robbing passersby. He wasn't her last choice — but he knew there were many things she enjoyed more than a sunset.*

*Hey, she would tell him, without missing a beat, every single time. She couldn't sit on the walls or jump from buildings; instead, she would hug her knees right under him, welcoming the shade brought by his body. Under his wing — over the cliff — staring at him as he bled from the hole on his side — counting birds near the sunset.*

*Hey, Yuan would grin. Chuuya watched her disappear inside that van — it was the last thing he did. Remember when you ate cockroaches, that one time?].*

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya, rationally upset: that child has blades on their arm

dazai, put the blades there, blinking: you don't wanna know what "my ability is my ideal woman, a twelve yo" would have come up with do you

first things first:

Shichigosan (a rite of passage for 3yo-5yo-7yo Japanese boys and girls, celebrated in November. The children wear kimonos, and it sorts of symbolizes a first "entrance to growing up)! I headcanon that the Flags would have jokingly promised Chuuya to take him to something in that vein, just to both make fun of him and allow him to live through something that was taken from him. Luckily, Kouyou is here to mend!

the five elements in japanese buddhism: air, water, fire, earth, and "void". Leconte Le Lisle, a contemporary to Paul Verlaine.

that little accent i put on mori saying the flags have "long since bet on chuuya" is a reference to the Cannibalism stageplay, where we got a new scene of Mori explaining why Chuuya was bound to become his successor (and revealing that the Flags, like most of the syndicate, had placed their trust in him)

WELL! nice to see you again. i hope you guys are liking the two-a-week schedule, because i should be able to maintain it (all that's left for this fic is to revise the last five chapters, and let's say it's taking some time.

but it's okay, we will manage!). i want to thank you again for all the nice words and the interest, though i am in a bit of a hurry today. you guys are very much half the reason i have the strenght to finish this brick of a fic. i hope you'll enjoy what comes next even more, and a have a great day!!

<3

# THE

## Chapter Summary

*There's this dream I have,*

Chuuya told one of Lippman's hundred faces on the ceiling.

*There is blood all over. There's my hands. There is nothing else in the world.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xvi.*

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*Case number: 77890567*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Nakahara C. and Dazai O. were tasked with the removal of  
[...]*

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*There's this dream I have*, Chuuya told one of Lippman's hundred faces on the ceiling — movie posters and memories. *There's blood all over. There's my hands. There's nothing else in the world.*

Nakahara Chuuya didn't dream, though — as such, because he was taught rationality at one point or another, he looked for other explanations. Lippman's face was too covered in makeup; it was framed by too-different wigs, completed by clothes too clean to fit even his most realistic movies. *I am as chameleontic as an honest man can be*, he liked to say, *and as honest as a liar can afford.*

*Not a memory*, he considered. So, then — it had to be a prediction. Foresight; good sense. If it wasn't there yet — it could be avoided.

Chuuya breathed in the dust, and opened his eyes inside a closed coffin.

It was mildly startling — the immediate understanding of where he was. The darkness had no shape and no weight; when he pressed his palms on the makeshift roof, the soft fabric was familiar enough to give him goosebumps. It had taken the men hours to put the Flags' bodies *respectably* into the coffins. He had never been one to let good work get wasted — so he had lingered by the coffins.

Chuuya always lingered.

*This is how people like you die*, Shirase had said, the first time he had witnessed a bullet pierce his skin. *By not looking hard enough.*

“*Oi!*” Chuuya snapped, rattling his hands against the lid of the coffin. The *thump! thump! thump!* was deafeningly endless, louder than his heart, pulsing against a concussion Chuuya had learned to recognize. For a single moment, haunted by the memory of the net, he forgot to attempt to use *Tainted*. “Fucking *hey*, I'm not *fucking dead*, you imbecilic *bastards* —”

The lid opened.

“He lives!” the most detested voice in his mind repertoire exploded, arms — cast or not — flagging around in obnoxiously astonished fashion. “Bear witness to the miracle of perseverance! He lives, my lord, he —”

Dazai's words got choked out of him right as Chuuya's hands enclosed around his collar — *pulling* him forward until he spluttered, all the red of his sunburned skin converging to singular spots of his face. His eye was lucid with the fever he had been pushing down all day;

under the little golden light of approaching sunrise, filtering in through blurred windows in the Mafia's funeral building, he was a mirage of enraging blankness.

"You," Chuuya breathed out, utterly calm, clenching his fists so tight around his shirt he felt them tremble, "*You* —"

Dazai's eye ran up and down his face, as he struggled for breath. "Oh," he wheezed out, at last, hilarity and childlike wonder and *jealousy* alike softening his traits, "Oh, you really do fear it."

"*What?*"

He laughed. His blood boiled — he let go of him, brusquely, pushing him to land in between the pews as he did so.

The boy, curled over his *MACKEREL* splattered casted arm, immediately began to whine. Chuuya set his fingers over the edges of the coffin, breathing in more spacious air; he dragged his gaze over the darkened aisle of the funeral room, from the old chandelier to the empty frame that would have carried the dead one's picture.

Something rumbled in his lower sternum; he put his hands — firmly gloves-covered, as they always were *after* — on his stomach, searching the pull of stitches under his shredded waiter shirt. There were less than he had expected. A dry mouth and spasming fingers filled that lack; and the ache of burning muscles down his spine and thighs.

When he looked at his arms, they weren't black — reddened, thick scars, like branches and veins, dominated the skin instead. Chuuya could never forget their semblance.

"I was bored, waiting for you to wake up," Dazai justified himself, now standing on top of one of the pews, aimlessly twirling. "And I couldn't risk the *Special Division* spying on us going to a safehouse. This was closer," He shrugged. "And slightly more entertaining."

"Fuck you," Chuuya said.

"You may want to lay down."

"I'm not sleeping in a goddamn coffin —"

"You already have," he replied. "And you had three different seizures. You may want to rest, if you don't want a fourth one to lock you in there permanently," A sigh. "What a wonderful gift it would be."

"When I knock you out and bury you alive, I'm sure that will be even better," Chuuya swore, dropping back onto the crimson cushions of the coffin, once holding himself onto his arms grew too painful.

He gritted his teeth against it, again and again — disgustingly *certain* that his body was too young to creak.

The ceiling was littered in humidity stains. If he focused hard enough, he could hear the sound of the first engines preparing to rise with the sun — distant, the last song of owls. He couldn't recall the seizures, but he felt their weight like a physical pull, dragging his cheekbones down and filling his mouth with a horrible taste.

He thought of van wheels. It took him eons to find the will to speak again.

"She dyed her stupid hair red," Chuuya said.

In the middle of playing *Hopscotch* on the pew, Dazai hummed. "Does that qualify as meaner or nicer than effectively stealing your title? A nice survival technique — certainly a good way to attract the *Bishop Staff's* attention. But, still."

He took the hit for what it was — not a true attempt at cruelty. A sharp blade, all the same. "I don't know," he admitted. "I don't know if I care about either one," The chandelier was hit by a golden ray; it shattered in a thousand pieces, all of them blinding dots on the wall. Summer had always been prettier in Suribachi City. "I have to find her."

Dazai studied him.

"Why are we angering three fifths of the *Five Moons*?" Chuuya questioned, at last. "How did you know the music that played when —"

He trailed off. His fists were clenched; he thought it was too deafening to be anger. Perhaps it was merely an ache — the frustration of seeing the finish line, and realizing it was nowhere nearby.

"I had..." Dazai trailed off. Then: "I was keeping an eye on this *Queen of the Sheep* stuff."

His head pounded; he set his jaw. "And you didn't tell me, because?"

He didn't answer.

"The *Five Moons* —"

"We're dealing with them too."

"Boss will kill us."

Dazai's face was stubborn. Like it answered both questions, he concluded: "Not when he sees the results."

Easily, he jumped off the pew, uselessly scratching his arm over the scribbled cast — Oda Sakunosuke's handwriting still the only thing he knew of him — and pushed into the most pained spots of his body until Chuuya gave in, letting him lay next to him in the coffin.

"This isn't a two-place ride, idiot," Chuuya complained, elbowing him where he had held his wound under his palm only weeks before. "They already build these shitholes smaller than they're supposed to —"

“Dead bodies shrink,” Dazai recited, like he had been born to offer that piece of information.

“— they’re not *made* for two people.”

“But dying alone seems so boring,” the boy lamented, inconsolable. They fought for the right to have their arm over the other’s own, until Chuuya’s breath got too shattered and Dazai began sneezing. “It always did.”

He offered him his most revolted look. His hip was hurting, pushed strangely against the wood — the lid of the casket hovered like doom. For no particular reason, he held his body off Dazai’s, and let *Tainted* light his fingers up. “I thought dying with me wasn’t in the plans.”

“Never,” Dazai said, immediately horrified. “Not even if it’s the least painful death ever. *No.*”

“You tried to jump out of the car during the race against the *KK Company*,” he listed off. “You tried to stab yourself against *Shadow Blade*. You considered jumping off the roof against *Takasekai*. I was there.”

“You can be *around*,” he insisted, *tsk-*ing. “A good dog would mourn, singing along to the moon. I just don’t want you in my blood.”

Chuuya thought about the traces of grass sprouting between the rocks at the end of the well. Their crimson shade. The flutter of Dazai’s eyelids as he slept; the knowledge that he was devilish, and that Arahaki was just a tad more — something.

*I’ve been in there*, he thought about spatting.

Eyes on the ceiling, faster than doom, Dazai asked: “Why did you hesitate?”

He knew what he meant before his fingers could close around it. “I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“I was choking under an Ability-nullifying net,” Chuuya snapped. “And I was surrounded by civilians. Fucking *sorry* if it took me more than two seconds to get out the holy activation poem.”

Dazai’s eye traced his profile — he felt it like a physical thing; a race over the bridge of his nose. He didn’t turn; he remembered the scar by the boy’s eyebrow by memory. He could feel how feverishly hot he was even through the clothes, illness and summer and sunrise all the same — still, he wasted no time taking off his coat, gingerly laying it over the both of them.

Chuuya kicked it off. Dazai put it on again.

“Liar,” Dazai said, effortlessly.

He set his jaw, and didn’t answer.



Then: “Why didn’t you want me to use it?”

Dazai crossed his ankles; uncrossed them. He had to bend his legs a bit to fit inside the coffin — Chuuya wondered who it was meant for. He wondered where Yuan was — if Shirase would blame him for it. If Matsuda would.

“I think we’re done with *Corruption*.”

He seethed. “I think *I* get to decide that.”

“What is there to find out anymore?” the boy questioned — adorned in that empty inflection of his; meant to make one feel foolish. “The same useful nothings we have spent weeks chasing? We’re just weakening you — possibly, we’re accelerating a deterioration that is meant to be permanent. Mori won’t like that.”

“Boss —“

“Boss was punishing us.”

Undeniable. Chuuya had seen it in his eyes — Chuuya had felt it in every dead *thud!* in his chest; never waiting for help, but somewhat terrified to be left alone to bleed all the same. “He doesn’t do things that aren’t useful.”

“There is pointlessness in greed too, Slug,” Dazai scoffed. “There’s no controlling this. There’s no reeling in. You say those words. You break. If I’m not there, you die,” He shrugged. “That’s all there is to it.”

Coffin or not, it sounded as final as a funeral.

“You said,” Chuuya insisted, because he couldn’t recall the past, but he recalled everything of the present, “You said it was my choice.”

The boy didn’t hesitate. “It is.”

“And you think it’s the wrong one.”

“I think it’s not yours,” Dazai replied, with the same toneless voice he used to rattle off different discoveries from each time the chant left Chuuya’s lips — *less scars* and *less seconds* and *less self-directed violence* and *less recovery time* and *less time for me to run*. “I think it’s the syndicate’s.”

“I want what’s best for the organization,” he replied. His voice was a croaking nightmare; his nails full of dried blood. “I’m not like you.”

“You think you’re what’s best for it?”

“Better than you for sure,” Chuuya said, uncertain of whether he was lying or not. “That’s why I’ll be Executive.”

For once, the boy didn't argue. Instead, he elbowed and kicked until he managed to lay on his side, the collar of his coat brushing his lips over a layer of stubborn sweat — and blinked.

Huffing, Chuuya mirrored him.

“Odasaku had me bring Kazuko to a vet, a few days after I took her in,” the boy started. The sound of the man's name startled his curiosity — a bit unwillingly. Dazai was always secretive — he very rarely acted like that secrecy mattered to him personally, though. “Stunning woman. She was very kind when she refused my suicide proposal.”

He pinched the skin between his eyebrows. “You're gonna end up with restraining orders, one of these days.”

“I have two of those,” Dazai replied. “But they're for me. Mimiko just wasn't the same after she sent me that bomb. She knows I dislike death by explosion as a possibility.”

Chuuya stared. “What?”

“The vet told me this story about a woman who owned a pet snake,” he continued, calm. “She had brought him over to the store because it seemed like the poor thing had started starving himself — day by day, refusing to eat. Never a good idea for a snake. I catch rats for Kazuko *daily*, because I'm a great owner. And because Mori will get mad if she strangles a mafioso,” He frowned. “But the snake had also grown way more affectionate. He insisted on sleeping in the same bed as the woman. Snakes aren't very affectionate creatures — which I could argue against, but. Well. Her pet was suddenly all over her, every hour of the day. What do you think the vet told the woman?”

Chuuya raised his eyebrows, unimpressed. “*Cover yourself in dead rats and wait until the beast gets the message?*”

Dazai shook his head. “The snake was only starving himself in preparation. He kept lying next to her in an attempt to size her up — he was in a long term planning to eat his own owner,” His hand reached forward — snapped his choker against his skin, startling one of the electrocution scars. “She had to give him away. For some reason, it didn't sound like a good death to her.”

“Shit,” he commented, disbelieving. “She was just *sleeping* next to that hungry thing?”

“Don't be surprised. She loved it.”

“Love should stop at stupidity.”

“You think so? I rather believe it starts there,” Dazai turned onto his back again, pensive. As if tracing constellations, he raised his good hand, following invisible lines with his forefinger. “This place — it's a bit like that. I think. It might give you everything you hope for, but it *will* empty itself as well. The mistake is believing it an act of selflessness,” His hand closed; dropped onto his stomach. “It's just patient hunger. It's preparing to devour you whole.”

Offhandedly, for the first time that night, Chuuya took notice of his lack of hair clips — not a singular, funnily shaped pin. Then, a bit later, he saw the blood staining the wrists of his shirt.

He scoffed. It burned across his wounded lungs. “Are you warning me?”

Dazai glanced his way. With something like pity, he said: “I am, but I don’t think you get it.”

The lines of golden on the walls rose higher and higher.

“I do,” he swore, eventually. He thought about the Flags; about how proudly they had died for a starving beast — readying itself to claim their lives, after having digested the little they had existed for. “I just think you’re wrong.”

Summer would still breathe in and out. Chuuya would learn to die quietly, and Dazai to put viscera back into an unwilling carcass. Gloved hands would guide him through the process, passing the thread through the needle, because Dazai’s sole eye couldn’t see *that* good — bandaged wrists would allow him to sink his teeth into them, muffling screams.

*In diametrically opposite ways, he insisted, they had no choice.*

Dazai kicked his foot. “You’re buying us ice cream *and* Arcade tickets, when we manage to drag ourselves out of here.”

He seethed, knocking his foot again — harder. “Why do I always have to buy?”

“As far as you know, I’m younger than you.”

“*Are* you, even?”

“Who knows.”

Chuuya frowned, poking his ribs. “Are you even sixteen yet?”

He slapped his hand away. “Don’t be dense. I’ll tell you at the end of the year, or you’ll know which months to eliminate from your analysis.”

“As if I’d ever waste time analyzing *you*, ” he muttered. Then: “22th of September?”

Dazai gave him a *look*. “No.”

“3rd of May.”

“*Dang!*”

“17th of —“

“You’re not going to guess.”

“Statistically, I *have* to, eventually —“

A vein visibly pulsed on his temple. “You’re wasting time, that’s just silly —“

“Bet you’re one of those people who believe in the whole *born under an unlucky star*,” Chuuya insisted, mocking. “Is that it? Or do birthday hats look atrocious on you?”

A pointed look. “Hats look atrocious on everyone with a shred of good sense.”

“No, your head is just shaped like a lemon. Trust me on this. I’ve spent months with Kajii.”

“No, it *isn’t* —“

He snorted. It was funny, for a beat — it grew slightly less so once he felt something warm pool on his lips, racing down his chin in *tandem* to the sharp fit of pain in the middle of his chest.

“Ah,” Dazai sat up, unceremoniously parting what was left of his shirt. He pressed on his sternum with hands spread wide — over the sudden fall of blessed quiet, Chuuya heard nothing but the wheezing sound out of his throat and the wet crack of something that got his spine to stir, as if electrified again.

“That tickles,” he stuttered, choking on the blood in his mouth. A fit of coughs erupted from his wrecked chest; it was sharp enough to make the hands running down his sides pause.

“You punctured a lung,” Dazai explained. Chuuya stared at the light and wondered, not for the first time, if he blamed Mori for the duty to keep him alive. “Thought I’d fixed it while Hirotsu drove us here, but —“

He stared. “Gramps drove us?”

A glance. “Told him it was you. He came. Subtly threatened me if I let Mori get a whiff of it,” He cleared his throat, almost amused. *Mori always gets a whiff*. “Have to see how many more broken ribs you have left, but you need to be awake. *Sleeping Beauty* reenactment later.”

“I’m *trying*, piece of shit,” he hissed, between gritted teeth. The need to pass out as soon as *No Longer Human* activated had slowly weakened, which probably meant progress. Chuuya found that he missed it. Comfort, though, was a secondary concern. “What’s with you and fairytales? You didn’t,” He choked on his drool, gasping. “You — didn’t even know *101 Dalmatians* —“

“What’s with you and that movie?” Why were they in a coffin? Where was Yuan? “A dog through and through.”

“Fuck you,” A pull — A twist. Something wet and warm and horrifyingly screeching; stuck so deep inside him tears gathered at the corners of his eyes — rage or grief. “*Fuck you, fuck* —“

“I know.”

Chuuya saw white.

“Hey.”

“Fuck.”

Very soft — a tone he wouldn’t remember; a strange reminder of what it might mean for a boy who wanted to die to dutifully vigil over a corpse every single night: “Chuuya.”

“Slap me,” he vaguely heard himself pant. “If you see me close my eyes, slap me.”

Immediately, a palm connected with his cheek. It was unnecessary — his eyes, though glossy and shaky, *were* open — but it did wake him up.

Dazai was always blurry, through a veil of the world minimizing itself to fit in his lungs again. Chuuya wanted him to stop looking. Chuuya wanted him to stand outside of firing perimeter. Chuuya wanted to gauge his eyes off and nullify himself, wanted *anyone* else to do this —

*The worst of it*, he thought, as he waited to actually regain feeling in his legs. *The worst of it was the freedom.*

Side effects came in bundles. Joy and rage were ephemeral and unculpable — he hid them deep in the space between the third and the fourth rib, where no mirror could stretch far enough to reach. Sixteen years of colors were easy on the eyes of the stubborn, and Chuuya knew the eye Arahaki had devoured was blind in ways most wouldn’t grasp. It *saw*; it didn’t wander.

“You hesitated,” Dazai noted, again. It rolled on the floor like Judgement Day. “Why?”

He swallowed, stubborn.

*If it breathes*, Mori had said. *If it beats.*

Then, gritting his teeth against the stupid effort, he reached up to lay a hand on Dazai’s chest.

The boy didn’t move. Graciously enough, he continued twirling his hands over his ribs, his eye running over options that included more than the stitching set on the first pew. Chuuya studied the lines of his dress shirt between his fingers, a bit red but *never* creased — the good quality of the fabric, just like the one Kouyou had forced down his throat. He wondered if Mori had given that makeshift uniform to him — if he ever felt the weight of the coat.

Nested underneath layers of fever-warm skin and thin bones — he lived in a *shipping container*, Chuuya remembered, *unironically* — he found a fluttering heartbeat.

*No different from any other heartbeat*, he considered. Doc had insisted every heart beat a bit differently than the next; Chuuya had called him a romantic with all the venom one could get on their tongue without choking. He had a feeling Dazai might like the notion, though — for someone who wanted to die, he did seem to believe life rather pretty.

*If it breathes. If it beats.*

Stable as it was, the heartbeat changed.

Chuuya frowned. “You need to give up on that shit.”

“I’ve almost mastered it,” the boy replied, tonelessly, pointedly keeping his eye away from his face. “It’s not that hard, really — a bit like holding your breath. I just need to figure out how to make two beats close enough to not perceive a pause.”

*And then it’s D-O-N-E*, his heart said.

He huffed, curling his fingers. “You’ll give your idiotic ass a heart attack.”

“That would be wonderful,” he said, overly elated. Whatever he had done, or whatever healing process he had prompted Chuuya’s muscles to start, it seemed to be working — with less flames running up his throat, he exhaled; not doing more than kick Dazai’s shin when he dropped next to him, crushing his shoulder. “Won’t it?”

*As long as it isn’t Arahabaki who does it*, Chuuya thought.

He paused.

He covered his face with his hands. “That’s so fucking stupid.”

A curious nudge. “What is?”

He shrugged him off. “That’s *so fucking stupid*,” he insisted, nauseous. “God. Shit.”

“Are you losing your mind again? I told you already, we don’t have funds for —” Chuuya shifted until he could lay his cheek on the side of his arm, retching as he did so. Dazai fell utterly, awkwardly quiet. “Ah?” He cleared his throat. “I’m not a pillow, you know —”

“Shut the fuck up and die,” he ordered. *Every heart beats the same*, he had told Doc. Arahabaki had no time to concern himself with buildings or innocents or the fragile layers of flesh of his vessel; he always counted heartbeats, though. Heartbeats meant blood; blood meant silence. *A little exercise in memorization*, Chuuya swore.

Dazai didn’t drop dead, but he kept quiet. His heart wasn’t saying a thing — it was, on the other hand, strangely upbeat. *Most likely*, Chuuya nodded, *the fever was growing wilder*.

Sunrise arrived in full bloom, raining inside the room with a light so golden it hurt on the eyes. The coffin creaked under their weight. At some point, some eons later, his heart’s rhythm began to change — framed by an hesitance a less attentive ear wouldn’t have caught.

Attempts. The proof that even prodigies — even alleged, braces-wearing, blank-eyes demons — had to start somewhere. *If it beats*.

*Alive*, he thought. *That’s all there is. The rest is sharp teeth*.

“Don’t show off,” he remarked — knew it was biting and unfriendly, like it only came natural in Dazai’s presence. But he had learned how to say Chuuya’s name with his heart. It seemed like a lot of effort; so, Chuuya vowed to remember it.

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*[Teeth brushed his ear. Nakahara Chuuya ordered: "Come find me."].*

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### **Present day.**

"Dazai Osamu."

Dribbling the first rain of the summer from his raincoat, Chuuya looked down at the stunned Officer at the desk. "'This enough to bail the motherfucker out?'" he asked. "If not, you can keep him."

Upon the woman's frame, a *bleep!* blinked from a TV screen. A signal of some sorts — a group appeared from the entrance door of the Yokohama Central Police Station, carrying two men in black and handcuffs through the desks. Right as he spat on the police emblem on the floor, one of them happened to lay his gaze on Chuuya.

His eyes widened.

"The —" he stuttered, docilely allowing the men to drag him away, neck bending to follow him with his gaze. "You're — *he's* the —"

His companion kicked him in the side, ferocious; before the guards could tear them apart, he hissed: "*Shut your fucking mouth* —"

It took a hissing screech for them to disappear behind the corner — Chuuya, hands in his pockets, curled an eyebrow.

The Officer cleared her throat. Chubby fingers searched through the stash of cash he had abandoned under her nose; the banknotes had been acquired after selling Dazai's favorite seat from his office. If the woman noticed the smell of fish, she was gracious enough not to mention it.

Perhaps she couldn't smell it. The bustle of policemen and interns sagged the air with the sharp odour of corrupted righteousness — nauseating enough to remind him of Suribachi City, although he doubted any of those sanctimonious assholes in particular could have been *begged* to walk a step down the crater.

Only the most incompetent got sent to Suribachi.

"Relations to the prisoner?" the secretary dared to ask, tapping her pen.

"Thorn in my fucking ass."

The tapping came to a halt.

Chuuya stared at the lights on the ceiling. "Just write me down as his cousin or something."

"A cell phone number?"

He offered it.

"And three contacts, so that we can make —"

"Make sure you can contact us, make sure the jackass goes to court," Chuuya completed, obediently, scribbling the first made up numbers to come to mind. "It's two in the morning, Ma'am, and we're here over a mackerel and his pet snake. Can I just go grab him and leave you to your —" He glanced at the brick of pages in front of her. "— Book?"

She sighed.

From the dated red radio on the woman's desk, Hirose Fumiko's *Did I Ever Save You?* filled the murmuring room. *Music on worksite isn't quite professional*, Murase used to tut, sneaking to the stereo like it would compare to Chuuya's weekly crimes. *And yet, isn't it a marvelous distraction?*

His wet shoes dragged him to the hallway of cellbars. Behind the furthest of them, Dazai was a white and black bundle upon the bench, bending a bit more with every bored motion of his dangling leg. His coat was a makeshift blanket; on the floor, was a clean open pair of handcuffs — one the other inmates were gaping at.

Abandoned as he was, drenched to the bone from the ongoing storm outside, he could have been a corpse. Could have been Mori, too.

The man turned the key in the lock. Autumn-leaves eyes snapped to Chuuya and, abruptly, he was nothing more than a child.



“My knight in shining raincoat,” he cooed, pounding into him as soon as his squeaking shoes were done stumbling on the floor. August had come with furor and glory, revealing one of Dazai’s least amusing quirks — passing out while Chuuya was walking forward, leaving him unable to notice until the silence took a not-enough malicious note.

*Low calcium*, was his justification, filled with delight. Perhaps he believed he would crack his skull open during at least *one* of those falls. *Or high calcium. Or maybe it’s tachycardia. Or maybe it’s the heat. Or maybe it’s your ugly face, shocking me to the point of unconsciousness.*

“I knew you weren’t being honest when you hung up on me all rudely,” he was blabbering, still. “All those *I’m not getting your ass out of jail* and *Go sink your teeth in wet cement and die* and stuff. Pettiness doesn’t suit you.”

He didn’t *hug* him, because that would have been an incorrect term for the very subtle, very purposeful game of *hanging-off-Chuuya* that Dazai had slowly mastered in those last few weeks. “Last thing I need is murder allegations,” Chuuya offered, unimpressed.

The *Special Division* — with their nets and Chuuya’s taunts — would have *loved* the notion of his civil arrest.

“On the matter of things that don’t suit you,” Dazai continued, flagging his body like jelly, forcing him to carry both of them down the corridor. “I’m beyond glad you dropped the hat, but the question remains. Did you *mean* to leave the house dressed like Red Riding Hood, or —“

“I was with Ane-san, before you threatened to release videos of me bumping against light poles if I didn’t come bust you out,” he snarled, between gritted teeth. For peace of mind, he observed the stains his electric red raincoat was leaving on his shirt. “It’s the fucking *Flood* outside.”

“*Mmh*, ” Dazai agreed. “What’s one more divine omen? And you let her dress you up? *Aw*. You’ve got your little hood on and everything! I could cry with — ”

He dropped him to the ground.

Under the sound of his laments, he turned to the police officer, still studying the abandoned handcuffs. “We’ll be going,” he said, after throwing Kouyou’s other raincoat — a vibrant blue — onto the wiggling worm on the floor. “Where’s the glorified lizard?”

“Safely kept,” the man answered. “Animal Control will be arriving after the night shift.”

Dazai stilled. Looking up from under the plastic veil, he echoed. “*Animal Control?*”

The Officer crossed his arms. Adults weren’t supposed to all look the same, Chuuya suspected, but he still had to meet one that didn’t. “Surely you don’t expect us to simply give it back to *you*, young man?”

“*Kazuko*,” Dazai replied, pointedly, half in his raincoat and half in his Demon Prodigy attire, “Is a perfectly well behaved creature. How is it her fault if those braindead hoodlums ignored a command as simple as *don’t touch the boa constrictor?*”

Chuuya doubted that to be the full story. Dazai tended to be blind to most of Kazuko’s sensible wrongs — perhaps because Oda Sakunosuke had found her; perhaps because he missed those grasshoppers he’d sworn he used to own. Still — something about Dazai *caring* felt unnatural.

The Officer was still blabbering. “— And witnesses attest that you were seen freeing the snake —“

“Kazuko had one of her princess fits — she bit my arms, which is *why* I let her go —“

His eyebrows flew to his hairline. “You do understand that pets are to be removed from their owners’ care when they attempt to maim them?”

Dazai stared. “That won’t be a problem. I don’t even *own* Kazuko, legally.”

“Alright,” Chuuya intervened, raising two pacifying hands. “We’ll just go, yeah? You keep the thing. We’ll just — call Animal Services. Bye.”

“No, we aren’t —“

He paused.

Chuuya tightened his grip around his wrist.

“Yes,” Dazai said, obediently smiling up at the Officer — a terrifying sight for all the wrong reasons, but it was successful in forcing the man to take a step back. “Yes, we shall go. Thank you for everything — I had a wonderful evening in this beautiful cell of yours. Could you direct me to the storing of my personal belongings?”

The Officer frowned, suspicious.

Patiently, they looked at him.

“Fine,” he huffed. “Follow me.”

A wooden door at the end of the hallway was opened with a devilish screech. Dazai stepped on the man’s foot on his way in; Chuuya did his best to pretend not to be snooping around the most recent cases — particularly, information on the disappeared girls.

No red hair dye called his attention.

He hoped Dazai had just enough oxygen in his brain to steal at least one of the cigarettes abandoned in the lockets.

“Hey,” Chuuya started, slightly hesitant. “Is Matsuda working today?”

The Officer's lips parted.

"Here I am!"

Victorious, Dazai appeared on the doorframe, dangling a wallet that certainly wasn't his own and some poor fool's cigarettes in his hands. "Once again, it was a pleasure. I do hope you'll be able to fix your bathrooms. I did tell Tanaka not to eat my food — but he just wouldn't listen."

"If we ever get all the toilet paper out," the man grimaced, "I'll let you boys know."

"Must be hard to see all that shit while not looking in the mirror," Chuuya nodded.

Dazai nodded, too. "So sad. Let's go, Slug."

Any desire to demand answers disappeared as they walked down the corridor, and Chuuya was faced with the genuine horror dripping from the eyes of all the other prisoners. It was a different kind of fear than the one that had darkened the men's faces when they'd noticed him; more *tactile*. They'd stuttered around Chuuya, because voices traveled fast in the underground; but they were *gaping* at Dazai's skipping figure.

*Or perhaps*, he considered, watching as the boy rattled his knuckles down the bars, making the prisoners physically recoil, *he sang Ninety Nine Hangman Knots the whole night*.

It was then, belatedly, that the Officer seemed to understand what *else* was causing the ruckus among the lowlife jailbirds. "Wait a —"

Chuuya didn't stop walking. "Now?"

Eyes forward. "Obviously."

They ran.

At some point between their merciless slaloming and pushing through desks and tired police officers, someone was aggravating enough to activate an emergency siren. Kazuko, intertwined under Dazai's coat, bared her tongue at every gun being pointed in their direction.

Outside, it was pouring. It had to be way more violent than it had been when Dazai was brought in, because he yelped as soon as the heavy rainfall battered his body, making him stumble.

"Now you're grateful for that coat!" Chuuya screamed, as they slipped and crawled down the street, leaving the lights and the shouts of the police station behind.

"It's *tacky*!" he replied, securing the hood over his head. His voice was barely audible; he had to shield his eyes with a hand to even *attempt* to find him through that blurry curtain. "It's no wonder you're defending it!" A yelp, as Chuuya's push landed him ass first in a puddle. "*Hey!*"

Empty streets chased each other down the drain, devoid of car drivers willing to risk the weather and pedestrians with sturdy enough umbrellas. Placid puddles were shattered by their shoes, shredding the moon reflected in it in a thousand little pieces.

It was a fresh breath of air, richer than any fans or agonizing solutions to heat waves. Chuuya found that the rhythmic *tap-tap* on the plastic-like fabric of his coat grew more soothing with each stride he took; found that pulling each other's hoods down and watching Dazai twirl under the moonlight with a snake in his arms was somewhat exhilarating; somewhat aggravating.

Refuge came in the shape of a *konbini* — and the single, tired glance from the only cashier in the shop for the lakes pooling under their feet.

“She didn’t attack anyone,” Dazai insisted, curled inside the cart amongst the bags of food, patting Kazuko’s head. She rested her non-existent chin on his shoulder; eerily close to the arms Chuuya had crossed over the cart handle. “It’s not my fault if mediocre minds lower themselves to prejudice. She just wanted to show those kids how pretty she is.”

“*She* is a boa constrictor,” Chuuya pointed out. He floated a bag of chips in; kicked his feet up, settling them on the base of the cart. “And those were twelve years olds at a birthday party. You’re lucky your ugly face didn’t scare them more than the the literal poisonous beast —“

“I *told* you, she is *not* poisonous.”

“She could have strangled them.”

Dazai sniffed, conceited. “She’s no cheater. I’m the only one she will ever bring to the doors of death.”

“She’s certainly working to get you there,” he huffed, eyeing the red mark down his palms and neck.

Music played from some centuries old speakers — a background hum vibrating along to the lights and the thunder behind the glass entrance. Chuuya heard more than he was meant to: idle fingers turning pages from a magazine; Kazuko’s intakes of breath; the electronic buzz of Dazai’s phone in his pocket.

He closed his eyes.

Fingers skirted down the length of his arm, a senseless shortcut to another bag of chips — a clear path down rotten flesh they were both too aware of. An excuse, and a too obvious one at that.

“Which one is it?”

Which *side effect*, he meant, probably. He was pretty sure the boy kept a list, — *weird voice when he’s recorded*, it probably read; *blood loss and scars*; *weird hands and weird fingers*

*and weird everything* — although he wasn't sure if it would have been worse to have it written down or just memorized. Chuuya toyed with the possibility of not answering.

"None," he said, finally.

"You're such a dishonest child."

"You're younger than me," he grunted, watching the lights through his shut eyelids. The cart kept moving. Then: "May 24th."

Dazai clicked his tongue. "Wrong again."

"June 3rd."

"Wrong."

"July 7th."

"Your chances for the day are over," The boy clasped his hands, startling Kazuko from her sleep. Apologetically, he patted her tail. "The weight of knowledge is a herculean one, but I cannot imagine such emptiness would leave your skull comfortable," He sighed. "Don't you ever get tired? It must be exhausting."

"Not more than being in your presence," Chuuya scoffed. "And not my fault if you're a freak. Who in hell goes as far as to delete any trace of himself from the system? What are you scared of, people knowing your blood type?"

"We live in a dystopian society."

Extracting something from the back of his pants, the boy threw a thick dossier into his lap. "Just to make sure you don't get any ideas of me owing you something for Kazuko's escape."

Holding the cart still, Chuuya looked down at the file. His eyes only made it as far as to the second line — he ripped it out of Dazai's hands, and snapped it shut.

"How," he ordered, "The *fuck* did you —"

"I know you went to the *Bishop's Staff* base, a few weeks ago," Dazai replied, kicking the end of the cart. "The question of *why* was pretty easy to answer, all things considered. Apart from it being a pathetic reason, it still doesn't change how stupid it was of you to go there."

Chuuya scoffed. "They didn't even notice."

"Unfortunately," he confirmed. "If they had, they would have killed you with a holy knife and then ripped your limbs off, leaving your torso and head to be sacrificed to the Creator," Dazai leaned the side of his head on top of Kazuko's. "Nothing ever ends well in my life." Irrked, he turned crossed arms on him. "And you broke promise fourteen."

He groaned. "I *knew* you were going to —"

“*Unannounced solo missions are an unfair advantage to the competition,*” Dazai insisted, speaking over him. “Your carelessness certainly gives me all the ammunition I need to ask Mori for more jobs than you — so that when he makes the *right* decision for the promotion, I can say that you made your own *teenie tiny* bed —“

“I didn’t even engage with them —“

“The *Bishop’s Staff* is a bundle of fanatics,” Pale, veiny hands halted the cart; the boy jumped out, almost bumping against the cleaning supplies shelves — leaning down to meet his eyes. “Are you familiar with the term? It means they’re a bit off their rocker. Those women you saw?”

“How do you —“

“The *Staff* intends to steal the children they will convince them to have,” His braces peeked through chapped lips, an unfortunate match to his tone. “They take women and girls who have nothing to lose and they indoctrinate them, convincing them to offer their body for their holy mission: birthing The Creator.”

Chuuya stiffened.

His grin grew. “Unpleasant, yes? They’re busy guys. Beatrice and the *Nine Rings* could have hardly convinced them to join. They have their own God. Which is why we couldn’t group them with the other *Moons*. Which is *why*, the plan was to leave them alone, for now —“

“For the last time,” he snapped. “It wasn’t a mission.”

“I know,” Dazai tapped one knuckle on the dossier between them. “That’s why I got you this, yes? Because it’s *your* business. Say, is Pink Hair at Albatross’ right now?”

“Dazai,” he warned.

“Although, I assume she’s not much of a *Pink Hair* any longer. Or did she find time to dye it, while she led whatever miserable life led her into believing she could scam the *Bishop’s Staff* with no loss or baby formula?”

Chuuya set his jaw.

“How did you even convince her? Knocked her out and dragged her by force? It’s be a shame if she were to —” Offhandedly, the knuckle he’d knocked on the dossier slid down. Ripped one corner apart; Dazai blinked in tandem. “Well. Be denounced for crossing territories.”

He pushed him off.

Enough strength was put in the impact to make him stumble backwards, clashing against shelves of detergents and birthing a hiss out of Kazuko — who immediately sank her teeth in his shoulder. It wasn’t enough to wipe the unsmiling amusement off his face.

The cart miserably skirted down the aisle. Electricity pinched his skin, thousands of needles — thousands of sounds he wasn’t even supposed to hear. *Which one is it? All of them.*

“Stay away from her,” Chuuya spelled out.

“How valiant,” Dazai commented, as he rubbed his shoulder. “It’s been weeks since you found her, though. Are you sure she still deserves your protectiveness?”

“I’m not fucking around,” A cliff, he thought, the ocean and the Arcade. *Chuuya is dealing with an important Port Mafia matter*, Dazai had said. *Chuuya is his own person. What, did your friends betray you?* “Keep your disgusting hands away from her and let me deal with this.”

“Why?” Bored, he blew wet hair off his forehead. “Are you scared I’m going to repeat the same trick twice? I’m not *that* interested in your life. And this is a train wreck in high definition. I have no reason to interfere.”

“*This*, ” He shook the dossier. “*This* is you interfering.”

“You needed her records for the last year and a bit, didn’t you? I was just helping you out. It’s clear Matsuda isn’t being very —”

“Refrain from it,” Chuuya ordered. “Things go to shit whenever you involve yourself in my business. This is already a delicate —”

“*How* delicate are we talking about?” Dazai questioned. Blue raincoat, soaked bandages — the gun in the back of his pants. “Did she already try to steal the sum of money promised to the Chosen One? How many limbs did they cut off for it?”

Horrificed, he tightened his fingers around the dossier. “No, what the *fuck* — I’m not letting that happen.”

He shrugged. “You’re not the boss of hers any longer. If she wants to destroy her life, let her.”

“Joining a *cult* is *not her choice*. ” Chuuya heard himself laugh; it didn’t sound very amused. “It’s in the word, you moron. They’re *fanatics*, and — and they clearly found her when she couldn’t even defend herself. She had no one else —”

“*Chuuya*, ” Dazai sing-sang, two fingers tapping his temple. Then, undeterred, he reached forward — tapping his own. Dumbfounded, he met his gaze — viciously clashing against the apparent nonchalance of his tone; *familiar*. “Chuuya, she’s not your responsibility.”

Disbelieving, he stared. “Of course she is.”

There existed no correct words to describe the way his face seemed to fall. It drained every pigment of color — suffocated every glint in the wooden glass of his visible eye; scrutinized by it, too close, for a short breath, Chuuya forgot to be angry. Only —

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you,” he concluded. Questions didn’t taste like that — truth, especially from the mouth of a liar, had a too-peculiar shape to mistake it. Disappointed, Chuuya thought. Dazai was *disappointed*.

The step he took forward broke the pavement.

“Get the fuck out of my face,” he said.

All he did was look down at him.

“Go,” he insisted, voice raising. “Take your stupid snake that’s never going to kill you and go pretend you *can* sleep in your fucking container, like the miserable freak you are.”

A smile crept on Dazai’s mouth, *painful*.

“I haven’t changed?” he heard himself continue, as venomous as a bite. “Look at *you* and tell me what’s different. Is it the part where you drown yourself in the river, or the one when you get yourself arrested and the only person around to call is *me*? *I figured it’s worth trying?* Fuck you.”

Kazuko blinked at him. For a moment, he thought she might surge forward and bite him — all she did, though, was wrap herself even tighter around her owner’s arm.

*They always ended there*, he thought. There was the ocean between the rocks they had curled onto; there were armed men behind Dazai, and the ruins of his life over Chuuya. There was too much empty space, and they were too starved.

“Fine,” Dazai said, and boredom was an art — and he wanted to smack it out of him, that lack of care, that superiority, that *everything*. “Go beg your little lamb to love you again. Go tell her you’re sorry for ever pulling on your leash, like the obedient dog you are,” He leaned down; closer and closer, until he could bump his forehead with his own. In a hiss, he informed him: “I have no more job offers for when she inevitably sticks a knife in your chest.”

He stalked to the entrance. Chuuya could feel every scar he had gathered in the past year; every second that had passed. *You haven’t changed a bit*. He stared at the chip bag on the floor; stared at the wet floor, the same shade as the Flags’ graves, as Shirase’s hair.

One hand busy waving lazily, without even turning around, Dazai sighed: “Born a sheep, die one, yes?”

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“Are we looking for someone?” Noguchi called from the kitchen, distinctively impatient.



“No,” Chuuya screamed, as he tore the doors of Albatross’ wardrobe apart. There was nothing to be found; only Ōmu’s mocking chirps, vaguely shaped like swear words. He had been following him through every hiding spot he had found empty — the bathtub; the underneath of every guest room’s bed; the cupboard, too. “Yes,” he corrected. “Maybe.”

“That’s useful.”

“Just get yourself a coffee or shit and stop complaining,” With a sigh, he jumped down the top of the wardrobe, studying the rows of silky *yukata*. “Stay away from the *Dog Owner* and *Dog cups*, though. Found poison in them the other day.”

“*What?*”

Flipped open on the water mattress, the file stared at him in unabashed carelessness. *You ought to pretend inanimate objects can show animosity*, Pianoman had once tutted. He couldn’t remember why. The picture on the dossier framed a stranger.

He tapped two fingers on it. “What the hell are you playing at, Yuan?” he murmured.

The pink dye had long since abandoned her hair — it struggled to survive near the ends, interrupting a dirty cascade of forcibly red strands. There hadn’t been much the underground knew about the King of the Sheep — only flashes of red, and the certainty of doom. The hair laid like sheets upon a bruised cheek, showing off her jaw bone. Too thin.

*There’s a thief who keeps stealing food from the kitchen*, Koda had said, offhandedly. *None of the kids recognize her, but she’s young.*

A sheep corpse. The bloodied words on his window — the traditional vow every kid had to recite when they joined the organization. Chuuya had spent weeks memorizing it; since he couldn’t read, he had had to beg Shirase to repeat it to him, again and again.

She had been arrested seven times in the last year; thirteen in total since Chuuya had joined the Port Mafia. No one had ever bailed her out. Thievery, assault, and shoplifting were listed down the dossier — but if he assumed she’d stayed in Suribachi, he knew there were countless ways to put children to use.

He could have *asked*, if only she —

“It’s me,” he called, a bit pathetically. Like she would jump out of the walls. Then, he made his way to the dining room.

The open window behind the couch stared mockingly back at him, carrying wind and rain inside the room, a puddle of naivety on his part. He hadn’t thought she would return, not after a week of MIA — but he *had* hoped the storm might just push her to hide in Albatross’ bathroom.

Wincing at the water wetting his socks, he shut the window. On the wooden drawer underneath, Ōmu muttered something intelligible, blinking endlessly stupid eyes at him.

“Why did she leave by the window, anyway?” he asked — to the bird, or to Noguchi, standing quietly behind the counter, beer in hand. “I *taught* her how to pick locks. The emergency stairs are all dirty.”

Ōmu hummed.

“You stupid thing,” Chuuya concluded. He did caress its head, though — with two knuckles only, mindful of all the times it had tried to bite his fingers off. “Albatross should have made you into a Thanksgiving meal for Doc. Hey, Fishface, did you ever —“

When he turned to look at the other man, he fell quiet.

Noguchi made for a striking figure, inside the mirrorball-illuminated space — all black and all tense, leaning his back against the counter to stare down at the immense sea of pictures attached to every door of the kitchenette. The beer in his hand was held so tightly it was a wonder it hadn’t shattered; his eyes were on Albatross’ face.

Chuuya grabbed another beer from the fridge; jumped on the counter, crossing his legs. Staring along seemed the polite thing to do. Chuuya had no words to explain the emptiness of every face in those pictures.

*Looked at it so long it lost all colors*, Shirase used to say, about his Sheep bracelet. *But that only means I’ve been kind to it, right?*

“Why was he always throwing peace signs in every fucking picture,” Noguchi commented, eventually. Not quite a question.

“Maybe he wanted to spread the word.”

“What word?”

“Of peace.”

A snort. A pause. Then: “He always felt untouchable.”

Chuuya was on the floor, for a blink — wooden tiles wet with spilled drinks and blood, shoes skidding and pants getting soaked. He had his nails sunk so deep in Albatross’ jacket, he could feel them getting ripped off. He had wanted to touch his face — he hadn’t been fast enough; and then he had been too much of a spoiled child to want to touch his corpse.

*Albatross was fucking wrong about you.*

“No one is untouchable,” he concluded.

The man drank. “I guess not.”

They drank together.

Bringing him to his building had been an uncertain feat, concluded too quickly for Chuuya to linger on it. They had needed a safehouse, after getting chased that far by a squadron of

*Hounds* — he hadn't considered the implications of bringing him there. Regret wasn't quite the thing for him, though — the leap of trust would have to last.

He wondered if Noguchi would be offended by the notion.

"Tsuchiya told me about your sister."

His hum was noncommittal. The fish bone tattoo on his face flexed along with the movement of his mouth; it seemed strangely alive. "Did she?"

Chuuya shrugged. "'Thought I'd tell you. I dislike the notion of a conversation where one party knows more than the other."

A huff. "Of course."

He frowned. "What?"

"You're just so —" Noguchi put his bottle down. Following his lines of vision, he studied his own face in one of the oldest pictures, red hair in Albatross' mouth as the man forced him in the camera shot. "Remember the Observatory?"

He grimaced. Truly, he only recalled how slimy Dazai's skin had felt as he dragged him out of the water — how beautiful the star-painted ceilings had been. "What, how you led a squadron in with no previous command?"

Noguchi's side gaze was nasty. "How you pushed me out of the way of a bullet."

"Oh."

"See," he insisted, fervent, seemingly ready to tear every picture in that place down himself, "You don't even — back then, I was *actively* and *frequently* attempting to kill both you and your bandaged boyfriend."

"Most people in my life are."

"And you *still* risked getting hit by —"

"I don't get hit."

"You could, one day," Noguchi snapped. He picked up the beer again, possibly just to have something in his hands. It reminded him, weirdly, of Yuan — her tendency to pick up rocks and play with them during Sheep meetings. "I'm never sure if you're anticipating the challenge or not."

Chuuya traced the elegant patterns on his new shoes — all good leather and good intentions and several bucks less in his accounts; all promises not to care — and didn't speak.

"I'm just saying," the man concluded, teeth clenched, "That you're a goddamn confusing guy. Twin Girl —"

“Rin has a name, and you know it.”

“ — calls you *egg with a mammal in it*.”

He turned to stare at him. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Hell if I know. That everything about you is unexpected, I suppose. I’ve thought to have you completely figured out more times than I care to remember, in the past year only,” Noguchi said. “And I still have it wrong. I don’t know if anyone has ever gotten it right.”

He scoffed. “I don’t care for secrecy.”

“It isn’t a matter of —“ A huff. “Whatever. All I’m saying — perhaps whoever you’re looking for isn’t sure of what to do with you either.”

Chuuya studied the depth of his bottle; the glimmering green glass, floating under the liquid. Ōmu was still tending to its feathers; that one movie posted in the furthest corner of the ceiling was still about to fall off. Noguchi was still the one who held secret conversations with the Colonel, and the Flags were still dead, and Chuuya hadn’t been a Sheep for almost two years.

*I have no idea either*, he could have told Yuan. The only certainties he had, these days, were the scars on his skin — the poisonous taste in the back of his teeth. A seat he wanted; for whatever reason.

“I mean,” Noguchi added, “The whole *god of the Port Mafia* shtick might scare away even the ballsiest people, y’know.”

Chuuya groaned. “That’s just bullshit, and you know it. All of you do.”

“I was there, in Rengoku. I saw —“

“What did you see?” He turned to meet his eyes, undeterred. “I assure you — whatever stupid explanation you’ve come up with and taken for granted, is wrong. There’s nothing divine about any of this, except the good publicity Executive Kouyou insists on,” He downed the last of his beer and threw it in the can, not wasting *Tainted*. “I’m sure the Colonel must have told you all about it.”

Noguchi took the hit in silence.

“Not really,” he admitted, eventually.

It was unclear whether he was ashamed by the notion or not — if he really thought he had a shot at the Executive Position. *You don’t*, Chuuya could have told him. *If it isn’t me, it won’t be you*. Fairness was good — believing Mori would have time to set his starved eyes on a frame taller than his or Dazai’s was foolish.

It took Noguchi an endless time to speak again. “The Colonel used to say that — regardless of how inconvenient it would be for the Mafia — it would have been better if you didn’t exist,” He stared at the floor. “Albatross did always get plenty pissed off about it.”

Chuuya, too, took the hit in silence. Took it for what it was, too — an apology.

He sighed.

“Her name’s Yuan,” he spat out, brusque. “She’s — she was my friend, in Suribachi City.”

Noguchi curled one eyebrow. “The King of the Sheep had a queen consort?”

“You don’t even imagine how funny that joke is, in the current circumstances.”

“Is it?”

“She’s like Tsuchiya,” he muttered.

A veil of understanding pooled down his face. He straightened. “How did you piss her off?”

He stared at Albatross’ photographs — he counted each time Doc’s IV appeared in one of the pictures, and started again when he was done. That apartment was a haunted house with no ghosts to spare; Chuuya had made up the voices all on his own. Exorcism was a necessary art, if he wanted to stay. He knew how to start breathing again in every corner Albatross had stepped on.

“Surviving,” Chuuya offered. “I guess.”

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He had to knock her out to bring her to Albatross’.

“You know,” Chuuya offered, leaning his cheek on the edge of the couch where he’d laid her, “Red looks like shit on you.”

There wasn’t enough naivety in his bones to believe she would have come along in any other way; and Chuuya, trapped between the columns of the *Bishop’s Staff* underground base, had lacked the time to figure out a better solution. She’d met his eyes for a split, endless second — as unfamiliar as it was, framed by thinner bones and different hair, by hands that had memorized the shape of his arm by dragging and begging, *let’s go home, Chuuya* — he had recognized the light in them.

*Terror*, he had concluded. She was terrified of him.

Underneath was a knife, and her fingers, ready to grab it and tear him to pieces.

Laid underneath the mirrorball light, her face devoured him alive. Chuuya sat on the floor by the couch, pulling on a strand of faded pink dye and forced red — and he was fourteen, twelve, eight years old, and *gut-wrenchingly*, in a way he couldn't remember feeling since the split breath when a knife had been buried in him in, he wanted Shirase to be there.

Childish. Pointless. They had all leaned on Chuuya; that was how it worked. He was in London. They were fine. They could never be in the same room again, he thought.

It was fine. They were fine.

She was quiet when she woke up.

“Hey,” Chuuya offered. The floor was cold, but it was too rainy for it to be a relief; behind the smell of dust and old of his compartmentalization, Yuan was crystallized with a teasing grin and bright eyes. She had always been a happy kid. “You have two ribs in bad shape. Don't move.”

She stared, breath cut short on its way to her lips — eyebags deeper than ink. *A happy kid*, he thought. Had anyone in the Sheep ever been happy, or had they just been young?

A breath passed. Blanket falling to the floor without a sound, Yuan sat up, eyes forward. “I'm leaving,” she said, very easily — and stumbled to the door just as effortlessly.

Chuuya stared at the floor. “You're not,” he replied, just as simple.

Mere steps from the door, she froze.

He recalled what it had been like — looking up, bent in a half as he bled; meeting the eyes of people who knew to have cut off their last thread of hope. *Will he kill us*, he had seen them wonder, *will he kill us, now that he has no reason not to?*

He stood up; she still didn't move. They had given her a nightgown of sorts, old and frail, barely distinguishable from her pale skin. She hadn't brown an inch — she looked like a ghost. Chuuya couldn't imagine her being anything else.

Quicker than she'd ever been, she grabbed the nearest object at reach — a horse shaped lamp — and smashed it on his face.

“Mature,” Chuuya commented, studying the shattered pieces on the floor, after he flung it to the side. Yuan had already thrown herself out of the unlocked doors. “At least it wasn't a bucket of water.”

He ran.

Every flight of stairs was freezing under his naked feet — *Yuan is the fastest of us*, he recalled Shirase say, and *Chuuya, Yuan is crying again*, and, *this is Yuan; be nice to her* — and every light on the ceiling flickered along to the storm. It had been more than a year — roughhousing still came to his blood like a street kid's honor, as he landed on her back and

they rolled down and *down*, sharp angles and new bruises, punching and kicking and scratching.

By the time they landed at the entrance, his shoulder bled from reopened stitches — and she was too thin and too angry, and her lip bled from the cut of a step, as she backed away, grasping at the wall — breathing in and out; staring.

Her lips shaped something. Then: “Chuuya.”

*That’s a pretty name*, he recalled.

Her gaze was the ruins Arahbaki insisted on burying him under. Insisting. Accusing. He had begged for it, he remembered — to be blamed. Selfishness was rooted in his ribcage; *be grateful*, he thought Kouyou had said, *but for what?*

“I don’t care,” he offered, blank. She hasn’t said a thing. “You’re not going to those freaks.”

“Those *freaks*,” she hissed, fists clenched, “Are my ticket out of this hellhole — my ticket to a life somewhere else. *You*, of all people, —“

“Yuan.”

“You have no right to destroy that for me.”

“Listen to me —“

“Not again,” Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes; a rage so profound mistaking it for pain would have felt sacrilegious. Rogue and useless, he wondered if she had wasted any tears on the idea of stabbing him in the back. “Chuuya. You’re not taking my life away again.”

The LEDs on the walls thundered. He had the feeling she could trace the black lines running down his arms, no matter the gloves — had the feeling she could see his skeleton with each flicker of lighting; could count his bones and observe his play pretend closer than anyone, since a boy with his same face had dared.

He had the feeling she wouldn’t stop.

“Let me call Shirase,” he proposed, then. It had seemed easier to keep his tone distant with him — not lingering on how much the scar on his side hurt when it rained had been easier. “The idiot’s in London. If you let me call him —“ *Chuuya didn’t blame any of them*, he remembered. Chuuya didn’t want Yuan to hate him. “You can talk to him instead. He can talk you out of whatever bullshit idea you —“

“Fuck you,” she breathed.

Her fingers strangled her own wrists, old bruises and new scratches; reddened and forced to a halt — but not bleeding; *never* bleeding — Chuuya would have *died* for them. “You have *no fucking right* —“

Irritation pulsed on his temples. “Gonna get yourself killed to spite me? Because, let me tell you, there aren’t words for how *idiotic* —“

“It’s none of your —“

“You think you can take an entire syndicate on your own?” Chuuya hissed, stalking forward so suddenly that she had no time to step back. Nose to nose, he clenched his fists just tight enough to resist the urge to shake her awake. “You think you can beat a bunch of psychos bending over to get a *divine child*? You think they won’t kill you?”

Yuan’s eyes were wide as coins; shallow as her breath was, her disbelieving laughter cracked in high notes. “Don’t pretend you give a shit about that.”

*I have*, his throat screamed. Shirase had never understood either; Chuuya had never known enough words to explain. *I have. I did, even when you left me there.* “If I wanted you dead,” he heard himself promise, always just an inch taller than her, “I would have killed all of you a long time ago. You think I couldn’t have pulled it off?”

Her lips parted, scratched to blood. She pushed him off with so little strength, she ended up stumbling too. “Our blood is yours all the same.”

Chuuya wanted to carve it where she would see it — *the dead cannot blame*. He wanted to kick her right in the mouth, *this is Yuan, be nice to her*. He wanted, he *wanted* —

“Yeah. Yeah,” he scoffed. *Why be mean?* “The vandalization and the dead sheep conveyed the message pretty well. Where did you even find the time to do that shit? Do lab rats get vacation days?”

“*Lab rats?*” She barked a laugh, razor-sharp, cruel, the least familiar sound of his life. “*You’ve* got some nerve calling someone else that.”

Chuuya fell quiet.

“Yeah,” Her chest rose and fell, red tips tickling the embroidered collar of her gown — looking at him, thousands of years away. “Yeah, Shirase told me. Before he went and left, too — that’s all you guys were ever good for, isn’t it? No,” She stepped back, one foot after the other; she plastered her back to the glass doors, lighting framing her like a picture. “No, not again. *Fuck that*. I’m doing this by myself.”

His lungs were getting too used to the shape of her name. Still: “Yuan.”

“You don’t get to do this again,” Her murmurs were almost too low; it was all for herself, and never for him. “I’m not letting you. Never again. You’re not taking anything else from —“

He took a step forward. “Listen.”

“*Shut up!*” she snapped. “For once in your life, *shut up*, Chuuya.”

“I’m just trying to help —“



“Leave me alone,” she nearly screamed, her nails sinking in her own arms, shaking her head so fast it looked like a whim. “Leave me alone, *leave me alone*, I hope you die — “

Chuuya took no further step. He opened his mouth; closed it again, counting ribs he could see peeking from underneath the nightgown.

“Yuan,” he heard, somewhere. “They will kill you.”

Her disbelief was palpable. “*You* will kill me,” she insisted. Deer caught in the headlights; a sheep bleeding up in the sand. “I’m not going to let you. I hope you die. I hope you die, like the others.”

A pause. He tasted poison — the familiar was recurrent, and a ghost was in his building. “The others?”

“Leave me alone —“

“*Yuan*, ” he snapped, stepping forward. She stepped back, terrified, terrified, *will he hurt us now that he has no excuse not to?* “Yuan, what about the others?”

It was to no avail. All she did was shake her head, shake it harder, murmuring — walking backwards until her feet were outside, in the open rain. Chuuya wanted to follow her; Chuuya had never wanted to leave in the first place. Chuuya watched her run downstairs, disappear; heard the doors close as she left.

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Finding her became an intermittent job.

He refused to get Kouyou’s eyes on it, no matter the possible aid — refused to do anything more than stare back when she sat next to him, studying his burned eye like it might be more sincere than the other.

“When you’re ready to tell me, then,” she would say, each time. It carried the sweet bitterness of knowing she would have to investigate it all the same — knowing there was the Mafia, and then there was blood, and *then* there was them.

Chuuya would usually nod.

Sometimes, he would try to imagine what she would say if she knew — if she would accuse him of chasing pictures long faded. If she would understand — if she had cried, even once, since she had buried Beatrice.

At some point, she assumed Arahabaki was to blame.

“When you’re ready to tell me, then,” Kouyou told him, one night — 3 *A.M.* blinking from an old clock in her office, and the documents of their latest transportation messes between them. This time around, she reached for his knuckles — tapped them, as if she knew the skin underneath had been decaying a bit more since *Takasekai*. “When you’re ready to talk about it as if it’s you, and not something unknown.”

“I know it’s me,” Chuuya huffed.

It wasn’t about that — Chuuya never wasted time thinking about Arahabaki. It was what the entire crater and some more had done for years; feeding and bathing a myth that didn’t exist outside of their fear of it.

*He doesn’t know*, he had wanted to tell them. *He doesn’t feel*. *He doesn’t care*. He was the blood flowing in his veins; he was his guilt and his rage and his victory. Chuuya only blamed him to have an excuse not to scream at a mirror.

“But it’s inside me,” he said. He hadn’t quite meant to; he couldn’t stop counting the flares in Yuan’s eyes when she’d said, *he told me*. He wondered if she could see it — if the doctors could — if everyone could. “Why does it burn?”

Kouyou shrugged. It was as delicate as a petal being carried by the wind — mercilessly, she offered: “Doesn’t it burn to be anything at all?”

Two days later, Chuuya found Yuan kneeling by the last pew of an abandoned Church the *Souls* had occupied, months before.

“You don’t even believe in this shit,” he said.

She didn’t even look the part. Someone had given her a grey hoodie; she was kneeling a bit too casually, and boredom lined every knuckle of her crossed hands. Hands on his pockets, he leaned against the pew, too.

“You don’t know what I believe in,” Yuan said, toneless. She was fiddling with banknotes; she had always had swift stealing fingers. A new bruise colored her cheekbone.

“There’s no *Creator*,” he informed her, helpfully. “And he won’t give you — or a child, or *anyone* — an Ability.”

“Why would anyone want one,” It wasn’t a question; she looked up at him like she expected an answer all the same. Her face was devoid of it all — it was worse than the tearful rage. “You came with one, didn’t you?”

*Tell them I’m here*, Arahabaki whispered.

*I did*, Chuuya replied, watching her stand and stumble out of the ruined doors. Talking with himself had made *the beginning* less boring; it was better than screaming at the sky. Counting the pounds of blood on a fake god's hands was easier than counting them on his own; it made studying the scars down Dazai's chest easier, too. *She doesn't care*.

Yokohama would never be Suribachi City.

There were no telltale places he could scout to find a trace of pink that was no more — but Chuuya had been keeping his eyes on the Sheep for as long as he could remember, and falling back into old habits was easier than breathing.

*This* Yuan liked the coast. The sea was nonexistent and vaguely legendary in Suribachi City — he wasn't surprised to find her dangling her legs over the railing, eyes settled on the current, pulling at the cuticles around her nails until she was bleeding into her own palms.

"I want you to leave," she told him, as he leaned his shoulders on the rusty metal.

"I know," Chuuya promised her. The failed attempts — when she would notice him and turn the other way, and he couldn't quite push himself to follow her — had taught him something simple: never stand too close, and never show his hands. "I just don't particularly care."

Her eyes searched him thoroughly — they drained him to the bones, scouring the hollowness. She wore her fragile skin with quiet uncertainty; stubborn enough to stay, but clever enough to know the curve of her shoulders meant something. *To be anything at all*, Chuuya thought.

She hesitated on the burned strand of his hair; his unpinned waistcoat; the blood on his boots.

"Look at you," she spat, repulsed. In another life, it was a mocking grin, as they tried on silky clothes stolen from passersby. "You look like *them*."

At the *Old World*, on the other end of the city, he remembered being introduced to dead men walking — not that he knew; not that he would have *dared* to, when they had seemed like the most *alive* thing in miles. Iceman, he already knew — both his face and his blood. Iceman he had punched, after those same words had been hurled at his face — at the green leather of his jacket.

His answer did not change, and yet —

"I am one of them," Chuuya told her.

"You've always been, haven't you?" Her frame shook, either rage or cold. They were saying it might rain again. Did she sleep in the *Bishop Staff's* hospital beds every night? "Even before they found you. The Port Mafia has always been a bunch of traitorous, cowardly *roaches*. You were *made* for them."

"I don't care what you think of me," he insisted, unimpressed. "I'm not here for your judgement. I'm here to help you."

"Too late," Viciously, her hands trembled, incapable of working correctly; nonetheless, she managed to hold onto the railing, fingers on each side of her legs, *sinking*. "Too late. I don't

need you anymore. I can do it on my own.”

“I know you can.”

“Then let me.”

He stared at the waves. “Not risking it.”

She bit her cheek. A bad habit; Momo used to pull her hair for it.

“You want to start anew,” Chuuya said. “Alright. You get it. You don’t have to sell yourself to those psychos. I have *money*, alright, and Shirase is trying to create a new group —“

“I’d rather die.”

He took the hit in silence.

*It wasn’t fear*, he thought. It wasn’t *fear* and it wasn’t hesitation — no matter how vivid the fire in her pupils was, no matter how *constricting* it felt to be the sole target of such unbridled rage. A child was looking at him, no matter how angry she was — a child hated him, and Chuuya didn’t *fear* her; but he didn’t want to look at her.

*This is Yuan. Be nice to her.*

“I’d rather *die*, ” she repeated, voice breaking on those last few sounds, “Than take anything from you, Chuuya. I’d rather die.”

Something was stuck in his throat. Two sharp mouths would amount to nothing. *You should try being angry, sometimes*, Doc had told him. “You’re being unreasonable.”

“You killed us,” Yuan replied, toneless and insistent, always the same. She said it each time he found her. “You killed all of us. You don’t get to grieve.”

*The dead don’t give a shit.* “Your *spite* is not enough reason to —“

“You want to make amends?” She laughed, blood around her nails, fingers tight on the metal, eyes too wide not to hurt. Chuuya did his best to recall what she looked like when smiling. “You don’t get to, Chuuya. You don’t even care, do you? You just want feel *better* about yourself, for *killing us* —“

“Yuan —“

“I want you to leave.”

*That*, Chuuya thought, *was always clear.*

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This Yuan had many stories.

He wondered, in rare moments of lucidity, if the *Bishop's Staff* suspected his involvement with one of their pearls; if it was why she was always around, these days — when he had spent more than a year hoping, in a corner of his mind, to catch a glimpse of his past in the streets.

To kill it, perhaps. To assess. To apologize. To stab them back, to walk past them, to make them beg — until he did not care anymore.

“Yuan,” Chuuya called, quiet, nudging her curled up body with his toe. “Come on, kid. I’m bringing you home.”

Facing the blooming trees of Yamashita Park, fingers intertwined with one end of the bench she laid on, she didn’t speak. The moon was gentle in its cover, bathing the wet grass in silver specks. The park was empty and eerily silent — Chuuya allowed *Tainted* to come to life just to hear its buzz.

Yuan shivered — more like a spasm than goosebumps. Nonetheless, he took Pianoman’s coat off, and laid it over her, crouching down.

“What did they do to you?” Chuuya asked, at last. There was bleeding cut between her eyes, running over the left side of her nose; she didn’t seem to particularly care about the dirt and the dried blood sticking to her skin. “Did they find you out?”

“They got Fumiko first,” she replied, eyes right over his shoulder. The coat covered her all the way to her lips; it made her look younger. “One of those stupid white vans. Me and the others killed them. But she’s still in the white van.”

A head-splitting memory — short hair and wide eyes; her favorite blue overalls. “Alright.”

“She’s still *there*, Chuuya —“

“I know,” he assured her. He put one arm under her knees and one under her back; she was lighter than a feather. “It’s alright.”

Her cheeks were sickly red; she cuddled her cheek against his shoulder, humming, pupils blown out. During his research, he had read something about the little care the *Bishop's Staff* had for their members’ wounds — they had probably stuffed her with something just powerful enough to make her wobbly through the pain. “Aimi was so pissed,” she murmured.

“I can imagine.”

“The assholes made her throw herself from the roof,” Yuan recalled, distantly, her weight all on him. “Either that or they would shoot us.”

Chuuya recalled two twin pairs of legs, jumping up and down the levels of the settlement — gaping at his flawless victories, pulling his pants, dragging him to the futons, *it's too cold to sleep alone, Chuuya!* “That sucks,” his mouth said.

“I hope you die,” she grunted, lips brushing his ear. Her feet were naked where they dangled from his arms, bleeding near the heels; Chuuya laid his chin on her forehead. “I hope you die.”

She fell asleep on Albatross’ bed.

It gave him the chance to clean her up to the best of his abilities. He didn’t dare undressing her, but he gathered enough wet towels to do the job — disinfected old cuts and bruises, found a pair of socks Albatross must have forgotten the existence of in the depths of a drawer — *dead*, he thought, *dead too* — and put them on her splintered feet. He sat on the floor.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but Yuan was gone when he woke up.

*This* Yuan was different from the one he remembered, but not less predictable. And so he found her — day after day, and he brought her home when the *Bishop’s Staff* left her too out of it. He locked her in his bathroom until she threw up whatever they had been giving her to heal — dodged every plate and every treasured belonging she threw to his face.

“Sorry,” he told Albatross, during his next visit at the Cemetery. “I don’t think you would mind. But sorry.”

The more he found her, the angrier she grew.

She had grown strangely deadlier than he remembered — skilled with the knives she tried to sink on him, screaming her throat raw and then not speaking for days. *Only she had survived*, she made sure to tell him. And so, too smart to believe even her new abilities would land a hit on him, she told stories.

“Katsuki *enrolled*,” she laughed to his face, as he pushed her down her knees, near the toilet, fingers down her throat. Hirotsu’s discreet enough research had concluded most of the *Bishop’s Staff* was hooked onto a chemically modified sort of morphine; something too strange not to be an Ability. Nonetheless, he worked with it. “He said he would, yes? They — *ah* — They busted him. They killed him. No records to speak of and criminal behavior, and they didn’t even send him to jail, they just killed him,” Deep in the toilet, she looked up at him, hair red and eyes redder, “Where the fuck *were you* —“

Ino worked at a factory near the slums, just like Shirase had — only less lucky. Some traitors from the *GSS* had recognized her immediately.

“They blamed us,” she recounted, vacantly, arms around her knees, surrounded by shattered glass from the window she’d kicked and kicked. “The *GSS*. They called us crazy for attacking a new Post Mafia asset — suicidal, for letting you live. *You told us we could kill*

*him. You told us he was one of you.* They killed so many of us. It's why we scattered. It's why Shirase left; that," She frowned; her lips trembled. "That *piece of shit*."

Chuuya wanted her to stop talking.

She never did.

Mitsuo was shot. Kyo was taken by the white vans. Arata and Michiko were thrown into some juvenile jail — found by kids who the Sheep had exiled. Saburo tried to join the *Shadow Blade*. Yoshito and Kohaku and Zuki — and when she was done with the stories she just started again, and again, *and again*.

*I hope they're dead*, he'd told the twins, Kajii. *I hope they're dead, because —*

At the dead center of her abdomen were intertwining tattoo lines — black ink on red one; shapes he never lingered on enough to recognize. The *Bishop's Staff* symbol was not the first or the last of the marks Yuan had caused herself since he'd met her; this one was purely more permanent.

Dragging her out wouldn't be easy.

Yuan wanted the *money* — an incredible amount of them, according to the voices. Enough to live the rest of her life comfortably. All the women who had been promised those amazing sums of money had been found dead.

"Don't touch me," she told him, one night.

So he didn't.

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The first time he tried to push her into the bathtub, she threw up.

Chuuya was nothing but stubborn; she was nothing but a piece of him. They spat liquified hatred in each other's faces, words he didn't even remember — fighting like the older Sheep would call them for dinner and make them shake hands in no time. Inconsequential. *This is Yuan. This is Yuan. This is Yuan. Be nice to her.*

"Chuuya," Hirotsu questioned, only once. "What are you doing?"

He didn't know what to answer. It had been more than a year — he knew he had grown. He knew he had seen *more*, had seen too much; he knew there was a solution just out of reach. He still couldn't let go.

Through the ghosts and the hysteria, he gave up on any semblance of maturity — *be nice to her* — and started screaming back.

“It's money, Yuan,” he snapped, each word an uncomfortable weight on his tongue. “I don't need a friendship bracelet. Take them and get the fuck out of here, and you'll never even have to see my face again.”

“No,” Her lips barely moved.

Her favorite spot at Albatross' was behind the television, curled up and silent — perhaps because of the electrical hum it gave. But Chuuya didn't know if he was the only one to hear it.

Her silence revolted him.

Yuan had been the loudest of them all — was he supposed to blame himself for what she couldn't be anymore? Again and again, and again and *again*, once for each member of the Sheep, twice for Shirase, a hundred times for a girl who would rather wait and see than touch his fingertips?

“They're not going to let you get away with this,” Chuuya insisted. He didn't know *what* she was doing to take care of the *Bishop's Staff*; he knew it was bound to fail. “You're not a fucking idiot. Stop acting like one. The best you can hope is for them to lock you in some cell and bind you to the syndicate for the rest of your days —”

“Maybe it's better like that.”

Barely a breath.

It struggled to exist — it shone blindingly, reflecting the squares of light of the mirrorball. Scratching his bones, looking for a foothold.

Chuuya gulped it down like the poison under his bed, and knew there was no one brave enough to choke it out of him.

“Better like that,” he echoed.

“Do you think being alone suits me?” Yuan scoffed. There was no fear in her eyes; nothing but a vacant carelessness for it all. She would have tried to murder the *Bishop's Staff* leader without even a weapon. “I had my family, and then the Sheep, and — and then I was alone. Look what I can do when I'm *alone*.”

Chuuya didn't understand.

“You want an organization,” His brain chased the answer — just out of reach. “They're going to kill you.”



“Aren’t you glad?”

His jaw hurt from clenching it too hard. “You want an organization,” he repeated, eyes to the pictures in the kitchen. “The *Bishop’s Staff*?”

“They’ll have me.”

“The Port Mafia would have you.”

It escaped before he could think about it.

Yuan’s sluggish eyelids were parted with a brutality that seemed to bleed. It was the most alive she had looked since he had found her — locked in a silence so merciless, it threatened to shatter his bones on impact. Chuuya knew it was a mistake the moment he made it.

Too late.

“Fuck you, Chuuya,” she gaped, shaking, barely words, a growl and a scream all in one. She stumbled to her feet, pushed herself against the wall — away from him. “*Fuck you, fuck you, who do you think you are* —” Chuuya dodged the glass souvenir she threw, heard it shatter behind his shoulders, *sorry, sorry again*, felt Arahabaki giggle in the space between his ribs, begging him to get angry, *you’re already there*, “You don’t get to say that *shit to me*, you don’t get to, they’re all *dead* because of you, *fuck you, fuck you*, I hate you, *I hope you die!*”

“You don’t have to work with me,” he insisted, stupidly. He imagined it, just for a moment — having her close enough to check on; having her safe enough to feel — “Stop and *think*, for a *second* — my Boss, she could train you, and —”

“I’ll die before I join those bastards,” Yuan breathed, hysterical, terrified. “They destroyed us. Don’t you *see*? Chuuya, how can you not *see* — they tore us apart, they dragged you into their mess and —”

“It’s *me* you’re pissed of at,” he insisted, “And you’re going to let it kill you, like a fucking coward —”

“They killed us,” she seethed. “They killed us — *you* killed us, and I’m not letting you —”

“You,” Chuuya spelled out, snapping his teeth so sharply even his skeleton seemed rattled, “*You* are the ones who stuck a *knife in my* —”

He snapped his mouth shut so fast he tasted blood.

Albatross’ home wasn’t built well enough for it to ricochet against the wall. Close enough to count her too-dark eyelashes, Yuan flinched from the impact all the same — stared at him, mute and speechless, eyes wide.

Chuuya tasted the betrayal in his tone too late.

*Suribachi City* — he had once declared, to no one but the pages of poetry he liked to read — *had been a merciless mother*.

It had been easier to see, in retrospect. He'd discovered it in his reflection in the Flags' eyes — telling stories they blinked at, marveling at the ease with which his lungs breathed when his shoulders weren't carrying the sky. Suribachi City had been a merciless father — earth-rough hands and broken pipes of lullabies, and a family whom he would have bled himself dry for — a promise that seemed weak, these days, with Arahabaki's claws in him; because it was easier to admit Chuuya had always known he wouldn't die. *Couldn't.*

Suribachi City had been a merciless home, and Chuuya hadn't blamed it for a second, as he bled out under the too-smart eye of a demon. Sins and devils were meant to make deals; the rest was a side effect — an unblemished victim.

*Don't tell Shirase,* he'd told Adam.

*I don't want anything he has to give, and he wouldn't give it anyway.*

"I want you to leave," Yuan stuttered out.

Chuuya rubbed his temples. "I know," he swore. "I'm know. But I'm *not*, Yuan."

It rained, the next day.

*Angry*, he left her to mope in Albatross' bedroom and went to the Headquarters — and *furious*, he let Kouyou drag him around with her elegant delight — and *tired*, he kicked the rusty gates of the Church when he passed by. Answered Dazai's only allowed call, sat in a shopping cart and thought, *you haven't changed a bit, have you.*

"It's me," he called, because the Mafia's resident demon was, ultimately, cursed with the gift of being *right*. No answer came.

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After the first day of rain turned into a full week, Chuuya sat under the canopy of a bus station, and selected the one contact on his phone with no name on it.

It rang longer than he had expected it to, an intermittent, unchangeable *beep* that ended up being as comforting as the slow traffic of the afternoon — grey wheels on grey streets against a grey sky; the waves of the distant sea shattering on the bay without a sound. Chuuya hadn't been cold since Rengoku; still, he sat on the wet bench, and he counted goosebumps.

Eventually, a metallic hiss interrupted the *beeps*; in a distinctively surprised Japanese, the voice in his ear questioned: *“Buichiro Shirase. Ah, if this is about those redundancy fees — Jeez, I’m sorry, man, I’m not even on your continent anymore.”*

Dropping his temple on the rusted frame of the canopy, Chuuya closed his eyes.

*“Hello? Heeeello? Anybody there?”* Some rustling and murmuring later, Shirase cleared his throat, clearly peeved. *“Seriously, come on. I saw the number. It’s from Japan. Yes, Jess, I know the Japanese — Of course I do! — Is this a prank call? I have no time for prank calls. A prank call from the motherland? How bored are you, dude. Come on.”*

A two-seats car passed by quicker than the others; it raised a small wave of dirty rain water.

The raindrops reflected the fading sun. He tried to find his eyes in them; tried to remember if storms had looked the same in Suribachi City. If *he* had — if a jacket and a bracelet and one secret more made a man, or if loss did. If he was allowed to miss it, if he didn’t want it back.

*“You don’t want to mess with me,”* Shirase was saying, still, growing more brazen with each second more of silence. He was the first voice of his memories. *“You hear me? If this is going to be some — Some Haunting Of The Park shit, with you calling anonymously every three days and breathing down my neck — I won’t get scared, you get me? I’m not a brat. I don’t get scared of this stuff. I’m a gang leader, you hear me — Ah. Hypothetically. Not seriously,”* A pause. English murmurs filled the background; the sound of skin being slapped. *“I — Listen, is this about those taxes? The factory didn’t even have an actual contract, man, you can’t — Do you even know who you’re talking to, you absolute pile of—”*

Chuuya closed the call.

He lowered his hands — tugged at the sheep-shaped phone charm; one of the first ones Albatross had given him. A joke. *Or a reminder*; the man had winked.

The police car arrived only a minute later, parking right by the sidewalk.

Kouyou’s camera was a weight around his throat, as he hurried under the rain — after a training session she had deemed him too distracted for, she’d sent him to get it checked out. The lenses were slightly cracked — when he landed on the passenger seat of Matsuda’s car, slamming the door behind him, they seemed to glisten.

“So,” he asked, distractedly, “Anything?”

Very pointedly, the man cleared his throat.

Chuuya raised his eyes.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

Looking entirely too comfortable for the situation at hand, Hirotsu raised his monocle under the little light filtering in from the window of the backseat, cleaning it with his scarf. He didn’t *blink*; he only glanced at the occupied seat next to him and said, low: “Quieter, please.”

Curled up under his coat, forehead plastered uncomfortably against the window, Dazai deftly pretended to snore.

Chuuya stared. He stared some more; still speechless, he turned to look at Matsuda.

The Officer's jaw seemed to be stuck in a death grip; he kept his eyes to the streets, knuckles white around the steering wheel, and clipped out: "Unpredictable circumstances."

"Some of Dazai's business with Kazuko had to be clarified on more official locations," Hirotsu explained. The man had a talent to seem entirely in his place in every situation; framed by a police car, he still held some careless regality. Chuuya kind of expected to watch him start smoking. "Officer Matsuda was kind enough to offer us a lift to Mori Corps."

"The kid got inside and started screaming until I started the car," Matsuda translated.

"He was just too tired."

"Was he?"

Undeterred, Hirotsu extracted his lighter. "Endlessly so."

"Yes," The man glanced at the rear view mirror, where Dazai slept soundly. Pretended to, at least — Chuuya wondered if Hirotsu was aware. Dazai *never* slept in public. "I can see that. The sheer number of Officers he's offered to commit a double suicide with might have influenced it."

"No," the Commander replied, "I believe he's very much trained for that."

A vein in Matsuda's temple pulsed.

It felt as if he had tumbled in another dimension. The stormy afternoon traffic was like a broken machine; the low murmur of the station radio was barely high enough to break the visible tension in the man's shoulders. Chuuya wondered if he feared them leaving blood stains on the seats.

Because everything in the Mafia moved according to his plans, he tried to meet Dazai's gaze in the rear view mirror.

They hadn't met since the *konbini* — all he had had of him were whispers on the competition, propaganda fliers, and the strange position his *Dog Owner #1* cup was abandoned in, at weird hours. The file he had given him on Yuan still sat under Albatross' bed. The words he had said were still *somewhere* — stuck under his nails, maybe.

"All right," Chuuya concluded. "So. Do you have something for me?"

Hesitantly, Matsuda glanced to Hirotsu.

"Gramps' fine," he forced himself to say, as uncaring as possible. He could feel the man's gaze on him. "He won't talk if I ask him not to. Yes?"

The Commander hummed. “If not against — upper orders.”

He scoffed, turning Kouyou’s camera on — sinking down his seat as less petulantly as possible. “As if I would ever go against them.”

Another hum. *Fair.*

Officer Matsuda still seemed hesitant; with a sigh, eventually, he offered: “Nothing much that I can do for you. I’ve been working on clearing her record — making sure big offenses get registered as minor, erasing her from the *looking-for* database. Stuff like that. If you can get her out, she could start a mostly normal life,” He glanced his way. “I can’t help you with getting her out unless you give me *all* of the information, though.”

“I don’t need help for that part.”

“Yeah,” he commented. “You and your — *jewelry business* will take care of it?”

Chuuya didn’t answer.

Another sigh. There was a new pen in the man’s pocket — the cap was yellow, this time. “I’m assuming she was behind that *Queen of the Sheep* ordeal, then. Any feelings about that?”

He was painfully aware of Dazai’s presence behind his seat. “She needed a name to protect herself with,” he said. “It’s not important. I just need someone on the inside to make sure she won’t be taken from one prison to another.”

"An insider?" Hirotsu perked up, boredly exhaling a cloud of smoke. “The state force is worse than I thought.”

Matsuda gritted his teeth. He could have *sworn* the bundle under Dazai’s coat snorted.

“Listen,” the man said, some endless time later. The pictures under Chuuya’s fingers were growing more and more familiar — Kouyou a bit older in each of them — Elise’s, Mori’s, and Hirotsu’s blurred faces appearing sporadically. By the time the red of his hair and his first suit made their debut, Matsuda had a weird look in his eyes. “When you get her out — I could work something out for her.”

Chuuya raised his eyes. “As in —“

“As in taking her in. If she needs it.”

He tried to imagine how well Yuan would react to the notion of living with a police officer — someone so tightly connected to Suribachi, too.

“With your statal salary and three kids fresh out of divorce?” He lowered his eyes again. “You have enough on your plate, old man. Last thing she needs is — Well. I’ll figure something out.”

“Respectfully, Chuuya,” Matsuda said, a bit forceful. “Because I have a feeling you *truly* want to help her — I don’t think bringing her from one well of crime to another will do her much good.”

Hirotsu cleared his voice.

“All offense,” the Officer spat.

“None taken,” he replied.

“No need to worry,” Chuuya cut in. “You can unclench, Officer. She has no interest in any jewelry business,” One edge of Pianoman’s hair appeared in a corner of a picture of the meeting room; in the next, Chuuya was standing by the door of Kouyou’s office, eyes a different shade and a tad too vicious. “Or in staying where I am.”

At that, even the animosity between the two men seemed to trail off.

It was sort of pathetic — the way they both awkwardly scrambled for a more normal topic of conversation. An attempt to give him a moment to himself, perhaps — unless they had bonded over the recent weather updates while he wasn’t there. Chuuya let it wash over him, coddled in the same uncomfortable warmth Hirotsu’s wink in the rear view mirror gave him.

It took three pictures, all dated from after the parking lot accident, to notice what was wrong with them.

Under the hum of Hirotsu using the terms *unusually frosty*, the lines of all of Chuuya’s frames grew blurrier and blurrier — as if, no matter the carefulness, the camera had refused to catch him still. His eyes seemed strangely vibrant whenever caught from too close; the few scars visible on his skin glowered a red that had nothing on *Tainted’s* own.

The more recent pictures went further — the scarlet marks shimmered from under the clothes, too. The last one — the one taken at Albatross’, as Kouyou prepared him for the temple visit — framed one burned eye shining too bright to be natural; and then, two spiral scars right in the middle of his cheeks, bleeding down onto smiling teeth.

He dropped the camera.

“Chuuya?” Matsuda called.

He cleared his voice; picked it up again. “Cold hands,” he offered, inconsequential. Then, squinting at the driver, he insisted: “What’s wrong with *you*, anyway?”

Matsuda frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Why are you all —” Chuuya gestured, a bit vaguely — an excuse to keep his fingers away from the sharper lines of the camera. Hirotsu was still staring at it. “Tense. You’re only like that after missions go wrong. ‘Something happen?’”

Hesitation curled up the wrinkles near his wooden eyes; the Officer seemed to munch on the possibilities of sincerity. He glanced at the backseats, again — then, he offered Chuuya a

complicated look.

“Chasing gone wrong,” he said, curtly. “We had to open fire. One of the guys I shot ended up not making it,” He pressed his lips together. “Got the call right before picking you up.”

Chuuya fiddled with his gloves, eyes set on the gentle lights of the car in front of them.

“Sorry,” he offered.

It probably sounded a bit lost — Matsuda’s next glance was fueled by the same frustration he got whenever he talked about *reformation*. “You could stand being a bit less used to death, kid.”

“It’s natural,” Hirotsu intervened, opening his window to throw the half cigarette out. “It ought to be talked about as such. Being afraid of speaking won’t amount to anything.”

The Officer’s irritation only grew. “And *some things* ought to be discovered later.”

“Who decides that?” Chuuya questioned, a bit distracted. He had kept the Sheep as safe as he could, back then — had lied about the number of weekly attacks; had lied about the bullets he wasn’t good enough to miss, at first; had lied about what it would mean to live without him. None of them were innocent; no one who joined the Sheep could afford it. And yet, Chuuya had always been — “It seems selfish to demand blindness, doesn’t it?”

The towers of the Headquarters appeared at the edge of the street. Matsuda didn’t seem to have an answer. Before he could attempt to find it, though, Hirotsu’s phone rang.

He didn’t hear what he said when he raised it to his ear; he only caught the slight widening of his eyes. Unavoidable, unreadable — those eyes were laid on Chuuya, at last.

“Dazai,” the Commander called, before he had even hung up the phone. “Get him out.”

It was startlingly quick — Dazai dropped all pretenses of sleep, sitting up so suddenly that Matsuda jumped in his seat. He didn’t waste time — settling one hand on his car door, uncaring of the vehicle picking up speed in the empty road, he threw it open.

“*Jesus!*” Matsuda snapped, stepping on the brakes so eagerly the whole car skidded forward. “Kid, what the *hell* are you —“

“*Magenta,*” Dazai called.

Amidst his wide eyed confusion, Chuuya stiffened. “What, seriously?” he lamented, for a moment — then, before Matsuda could react, he grabbed him by the nape and slammed his face onto the steering wheel, knocking him out.

Under the incessant rain, his own car door was already being opened. “Go,” Hirotsu ordered, climbing in between the seats to take Matsuda’s place; the man’s body falling onto Chuuya’s own lap. “Stay with Dazai. Do *not* step a foot near the Headquarters until we let you know, alright?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he demanded, on a thin line of patience. “Why *me*? Is something wrong at the —“

He felt a single eye on him, needles and pins and thorns down his skin. Arahabaki came with side effects; one of them, he’d quickly realized, was paranoia. Perhaps it was another show of self-importance from a fake god — the assumption that someone was *always watching*. Perhaps it was just intuition, and Chuuya was nothing but a cage.

*Fuck that.*

Familiar fingers grasped his hand; Dazai had no particular expression on, even with hair and bandages plastered on his face by the rain.

“Come on,” he incited, endlessly bored. Still, when he intertwined their fingers to pull him out into the storm, Chuuya felt a curious tilt to his heartbeat. “I’m taking your microscopic self home. Try not to drown in the puddles.”

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*Dazai, Mori had told him, once, is barely a person.*

He didn’t quite remember the context — only the blinding light of his medical office; a needle in his arm. Chuuya had lacked a good number of shots, when he’d joined; before Doc had put his sadistic hands on it, there had been Mori — and the lessons in Mafia survival.

*His humanity rests in a common trait: he exists to entertain himself. It’s inconsequential whether that entertainment is a danger to himself or to others. It’s even less inconsequential whether that entertainment could be called such.*

When the endless mountains of trash of the dumping site appeared in front of him, Chuuya knew there was a joke, somewhere.

He kept quiet all the way in, though.

“Here we go,” Dazai said, too cheerful for the circumstances. It was disgusting to see; it was goosebump inducing, the sound of his hands pulling the metal door of the shipping container aside. “You might not remember, given your late tendency to pass out like a fair maiden — but. Here’s my humble abode.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya echoed. Being weirded out or being concerned, was the question. “Humble.”



It was then, in the heavy silence and the water drops dripping from their chins to the floor, that they both noted their still intertwined hands.

Both shivering in disgust, they let go.

One track minded, Dazai was surprisingly efficient in his quest to ignore the circumstances. Each step he took on the metallic floor shook the whole box, as he made his way to the mini-fridge in a corner and fished out some clothes, startling Kazuko from her curled sleep on his bed.

The only other furniture of the house — a desk overflowing in reports, projects and dossiers, and a screeching stool — was dimly illuminated by the thunder appearing from the square of the door. *The lightbulb*, Chuuya noticed, a bit numbly, raising his fingers to brush against the sharp, warm edges, *had exploded*.

“Here,” A bundle of clothes hit him right in the face — dry, *warm* enough to feel like a relief against his soaked body. “We’ll be here for a while. Last thing I need is to be subjected to your horrible caveman sneezes.”

“They’re *not* cavemen —“

Dazai threw another shirt.

The *tip-tap* of the rain against the roof was the only sound, apart from the rustle of fabric. He abandoned the wet clump of his clothes under the desk, skipping over the curves of Kazuko’s body with familiar mastery; the blue shirt he slipped on was too tight on the shoulder and arms, but it reached embarrassingly low under his waist. He stuffed it into an old pair of pants to hide it — only half surprised that Dazai would own something other than suits — and pulled the hems up his calves.

By the time he was done, he tilted his chin to study the panels on the roof, and paused.

“Did you make these?” he asked, stupidly.

*Drawings*, he could only conclude, blinking at the faded oil paint. Those were *drawings*.

Sketched and abandoned halfway, blurring off at the outlines and ruined by palms running over them in an attempt to wipe them off. Hands in white gloves, dragging a scalpel up the tarnished metal surface; a brown scarf fluttering with nonexistent wind down an old man’s frame; golden eyes bleeding crimson tears down the mini-fridge, demonic and familiar and much more vicious than they had ever looked at him; manicured hands on a secretary desk; the river near the Headquarters.

A red-led light sign, white words curling in unclear letters — *B-r L-in?* — and a man’s hand wrapped around a glass of alcohol. More detail had been put in those fingers than on any other smudge on the walls; a heartbreaking kind of care littered on every brushstroke.

Chuuya reached out to brush against the most faded of the pieces. The rumble of thunder called his hand back; when he turned, Dazai was wearing only a white shirt, sitting at the

edge of the doorframe.

“I can’t stay here,” Chuuya announced, dropping down next to him, their legs dangling. The container had a canopy of sorts. He studied the smoke-colored sky — the lines of bandages on Dazai’s naked legs. “Yuan might come back to the apartment. If you have shit to say about whatever the hell *that* was, speak up.”

Dazai hummed. “No.”

“Of course.”

“I’m just as allowed to be informed of these things as you are,” the boy clarified. “You must be aware.”

He scoffed. “You’re basically Boss’ equal.”

“Because I know how to find things I’m not allowed to find,” Dazai insisted. “You should learn. It might do wonders for your development.”

He removed his hat; threw it somewhere over the makeshift bed. After a moment, he took off his gloves too. Quietly, he seethed.

The sound of the storm was less of a background noise and more of a *roar*; Chuuya couldn’t imagine trying to fall asleep underneath that melody.

Chuuya couldn’t imagine — having that little space to move, given how continuously tweaking Dazai was; circling and circling those four walls again and again and *again*, spinning on a stool, talking with a snake whose existence was a prayer for death. If he focused on it too long, *something* started climbing up his ribs — as if the answer would be hidden in the hook for a hangman knot on the ceiling.

*It’s just Dazai*, Kouyou had said, once.

With not much to add, he reached back for his coat — Dazai’s own thrown like trash into a corner, being curiously analyzed by Kazuko — and settled it around both their shoulders, sighing.

“For your information,” Dazai said, after the cascade of raindrops had turned into a blurry, furious mess. “A meeting with the *Five Moons* has been announced, a month from now. And if we go on with the last part of the plan, three of the *Five Moons* will want us dead by then.”

*The last part of the plan.* Chuuya frowned. “We knew that already.”

“The stakes just got higher, though. Those dummies found a useful card. Even the advantages we’ll gather next week are in question.”

“So, we don’t act on it?”

“No,” Dazai replied. His side was freezing, pressed against his own; his heartbeat placid. A few of the scratches on his upper thighs, right by the hems of grey boxers, were shaped like

glass pieces. “We do.”

“Makes sense,” Chuuya shrugged. Curious, Kazuko slithered in their direction, blinking onyx eyes up at him. “Don’t you *dare*, brat. Keep your slimy ass out of my personal space, or I’ll turn you into shoes for Madame Tanaki.”

Dazai’s gasp was obnoxious; he gathered the boa constrictor on his other side, offended. “Are you *heartless*?”

He flicked him between the eyebrows. “What card did the *Five Moons* find?”

“The plan was to remind them who the sleeping dragon truly was,” Dazai explained. “I told you this. Show them how easily the Port Mafia can get rid of high-placed pieces on their chessboard. Truces are a sign of weakness — what Mori *needs*, is for them to keep us out of their conflict.”

Chuuya watched a scrapped traffic light at the edge of the trash crater blink, shattering the raindrops in blue-red-yellow rays. “We didn’t fail.”

“We didn’t,” he agreed. “Unfortunately, they were smart enough to set their eyes on —” Inspiration curled upon his lips; his eye fell on Chuuya’s hands, gathering his soaked hair on his shoulder to work through the knots. “Something we need.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll see.”

“Fuck you.”

Dazai did nothing more than shrug. “You have been just *so* busy chasing your past around the city. If you had shown up, I would have — *very* reluctantly, please be aware — dragged you to spy on the Executive meeting with me.”

Chuuya stared at the ground. “Oh.”

“Yeah. *Oh*, ” He pulled his side of his coat a bit tighter around himself, clearly pretending to be peeved. “You’re always assuming the worst about me. With the little you’ve got going on for you, you could at least be more graceful.”

“Don’t make me punch you again.”

“Would it help you calm down those dog nerves of yours?”

Thunder flashed. “Excuse me?”

“Well, you sure can’t punch *Yuan*, ” Dazai blinked, weirded out. “She’s a *girl*. ”

He huffed. “A girl who could kick your ass, if she wasn’t starving.”

“You can relate to that, don’t you?”

“Do you relate to Kazuko?” he snapped. “Homeless and slimy and pathetic?”

As if she understood, the snake hissed. Less than impressed, the boy munched on his nail — with the same interest of a sniper for a dead body. Lighting followed the thunder, rattling the container. They fell quiet.

Eventually: “So you *do* know her name.”

“I know everything,” Dazai replied, flippantly. “You know — there’s a wall at the Headquarters filled with photographs of high-level members. It’s been there since the foundation.”

He frowned. “Is there?”

“*Hm-hm,*” He pinched Kazuko’s chin. As much as she bit and tormented him, it was astonishing how genuinely peaceful the thing was in his arms. “There’s this old tradition — should one of the subjects of the pictures betray the organization, their frame will be cracked.”

Traitors were rare in the organization; the higher they were in rank, the more vicious their punishment was said to be. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just take the photo down?” he mused.

Abruptly, the boy turned to look at him.

“What?”

“I,” Dazai blinked, as if the idea had never crossed his mind. He still needed to cut his hair; some horribly asymmetric strands were wetly stuck to his cheek. Chuuya itched to pull them. He hadn’t worn a single hair clip since the well. “Well. You’re the expert on betrayal, aren’t you?”

Disgruntled, he kicked his calf with his own.

Dazai didn’t seem perturbed — he kicked right back. There was a jitteriness to him that was only more evident without the endless layers of an incomplete suit and Mori’s coat; an *intent* to his fingers that had Chuuya only watch, when he reached out, tracing a fading black line on the inside of his arm. He reached his palm; tapped on the curling branches of those poisoned veins, once, twice, and intertwined their fingers again.

A quiet so familiar it could be *tasted* came with the next wave of rain.

Chuuya stared.

It was more felt than seen; their arms were pressed from elbows to wrist, freezing skin against drying one. A distant memory pressed against his eyelids — wandering through the most dangerous layers of the crater, hungry and bored, holding onto Shirase and Yuan’s sticky fingers.

*This means something,* he mused, belatedly. Everything did, with Dazai. He stretched his fingers to plaster their palms together, cringing at the wet squelch of rainwater; gulped down

the hint of revulsion he could see in the tense line of Dazai's jaw, too — and exhaled.

"It tastes like blood," he said, eventually. Kazuko had managed to lay her chin on his knee, right by their knuckles. A heartbeat that wasn't his own pressed against his wrist; he focused on it.

Dazai squinted at him, like he didn't really care. "What does?"

He shrugged. "Everything."

Understanding clogged the silence.

"Most of it, anyway," he added. "I'm not *starving* myself. I'm not — fucked in the head," Kouyou's voice echoed in his head, reprimanding. "Or *something*. It just tastes like shit."

"Because of Arahabaki?"

Chuuya huffed. "A recurrent theme."

"But you *do* ration your food."

"And you don't sleep at night, or leave your house without those disgusting bandages, or give a good reason for holing up under people's desks," he spat out. "Keep your nose out of *my* stuff, and I'll keep mine out of your —"

"My?"

He kicked the metal ground underneath his calves. "Whatever it's fucked up in there that makes you live in a shipping container."

Howling wind plastered his clothes to his skin; whispers over whispers over taunts. *In the nature of gods, I'd imagine*, Hirotsu had once mused, unaware of the incongruous irony, *there is loneliness, too*.

*Is that why you never shut up?*, Chuuya wondered, watching Dazai's thumb trace a bundle of ink lines over his third and fourth knuckle. It was a hypnotic, vaguely unpleasant feeling — every nerve in his body had focused on that spot, humming along to the swing of his fingertip. *Are you not even an inch as terrifying as they all believe? Are you pathetic, behind the blood you spilled and you bled?*

Arahabaki knew no sarcasm — he barely knew anything. *Look who's talking*, he imagined he would taunt.

"No, but seriously," Dazai started. "Being the expert on betrayal. Say you needed to pick. One afternoon with Yuan or one with Verlaine?"

Speechless, he paused. "*What?*"

"Between Yuan and Verlaine," he repeated, undeterred. "An entire afternoon."

“You need to shut the *fuck* up.”

“Odasaku would call this a *devilish crossroad*,” His nails traced Kazuko’s scales, pensive. “A global scale emergency could erupt if you picked Verlaine, but are we sure Pink-Hair won’t pray to her Creator to strike you down with lighting? She’d be doing me a favor. Perhaps I was too harsh with her. Perhaps I understand where you’re coming from.”

“I will kick your ass,” Chuuya spelled out, lips trembling, “Do you understand me?”

“And blow my thatched house away? Are your dog tendencies morphing into wolfish ones?”

“What the *fuck* is up with you and fairytales?”

“How does a street rascal know them, by the way?”

He hadn’t quite been smiling; all hilarity subdued all the same. He watched dirty raindrops draw dots on his shoes. “One of the younger kids had a fairytale book.”

A hum.

“He’s dead now.” It seemed necessary to say — felt like Chuuya had been lying about just how capable he had been. *Just don’t kill the kids*. “They all are.”

Dazai’s fingers tightened around his own, only once; somehow, it managed to feel careless. But it was there, and it was quiet. Tactility was a privilege he had no spine to deny, not to someone who craved it so quietly. Not to someone who’d had his hands in his blood.

*She’s not your responsibility any longer.*

*Who else?*

“You’re very stupid,” Dazai concluded. “Death is death. It’s all very boring.”

*It didn’t mean*, he thought, *he had to understand it*. It meant Dazai spoke in transactionality, and Chuuya, foolishly enough, had developed a pendant for learning his languages. “You’re the scum on this earth.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “But you’re even more suicidal than I am.”

He barked out a laugh. They were sitting in a shipping container. Four overheated walls, puddles of rain sneaking in through holes in the metal, a broken lightbulb, and a snake on his lap, stubbornly crawling towards Chuuya’s own. A shipping container where he *lived*.

“Doubt.”

“They were little cowards overflowing with delusions of grandeur,” Dazai replied. “And you were their King.”

“I wasn’t shit,” he scoffed.

“Because you didn’t want to be.”

“What?”

“Look at you,” Stretching, he allowed Kazuko to intertwine around his waist; the world’s deadliest belt. He unclenched his grip until their fingers were only intertwined by fortune. He ran his index up the inside of Chuuya’s little finger; then, their shared scar by the thumb. “You don’t even trust them enough to tell them the truth.”

Chuuya stared at the ground.

“You didn’t tell Shirase,” Dazai sing-sang, still, studying the brumous sky. “You won’t tell Yuan. You’re content with their crucifixion. For a slug so eager for a chance to punch someone in the face, you surely will do anything but beg for someone else’s contempt. Won’t you?”

“I’m not you,” he said, easily.

For a moment, he was hanging from chains, a spear of electricity piercing his body, and *pain* — more than he should have been able to withstand. A familiar face, too close, too unwanted. *You and I are the same.*

“Oh,” Dazai said, because *he* was real. “Oh, that’s for sure, Chuuya.”

*Gods are to be left alone*, he thought. But he wasn’t a god, was he? External factors did not count. Were his hollow bones not the same as the ones in the soiled ground? Would he not have bled the same as every child from the Sheep, dead, dead and gone, caught in the trap of a sin he hadn’t committed?

*If it’s not real*, he thought, *it should at least be useful.*

“You get more freckles.”

Chuuya frowned. “What?”

Pointedly, Dazai’s nail printed a half moon on a dot on his knuckle. They were pressed from shoulder to knee; if he focused, he thought he could hear his blood flow. *If it breathes. If it beats.* “After *Corruption*. Like a sunburn, I assume. They usually disappear by the time you wake up, but they make you look like a chickenpox victim,” He tilted his head, studying him. “A very ugly one at that.”

He spluttered, speechless. “Your dead fish looking *ass* has some fucking *nerve* —“

“Your eyes also glow in the dark.”

Kouyou’s pictures came to mind. “Shut the fuck up.”

“And if I look at you from the corner of my eye,” the boy continued, undeterred by the pinches and punches, “You’ve still got *Corruption* marks all over you.”

“As in —“ Chuuya blinked. “What, like, *during Corruption*?”

“Bleeding, shiny gashes that smell like burning trash cans, yes. Rotting arms and hands aside. You might be familiar with the idea.”

Chuuya *was* — but only from reflections he mostly attributed to his decaying sanity. It was meant to be a private business, he thought — not one more proof for others to wonder. There wasn’t supposed to be any space for *questioning* — not when he, Dazai, and Mori were the only ones who knew enough to doubt.

It seemed stupid — but they were stuck in the rain, and their fingers were still too close, and Yuan was still lost. He asked: “What else?”

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“Here,” Chuuya said. “Answer the phone.”

Through rain-wet eyelashes, Yuan stared at him. A reddish veil was draped over her skin — a reflection from the umbrella he’d pushed towards her huddled figure at the end of the alley.

“What?” No sound arose from her mouth; her lips, though, moved unmistakably. The motion spurred her eyes into motion, too; she settled them onto Chuuya’s destroyed cell phone.

He threw it on her lap. “Go on.”

Hesitantly — *how did you find me*, she didn’t ask, and *I want you to leave*, she didn’t say — Yuan did as told.

Static noises floated to his ears, defeating the distance and the roar of the storm — shaping themselves into words that ripped Yuan’s eyelids apart. Chuuya pretended to scratch his ear with his shoulder, doing his best to muffle his hearing.

So delicate it could have been a simple breath, she whispered: “*Chi-chi?*”

Before he could shut the conversation out, Shirase’s embarrassed groan filled his skull.

“*Yuan? Are you kidding me? You’re the one from the prank calls?*” His huff was louder than the storm. “*That’s so not cool, I thought I was getting haunted — Yuan, come on, what did we say about that nickname? It’s Buichiro, if you really have to — we’ve talked about it —*”

A sob wrecked her throat — something lined in more longing she had spared for him. Chuuya turned around, floating his umbrella over her head to step away.



*That piece of shit*, she had spat out.

*Less of a piece of shit than me*, he considered, for a split second — a breath so quick it was over before his lungs could even feed on it. Pettiness was childish, and childishness was luxury, and Chuuya had no money to spend — and Chuuya wasn't a child, and Chuuya hated that he truly didn't care.

He was supposed to care, wasn't he? That would have been the human thing to do. *Unfair*, he thought, only once, like a luxury — and then it was gone, because it wasn't real. *Unfair*.

He exhaled.

Evening traffic and busy passersby had filled the road to the brim by the time he felt his phone hit his back. Yuan held onto his umbrella for dear life, untrusting even of his power — her eyes settled on him, a bit more awake.

*"Stray Sheep?"* she muttered. Fondness lined her mocking tone. "What a dumb name."

Chuuya removed his soaked hat, snapping his fingers. Keeping the rain outward with the help of his Ability *was* possible, but it required a certain concentration his frantic mind usually refused to waste. Unconcerned with his thoughts, Yuan was still shaking. Still in that damn night gown.

The awkwardness of it all would kill him, one day.

"You know," he spoke up, unsure of why. "I had a brother."

Hesitation filled her dusty features. "No," she replied, tentatively. "You're an orphan."

Chuuya tilted his head. "That's — actually debatable. But it's a long story," He plopped down on the wet ground, giving Yuan all the time to study his movements as he lowered himself. A corpse could have filled the space between them; it did, perhaps. "He's not really my brother. Ane-san said we resembled each other, but I didn't really see it. We just — came from the same place."

*Got out of it differently, too*, he didn't add. Verlaine's voice was a flicker in the back of his skull — an accented tone swearing their birth had been the problem. Chuuya lacked the sufficient rage in his mind to send him to hell.

Yuan hugged her legs closer.

"Before — Before leaving," she cleared her throat. "Shirase told me you were — said you came to us from this *facility*. Said they made him pass out, and — he said I'd have to ask you the rest."

He waited, curling an eyebrow.

"I don't want to know," she admitted.

"Alright," he conceded. "It's none of your guys' business, anyway."

“Like your personal Port Mafia business?” she questioned, mocking. “Like at the Arcade?”

Outside the alley, car horns filled the silence, a dissonant melody. Chuuya wiped his face, pointlessly. “Yeah. Exactly.”

A glint of surprise flashed through her face. Turning it to the side, she insisted: “Where’s your brother, now?”

“Dead.”

“Did you kill him?”

A helicopter platform, the Yokohama skyline. A useless question from someone who knew there was no other choice, and then — nothing. A *nothingness* he had grown familiar with, cradling it in his arms every week, studying the constellations as he bled out in the grass. His *nothing* against someone else’s — the only one who might understand. The only one he didn’t want to ask to.

“Yeah,” Chuuya concluded. “The bastard murdered my family. So I killed him.”

Yuan struggled to open her mouth. “We were your family too, you know.”

*Control the things in your veins*, he recalled. *Or they’ll control you instead.*

“Things change,” Chuuya said.

She fell quiet.

It took less convincing than other times to get her to her feet. She accepted to walk close to him, knuckles white around the umbrella — given that they both wouldn’t fit underneath, Chuuya pretended to appreciate it, pushing himself out of the way.

Uncomfortable memories from the first *true* storm to hit Suribachi City crowded under their steps — the kids all pushed together in the driest corners, wrapped in shared blankets and gritting their teeth to keep them from chattering. On his eleventh birthday, Chuuya, had marched war against one smaller group in the better side of the settlement. It had gained them a new base, and some easier stormy nights.

*You need to take better care of yourself*, Yuan had huffed, strangling him in her own blankets, pulling at his hair, as if the rain could be dried with ripped pieces. *What will we ever do if you get sick, Chuuya?*

The closer they walked to the destination, the slower the girl’s steps grew. “This isn’t your apartment,” she dared to murmur.

“Bet you’ll recognize the place anyway.”

As he’d expected, the moment the rusty gates of the *Wild Geese Orphanage* appeared in front of their eyes, Yuan gasped. Quicker than she could have predicted, Chuuya’s hand sneaked

out and wrapped around her wrist, gentle enough not to startle her — barely stopping her from sprinting to the other direction.

Chuuya felt her stiffen under his touch; her grip around the umbrella gave up, dropping it to the ground.

“Hey. *Hey*,” he hurried to explain, dragging her to the canopy. “Listen to me.”

A hint of betrayal sparked in her eyes, pulling her shoulders in. “Chuuya,” she breathed out. Something in his chest tightened; something about her seemed younger. “Chuuya, what are you doing?”

“Listen,” he insisted. “It’s fine. I have a friend who has a brother here. He and this other friend of mine — sort of work here, too. They’re not mad about you stealing food.”

“They will call the police,” Yuan hissed. “Chuuya, you *know* they’ll call the police —“

“This isn’t Suribachi City. And they’re mafiosi, they wouldn’t call the *police* —“

She pushed him off. “*Everywhere* is like Suribachi City. Where the fuck have you been?”

“*Surviving*, Yuan,” Hands on her arms, he shook her — needing her to *look at him*. “That was the whole point of the Sheep, wasn’t it? *Surviving*. That’s what I’m doing. That’s what I need you to do.”

“The *Bishop’s* Staff —“

“Are a bunch of *psychos*,” he cut her off. “A bunch of fanatic, disgusting fuckers who are going to take more than what you can give, and leave you emptier than before. You don’t want my help — *fine*. You want me to get out of your sight — I can *do that*. But I’m not leaving you with them.”

Frantic, her eyes searched him, untrusting, uncertain, *angered*. “You —“

“I killed you,” Chuuya heard himself spit out. She flinched. “I killed all of you. I believe you. I destroyed the Sheep. I ruined your life. Let me *fix it*.” A gulp wrecked her throat, deepening the veil of tears in her glass eyes. “But to do that,” he spelled out, slowly, the tone he used to wear during emergency attacks, when he needed the older kids to bring the younger ones to safety. “I need to take a step back.”

She didn’t speak. “You need someone to trust,” Chuuya concluded. “I’m not that person.”

Her next flinch shook her whole frame.

He didn’t let it deter him. “I’ll get you one of those stupid sparkly pink phones you’ve always wanted and put Shirase’s number in there. I don’t know why he left without you, or what happened between you two — but clearly it’s *fixable* shit. You can *fix it*. You can stay here, with the other kids, and you can get better. My friends will keep an eye on you. I promise not to interfere. I won’t even show my face around here.”

“Chuuya —“

“Just for a few weeks,” he said, undeterred, eyes set on nothing at all — *if he stopped talking*, he thought, *he would never do it again*. “A month. Something more. They can help you. You need — you need medical checks, and some food, and a bed that’s not in the middle of a cult’s base. You don’t even believe you can cheat the code, Yuan,” Her eyes brushed the ground. “None of us can.”

“Just a few weeks. And if you still want to leave — I’ll get you the money. Not mine, and not the Port Mafia’s. I promise. I have a — my stupid brother. He had this house in France, and he — I’ll get you his money. He had a *shit ton* of money, and nothing would make me happier than someone wasting *all of them*. You can go wherever the fuck you want. Yuan, I *don’t care*.”

The strange, nonsensical way those last words seemed to echo off the walls of rainfall mocked him, laughing in his face, closing them in with its peer pressure. Yuan was paper thin under his hands. Yuan had spent almost two years in a nightmare. *This is Yuan. Be nice to her.*

“This is touching,” A voice spoke up. “But wouldn’t it be better if you maggots continued your heart-to-heart where it’s dry?”

Noguchi and Koda were leaning on the doorframe of the Orphanage, a stone-throw from the open gates. Uchiyama slept in his brother’s arms, lulled by the rain and the gentle roar of voices he could hear from inside the building.

The moment their eyes laid on them, Yuan threw herself behind Chuuya’s shoulders, hands reaching for a fragment of glass he’d seen her pick up in the alley.

“*R-Relax*,” Koda intervened, hands in the air. “We’re not here to hurt you.”

“You can fucking *try*,” she hissed.

Noguchi huffed. “Yeah — your little sister alright, Boss.”

Chuuya threw a nasty glance in his direction. “She’s not my —“

“Are you going to get inside? You look pathetic, standing under the rain like that. And *she*,” He nodded towards Yuan, “Is going to pass out from either starvation, sickness, or hypothermia in about — *yesterday*. Get *inside*.”

“Fucking *alright*, shut up,” he snapped. “Can we have a moment, or do you two need help finding the way in?”

They muttered — but by the time he had leaned down to pick up his fallen umbrella, the porch was empty again, and Yuan’s fingers were tattooed around his wrist.

“He,” she forced out, looking distraught by the notion. “Shirase told me to trust you. He said I could.” *That’s fucking rich*, he thought. “He said you — he said you tried your best.”

Abruptly, Chuuya felt very tired.

“But,” she gulped. “But I — I *can’t* —“

“Yuan,” he stopped her. It thundered; as incessant and insistent as it had come, the rain only grew stronger, following the parting clouds. The smell clogged his nose; the taste ran down his throat, leaving him thirstier than before. “Yuan, I don’t care.”

“But I *do*,” Yuan snarled. Her fingers flexed at her sides — longing to punch him, perhaps. To pull him closer. To do *something*. “What the hell do I do with it?”

Chuuya studied the splintered wood of the Orphanage door. *Death is death*, Dazai had said, and *some things are meant to be discovered later*, Matsuda had insisted, — and, *doesn’t it burn to be anything at all?*, Kouyou had shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he offered, eventually. “You try and figure it out where it’s warmer, I guess.”

She parted her lips; closed them again.

He stuck his hands in his pockets; jumped down where it was wetter and safer. *A cowardly route*, he considered — *just for a bit*. He thought about something sufficient to say; came up empty. Yuan didn’t speak — she pulled her wrist, looking for a bracelet that wasn’t there.

Chuuya turned around and left.

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya: i am being haunted

dazai: like christmas carol or

“at least it wasn’t a bucket of water” anybody caught the stormbringer reference? hi there! if you’re still reading — thank you so much for the support, and for the comments, and for the kudos. seriously, it’s all so very nice and it always makes my day!

i’m in a bit of a hurry, but something i wanted to highlight is one of my favorite chuuya hcs — namely, that corruptions gives him strange side effects. the pictures thing in particular has always been a little hc of mine, and i’m glad i finally get to use it!

as for yuan, she's always been a side character i've wanted to explore — and i have a whole lot to say about the way stormbringer handled chuuya's feelings towards the sheep. i feel like chuuya took shirase's blame very headstrong, and he kinda took their whole situation as a “okay, that's over with”, so in my hc — him meeting a yuan who carries news of just how devastated the sheep were after everything that happened would absolutely make him. yk. pause. i also like to believe living with the flags and being generally treated “better” would help him understand he does get to feel betrayed about what happened — though he'd rather die than admit it to the sheep themselves (hence his regret during the “you're the ones who stuck a knife in my—”)

anyway! i do have more to say, but i'll tell you guys next time. kudos and comments are always appreciated, and i hope you'll keep reading! have a wonderful day <3

see you!

# NOVEMBER

## Chapter Summary

*The end of August ruffled rusty feathers on the unjusticated tension brimming through the syndicate, and brought government cars around the perimeter of the Port Mafia Headquarters.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xvii.*

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*Case number: 7886990*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Nakahara C. and Dazai O. took part in the emergency meeting between the [...]*

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*“...reports from the station are yet to confirm whether the attack should be linked to terrorist roots, local gang violence, or the isolated case of an antagonistic shooter. Anything of smaller scale is to be excluded, given the damage to the station itself and a number of wounded and dead that brushes the two hundreds. The few, horrified survivors from Train 7 reported the presence of bullets right before the bomb went off, killing every last passenger inside up to five wagons of the train. From the Yokohama PD, Chief Tanaka says:*

*‘It’s too early to speak with certainty — we’ll need to wait for answers from the forensic team. But my bets are on a fore-planned gang attack. One that ended up involving too many civilians — a scare technique of its own right. None of the gangs want the police’s attention. To do something like this, the culprit must want to send a strong message. Truly — we haven’t seen anything of this scale in a long time. It was a bloodbath. We have gathered the names of three suspects from the three different criminal organizations, among the deceased — namely, Takasekai, the KK Company, and the Shadow Blade. Our database named them as rather relevant amongst their syndicates — perhaps even among the top dogs. It’s not far fetched to hypothesize the attack was meant to partly incapacitate such groups in one go.’*

*On the matter of whether the Chief has any suspicions on what gang might be blamed for this tragedy, Tanaka added:*

*‘I’m sure we’re all thinking of one name in particular. This is Yokohama, after all — who else?’*

— **Extract; 12:37.**

**[Radio Station: City View]**

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The end of August ruffled rusty feathers on the unjustified tension brimming through the syndicate, and brought government cars around the perimeter of the Port Mafia



Headquarters.

Having unwillingly developed a Pavlovian response to anything that carried the government footprint on it, Chuuya wasn't particularly surprised by the *fight-or-flight* instinct swathing his spine like sticky ivy the more vehicles he located — leftovers of the paranoia Arahabaki brought with him.

Problem was, he'd never been much of a *flight*. Problem was — he wasn't quite sure anyone else could feel the rustle of taut wings through the halls.

"Perhaps you need some rest," was all Hirotsu said, when he dared to bring up the issue. Chuuya had been covered in goosebumps since the morning, no matter the scorching heat beating his reasonings. "You and Dazai have been bouncing around missions —"

— and it *was* true. There had been job upon job, infiltration upon infiltration; until Chuuya had come to the disheartening conclusion that he would have probably managed to kill whoever Dazai needed him to before he could even meet his eyes. Messages were tapped onto his skin, traced, bird-whistled, blinked, mouthed, tutted with lights and reflections — a thousand ways more. His soles were shaped like skulls biting the curb; his feet tended to climb walls, forgetting to turn off his Ability. Dazai was everywhere.

Surely that could be enough to be tense.

And yet —

"Not to mention your squad, and your..." He searched for the words; landed on all the wrong ones. "Your training."

Chuuya tasted acid and apple pie; familiar, never mind if he had never munched on either one. "Drop the subject."

"I'm merely —"

"Old man," he insisted, snapping eyes from a long time ago in his direction. Not the gaze of *run from the handler* — a brother to the darkened drapes he would wear when the man walked a bit too close to the sun. "Drop the subject."

"Alright," Hirotsu conceded, once he was done reflecting him in his monocle. "But I'm not blind, Chuuya. And whatever it is that is haunting you —"

"Nothing's *haunting* me, grandpa," He swatted at him, knocking back his glass of wine. Yuan wasn't a secret — just an unnecessary detail.

Skepticism blurred his gaze. "Something must be, if you're so convinced trouble's on the way."

Trouble was always on the way; that mentality kept him alert — kept him *useful*. A meeting with the *Five Moons* was scheduled for the end of the month; there, eventually, they would be asked to own up to crimes nobody but him and Dazai knew of. Whatever secret card the

*Moons* has apparently hoarded would come clean — a truce might be put in place, or they might finally accept to bow their heads.

“The sooner the Five Moons understand the subtle concept of *hierarchy*,” Mori explained, hands crossed under his chin — as certain as an untouched painting, “The quicker this tension of yours will know peace, Chuuya.”

He hadn’t told him about any tension of his. “Do you wish to rule over the *Five Moons*, Boss?”

“*Wish* is an — *elastic* term. Power thirst is such a cliché motivation to act upon,” His smile was a private thing; the borderline appraisal of it helped Chuuya imagine that there might be no real purpose behind the, *want to take a walk with me, Chuuya?*, he sometimes chirped. “What I *wish*, is to protect the organization in the best way possible. If command over the *Five Moons* will help me accomplish that mission — then yes. I do wish that.”

He didn’t seem concerned. Only endlessly, omnisciently amused.

It wasn’t the perspective of having done something wrong, turning his skin into a field of pins and shivers, though; nor the possibility of the *Three Moons* demanding their heads. Of the many curses Chuuya’s plastic skeleton had been stained with, trust in Dazai might have been the most foolish of them — but, unfortunately, also the sturdiest.

*[Policy in the Sheep went: you do not attack, if you’re not attacked first. Policy in the Flags went: you can keep your morals, as long as they don’t shit in the dining room].*

“The Black Market has been suspiciously devoid of competition,” Kouyou admitted, mouth hidden in Hikari’s fur. “Those fools are too busy throwing knives at each other’s faces in the name of their former commanders to realize how quickly their affairs are tumbling down. Nonetheless, they will still demand our help to figure out who’s to blame for the slaughter at the train station,” She studied her own nails, looking thoroughly bored. “An alliance is an alliance, I suppose.”

Pointedly silent, Chuuya kept his eyes on Hikari’s sharp claws.

Featherlight and wonderstruck, day after day, he kept his eyes on the stained-glass windows, too. He would have been able to feel a sniper even with his back turned. He could have counted every government vehicle circling the buildings, and he could have memorized them from wheel to roof.

He could *wait*.

“She needs some more time,” Noguchi told him, uncharacteristically non-disgruntled. The bustle of children from the Orphanage embraced them, suffocatingly warm and impossible not to glance at — fighting for the last piece of bread on the counter of the kitchen they occupied, playing catch with Koda’s limping, bruised form, they were the loudest thing around. “She barely accepts to talk with the other kids. You’re going to set her back if you insist on seeing her.”

*What the fuck do you know*, he wanted to say. The roofs in that place looked unstable. If he concentrated, he thought he could hear Yuan's too-heavy steps — running circle over circle; biting her nails down the quick.

He hoped they had managed to get her out of the white gown. He hoped she hadn't stolen any more food.

As far as everyone who he had involved knew, the *Bishop's Staff* hadn't been looking for her. Only Chuuya — and the healing scar on his side — were aware of the truth.

*[“You don't get to keep her,” the man in the mask had told him, right before he'd attempted to sink a stop-sign into his ribcage. Chuuya had made him eat the concrete for two whole alleys, for it. “But you can have her, if you wish.”]*

“It's not you she hates,” Madame Tanaki told him. “I assure you, dear. It's what you represent. She doesn't see *you*. She only sees all that she's lost.”

*Be patient*, they told him. To the goosebumps on arms he still checked every morning, surprised not to find them near the ending stages of decomposition; to the pointless startlement that woke him up in the middle of the night — longing for a *Corruption* break Mori had mournfully decided could come to an end, for, *I see no point in giving you scars you haven't earned. For, you could create immeasurable problems for us, Chuuya, if you got yourself defeated so easily.*

He knew.

*[It was, he knew, an oversimplification of the circumstances.*

*Side effects were easy to juggle. Chuuya found that he preferred them; would have rather felt Dazai's questioning — contemptful — gaze from the corner of his eyes, studying marks and dots and skin-ash that shouldn't have been there, eyes that glowed a tad too bright, needles and pins down his spine because someone was watching, and —*

*Belated side effects could be juggled. They were nothing compared to the immediate ones.*

*“I believe the strain might be catching up to him,” he overheard Dazai explain to Mori, after he was dismissed. He still didn't know what the man had told him, after the Hospital fiasco — at times, he wondered if he had been blamed for it. “Corruption — I don't think it was supposed to be activated this often. Those stains on his arms are only part of it. We've been giving Arahbaki all the means to gain more control over a weaker body. Who's to say something akin to the parking lot won't happen again?”*

*“I thought you'd said it wasn't as strong, during the training rounds,” Mori replied, sounding every last bit surprised. “That is why I gave my approval to them.”*

*“There's a different weight to the power when it's not actually being used to fight, but it still —“*

*“Still?” Mori encouraged, when the silence stretched out too long.*

*“It’s... ” There was no particular shade in his hesitation — merely an intake of breath. Doctor to doctor; except most of Chuuya’s scars would never heal nicely. Except he wasn’t quite fond of the idea of offering himself to real medical eyes again. “Rotting him.”*

*He wondered what part he was referring to — if it was the scar tissue draped across him like a second skin; the sudden bursts of energy; the lungs-related difficulties he refused to admit he was experiencing — but which he doubted the guy who had memorized his breathing pattern hadn’t noticed. Training himself to withstand poison had made him very much familiar with his toilet; throwing up blood, though, tasted like concrete and gunpowder.*

*The end — and the delineation of those academically precise words of his — came with the rain, and with the burst of freedom Arahabaki had ripped from his chest when he was distracted.*

*“It’s not stopping,” Dazai told him, calm.*

*Swimming through the waves, redder than they should have been, clogging up his throat until his breaths came out in rattles, Chuuya watched the stars. Bleeding was an outer-body sensation; liquefying through the grass, dew and sweat one and the same, skin melting with the heat. It’s not stopping, he said — was it supposed to?*

*In the back of his skull, Arahabaki dragged a tongue of flames up his nape, wet and sharp. Limbs turning to dust, hands turning to poison, destruction on the tips of his decaying fingers. Stars, it said, hysterically, because he couldn’t say a thing. Hurts like a bitch, but it’s beautiful, yes? Yes.*

*The slap smacked his jaw on the ground. He felt his skin tear apart, scratched — reuniting with everything it had lost through the green threads and the moonlight.*

*“It’s not stopping,” he repeated, clenching two fingers around his chin, lining his gaze with his own — which was useful, or would have been, had his eyes managed to focus onto something that wasn’t blue and dotted in silver; had he managed to see more than bloody bandages and the incomprehensible lines of his sunburned face. “So you need to make it stop.”*

*His lips parted. What?, he couldn’t say. There was something bubbling under the surface, he thought. There was a star much brighter than the others, and it kept looking at him. Stars, Arahabaki agreed. Stars were —*

*Fire erupted with the snap of a thread, and his vision went white.*

*“Think about it as — overheating,” Dazai would explain, later, holed up on the floor of the safehouse closest to the train station. They would have to burn the car, once he managed to stand. The blood it was soaked with would never stop sagging the air. “It’s a simple assumption, of course, given we have no comparison to study. But, according to you, Arahabaki lives to breach his way through. If we allow him to bite away at the entrance so often — to train himself to slip through the,” He snapped two fingers against the burned skin of the inside of his wrist, “Cracks, then, maybe...”*

Overheating, *Chuuya considered*, was a rather *mechanical* way of putting it. *It was merciful, also — much quicker on the lips than the blank descriptions Dazai had offered after his barked questions.*

*Something sneaked its fingers through his ribcage, widening the space, fitting itself where it shouldn't have. Terror, he thought — distantly, because he'd been very young the last time he'd felt something akin to fear.*

*Still — terror. It would never push past his lungs, but he wondered, still, where it had come from. Corruption wasn't an addiction and Chuuya didn't need the infinite in his veins. Corruption didn't even feel good. Corruption was —*

*“Chuuya,” Dazai's eye was all for the ceiling. He should change his bandages, he thought. A stranger's blood was rarely a good feeling on naked skin. “Do you want to be useless?”*

*The official communication was offered to Mori the next day — Dazai sporting a bent nose and a bored face, and narrating his tales as insultingly as possible. Chuuya spent two days stuck in Kouyou's guest bed, seething and grimacing, haunted by Arahbaki's taunts. Next time, he told him, next time for sure.*

*He would have to be patient].*

And so Chuuya was patient.

“Hey,” Tsuchiya said. “Just once. Can I drive your bike *just once?*”

And,

“Five bucks I can get Rin drunk before the mission starts,” Kenta winked.

And,

“I made you one of the characters of my new story,” Virgil confessed. “Do you mind?”

And,

“Chuuya, I'm alright — Chuuya. *Chuuya*, I'm alright,” Koda promised him, cutting his rant off, holding a soaked piece of fabric to his bleeding side.

Missions with the squad quickly grew to be his favorite part of the week. An assortment of the adrenaline and the familiarity of a leading role managed to startle the ferociousness stored in his hollow bones — to set it on fire and keep him awake and *vigil*. It wasn't the instinctiveness and effortlessness of jobs with Dazai — but it was *good*, and he actually *liked them*.

He liked hearing the victorious *whoops!* out of Noguchi's mouth when their performance satisfied his pathetic parameters of fun; he liked watching Tsuchiya scam guards into believing she wouldn't be much of a threat; he let Kenta teach him something more about aim with actual weapons.

He watched Virgil and Koda brawl on the ground over some drunken bet, relishing in the unworried curve of the *ex-Soul*, in the time it had passed since the last time he'd said the name *Dante*; he challenged Rin to a duel on bikes when the teasing about a supposed puppy-crush of his on her grew too irritating.

It made nights easier. Mornings stayed the same, and cars kept circling the Headquarters.

Goosebumps and needles and pins, and glowing eyes in the dark, and some more quirks — Dazai insisted that his voice sounded different on the phone; Chuuya refused to let him prove his theory by deleting his number at least once every three days — and he could only come to the conclusion that everything was *fine*.

"I think France was good for you," Kajii sighed, holding him tight to scrub traces from an exploded lemon-bomb from his face. "Maybe you should consider a vacation. Paris is somewhat more tolerable in the winter."

Chuuya found himself agreeing, absurdly.

*Roommate*, he called, sometimes, when it was too dark for any reflection to catch up with his weakness, with his *longing* — waking him up, sweating him out, sucking his soul dry until all he wanted was the god-touched agony that had grown *familiar*. Some of his scars had healed, and some had not. He traced them at night, undifferentiated — and he imagined the grass under his body, imagined bleeding out, imagined the stars.

If he had to live with goosebumps and needles and glowing eyes, they would be *his*, and no one else's.

Cemeteries didn't calm him down, but he went there all the same. Talked with five graves who would not answer back. Thought about a makeshift tombstone on top of a cliff who he owned everything and nothing to; grass that had long since been washed clean from his blood, from the soles of the Sheep's second-hand shoes — second-hand loyalty.

*Even if you are a pattern*, that one grave told him, because *that* grave always answered back, *etched on the surface of raw power; you are you*.

"Sorry I killed your — him," he grunted to Verlaine, who did not have a grave — but who he didn't think would have minded sharing with Randou; Rimbaud; *Arthur, mon stupide humain*. "He wasn't as much of a piece of shit as you are."

He paused. "You were."

What the flutter of wings was not: grief. As such, it had to be a thing of the dead.

"Something is coming," the Colonel said. "And they're all fools if they cannot see it."

Chuuya paused, stunned.

Government cars circled the HQ. Suribachi City had overflowed with vultures — they had known they would never go hungry. It felt somewhat the same; it felt nothing like it. He knew what *red water* was called, these days. He knew they wouldn't throw him in the fire.

“Maybe you’re senile,” he replied, respectfully. It wasn’t the first time the man approached him; it *was* the first time he opened his mouth, instead of standing too straight — too tall, too *nothing* — next to him. “Ain’t it soldiers who get the PTSD thing? Paranoia and stuff.”

“That’s not what PTSD stands for, son.”

“Have you considered that I don’t care?”

“How hostile,” the Colonel mused, as if it didn’t touch him at all. “Has Kouyou been filling your head with warnings, lad?”

Chuuya didn’t have anything against the Executive. It stayed an open question whether it was because he couldn’t *afford* to, or because there was truly no reason. The man had wanted him in his team. The man thought he used his Ability in all the wrong ways. The man stood next to him after every meeting Dazai didn’t immediately drag him out of, and he didn’t say a word.

It wasn’t enough to hate a person. Not even Kouyou’s barbs were, even if he did recognize his own tendency to idolize her opinions. *Too much of a soldier*, she’d tell him, sometimes. *The Mafia has no use for those*.

As far as he understood — the woman despised the unfamiliar, and she despised the unreachable.

“Why do you think something is wrong?” he asked, instead of answering.

The Colonel hummed. “Why do you?”

“What makes you think I do?”

“We’re not like them. We understand.”

He scoffed. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“Our Abilities are somewhat similar, have you ever noticed?” The man tapped two knuckles on a red tassel of the window. A circular scar was imprinted there; Chuuya recognized the marks of a dashboard lighter. “They require us to be particularly aware of what surrounds us. It is inevitable. The ground under our feet,” He tapped ruined soles on the floor, “The ceilings, the walls, the air, the *people*,” Swiftly, he bowed his head to a passing woman, armed to the teeth and clearly uninterested.

“*Everything* could possibly become our weapon. That means we need to feel all of it,” the Colonel concluded. It could have easily been a soliloquy; Chuuya’s presence was nothing but a side effect to the rainfall of words abandoning his scarred mouth. “I know you understand.”

“If *I’m* the one who understands,” he drawled, feigning interest, “Why is Noguchi your champion?”

*Noguchi, who doesn't even want to be Executive*, he didn't add, because his analyses of his own subordinates were not to be disclosed — certainly not to the one man who would surely tell the interested subject.

“Because he saved my life,” the Executive said, easily. “And I believe he could save many more.”

Surprise stiffened his shoulders. He thought back to the stories Tsuchiya had told him — to the little Noguchi had allowed to escape about his mentor; an assortment of hushed conversations in the hallways and hesitation pulling the edges of his fish bone tattoo.

“His sister,” he dared. “Were you in the village she destroyed?”

A curt nod, soldier-like in its rigid curve, in the way it was immediately over — despising to concede. “I *am* from the village, to be precise. Noguchi saved me and my wife from certain death. In exchange, I brought him to the runaway road he was so desperately looking for after the funeral. His sister was not so lucky.”

“Her Ability,” Chuuya frowned. Suspicion tickled his palms; the aborted warnings from Tsuchiya's mouth — the step back Noguchi took whenever he dared to garrote the air in scarlet branches. “What was it?”

Instead of answering, the man offered: “Here's a question, Nakahara.”

He stared. “What, are you *quizzing* me?”

“Are you against it?”

“I don't see the need. It's *Chuuya* — “

“Here's a question, *Chuuya*,” he insisted. “Can an Ability be turned off?”

“No,” Chuuya said, eventually — once he decided the man was serious. “You can't turn off the blood in your veins.”

A flash of surprise overrode his features, quickly suffocated. “I see Albatross' rare teachings still strike as deep as they used to.”

It stung.

Chuuya hated it with precision.

Mindless hatred wouldn't do a thing. *Keep the target under your eyelids*, Kouyou had told him, teaching him how to correctly handle a gun. He hated it with cogency; for its inability to turn into a duller sort of nostalgia.

It was a reasonable idea — that living in four walls covered in photographs and ghostly laughter should have made the blade blunter. He didn't wish to forget. He didn't wish to not *care*. He wanted to catch a glimpse of the Flags in the summer air and not *hurt*, first and foremost, insistent and unbeatable, and *there* — always there before everything else.



*Tell me about him*, he wanted to ask Noguchi. *Tell me his life*, he wanted to ask — but there existed a claustrophobic room of possibilities, and each of the windows wanted a price, wanted something back, wanted, *only if you tell me his death*.

“Is there a point you’re trying to reach, sir?” Chuuya asked, eyes forward.

“You can’t turn it off.”

“We’ve established that.”

“Chuuya,” Something in his tone warranted him to turn. Eyes were interchangeable; nonetheless, he’d worn that exact pair as he asked him to tame something that wasn’t his blood, but that had been fighting for the space in his veins since the beginning. “Abilities know more than we ever will. They need no sleep, no rest; they’re untainted by bias and untouched by rationality. You may not be aware of the ground you step on, but your *power* is.”

*That mentality won’t help your case*, Kouyou had told him, and, *I think Golden Demon despises me*.

Yet another government car circled the building.

Chuuya didn’t fear it. It didn’t raise goosebumps on his skin; didn’t prick him with needles. Men were the least of his fears. He didn’t fear it — he didn’t *remember* enough to do so. *It was him they’d thrown in a cage*, he thought. But it wasn’t him who’d occupied the body in the water.

“And if the one, lonely guard who never sleeps says an earthquake is coming,” the Executive concluded. “You have no excuse to ignore him, do you?”

Chuuya despised those government cars.

Instead of longing for blood that was not his to spill, he tried to think of obscurer — and, as such, *nicer* — things. *I’ll buy you a car, if you get your promotion*, Kouyou had told him. *We’ll have to forge you a fake license, though. Can a sixteen years old drive a Maserati? Or would you like something nicer?*

Something nicer.

*Suribachi trash once*, Shirase would have said, *Suribachi trash forever*.

*Suribachi trash doesn’t have a several-zeroes monthly pay, though, does it?*, Chuuya replied, petty, pointlessly, talking to the walls.

“Are you going insane?”

It was a deeply *Dazai* question — unwarranted, unwanted and somehow *correct*. Scientifically curious and pointedly uninterested. It made him want to hurt him; so he did.

“*Ouch,*” he whined, cradling his pinched wrist, devastatingly blank-faced. “Someone’s pissy he didn’t get invited to the Grown-Ups party.”

Summer was but a season, and it could not change the unchangeable. Thus, Dazai had recently managed to land his wrist in a cast, following some unimportant mission with his *Secret Force Squad*. The obnoxiously *blue* shade of his splint was characteristic; the dead mackerel Chuuya had drawn on it a bit on the nose — but necessary because of it.

“In case you forgot,” he muttered, tickling his guts with his heel — as much as their stifling hiding place allowed, “*You* weren’t invited either, dipshit.”

Several feet underneath their broken spines and intertwined legs, Mori and the Executives discussed the meeting the other *Four Moons* had requested. Glowing blood dripped down the led lights and the chandeliers — liquid blood, liquified dawn; the blush on Madame Tanaki’s cheeks when she’d stuttered out a reason to make them take the stairs. *Thank you*, he hadn’t told her.

There had to be a prize, he thought. Surely, not anyone could be so stupid as to get themselves stuck in a vent with *Dazai Osamu* so often.

“I didn’t want to go,” Dazai brushed the matter off, lightly. “I told you once, didn’t I? Grown ups are so aggravating.”

The *grown ups*, he was somewhat sure, were supposed to discuss the traffic of government cars outside of their Headquarters, at some point. *Do you know why they’re here?*, Chuuya had barely managed to hiss to Kouyou, before the flood had swept her away to her duties.

*I have my suspicions*, she’d replied. Two fingers under his chin, two taps — a kiss on the forehead. Concern was not a thing of statues. *Keep your gravity on your fingers, alright?*

“It’s not *quite* the Prime Minister.”

“What?”

“You’re thinking about the cars,” Dazai guessed. “It’s not exactly the Government.” Ace snapped at something Kouyou had said. Mori observed. The electric hum in the room could have webbed every bullet-proof window; all it did, though, was sag the air with the smell of unexisting blood. “It’s the *Special Division For Unusual Powers*.”

Electricity scars had long since healed — the tasers couldn’t have awoken them, despite the spasms of his fingers. Still, he tasted rust. “What are *they* doing here?”

As estranged from the real world as Suribachi City had somehow felt, Chuuya had never needed anyone to explain who the *Special Division* was. When he was younger, he’d convinced himself it was a piece of information every Ability User naturally possessed — the instinctual, unexplainable fastness of preys’ limbs, all to escape predators they weren’t even aware of.

In his mind, it was a lurking shadow — grey walls, probably, and dusty archives. Dossiers on dossiers, lines of numbers on lines of numbers, names and ages and stuff Chuuya had never cared about. They were meant to keep Ability Users contained; they existed to give order to what, in his experience, existed to *not* be ordered.

For them to be observing the Mafia — for them to be observing *him*, according to Kouyou

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“Same thing the *Moons* are doing, I assume,” Dazai shrugged. He hadn’t said a word about the *train station*; clearly, he was waiting for the best moment to snap Mori’s patience with it. The closer the meeting came — the more Chuuya wondered. “Circling the prey. Looking for mines. Searching for the poisoned apple. You can pick the metaphor. We’re having a rat infestation.”

Chuuya didn’t follow. “The fuck do *rats* have to do with this?”

Only one side of his mouth curled up.

There was desperation in the knowledge that even his smiles had become a language, and his pendant for them had yet to fail him; immediately, he knew he was being left out of a joke not meant for him — out of Books with capital initials and the doors of Mori’s office; because no briefing could ever be over before the Boss got his hands on secrets no *promise-number-nothing* could bring Dazai to spill.

“More than you’d think,” he said, at last. “About the animalistic circling. Did you kill the man from the *Bishop’s Staff*?”

He stared. “What?”

“The one who attacked you in the name of Pink-Hair,” Dazai yawned, accidentally — allegedly — kicking him in the side to sit up. “Did you kill him?”

“How do you even —” He took a deep breath. “No, fuckass. I didn’t kill him. I’m not *stupid*. Last thing we need is for them to join the other three *Let’s Murder The Teens* organizations,” He hooked his fingers on the metal graves. “Which Mori will kill us for, by the way. If we don’t tell him before the *Moons* can accuse us.”

Begrudgingly, Dazai appeared impressed. “I really *am* rubbing off on you, am I not? Much pleasing — for my dog for life. Less pleasing when I consider just who you are.”

The idea settled somewhere it wasn’t meant to; he knew, because bile spread through his teeth, almost drowning out the nausea resting beneath his lungs. *All we share*, he told himself, both a reassurance and a threat, *is victims, sunburns, and scores at Smash Smash!*. Nothing so serious as habits. Nothing so serious as minds.

“Says the guy who fights with his hands in his pockets,” he said, before he could stop himself.

What he could only imagine was a mirror of his own expression morphed the boy's face into a living nightmare. "No, I *don't*," he snapped.

The Colonel and Ace fought. Kouyou suggested the smartest solution — Mori accepted it, but pretended not to, all to watch the Executives reach for each other's throats in front of his eyes. He took that from Dazai, he assumed. Or perhaps it was the opposite.

A suffocating tunnel was all but the suitable place to wonder after the most scrutinized dynamic in the Mafia; nonetheless, Chuuya wondered. *Sticking* with someone, he thought, sticking *on* someone — was it a matter of strenght or perseverance? Dazai could have walked all over Mori in the name of stubbornness; Mori could have pulled Dazai by the tongue with a crown of power. Dazai proof-read every document Mori came up with. Dazai knew of every ounce of blood anyone in the organization spilled.

*Tiring*, he found himself thinking, astonishingly — before any envy, before any longing for competition. Forced closeness had to be at blame. He was close to fault the blue under Dazai's eyes to something they had wordlessly agreed not to talk about. *It must be tiring*.

"Are you seriously going to pass out, you waste of —"

"I believe that should be enough," Mori's voice called, several feet underneath their grates, alerted by the metallic thumps and the screeches. Uselessly, they froze. "Hirotsu, do me a favor and ask Chuuya and Dazai to join us. They should be in the Hall, correct?"

Goosebumps and needles and government cars took a step back. Breathlessly, Chuuya concluded: "Shit."

"We're leaving for the meeting in Tokyo tomorrow evening," Pleasantly, eyes to their grate, the man added: "I believe they might be interested in the information."

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His apartment stank of fresh paint.

The warning sign still adorned the door, but Chuuya paid it little mind before pushing it open. Apart from the smell, all was as he'd left it before boarding a plane for France — which he knew, meant very little, if his sole piece of furniture was a bean bag.

He strided to his room, only offering a quick glance to the white tents draped all over the ceiling. Abandoned jars of paint and wide brushes littered the floor; some of his French

textbooks were still on the table. On the doorframe that led to the dark hallway, two gashes left by a knife still tainted the wood — two names next to them. Chuuya vowed to never measure heights with the mackerel again, if it would assure him the distance would stay minimal — on paper, at least.

He found the box where he'd left it: deep in his wardrobe — still compartmentalized as *Shit* with a scribble on the lid; still fraying at the edges.

Opening it was muscle memory; one particular addiction he had given up sometimes around the first laughter out of Albatross' mouth. The blue bracelet was faded and frail with use; it had survived seven years of mindless abuse — of heartfelt, *bare-teeth* protection — and several weeks of munching; of pulling until it broke but never did; of snapping his wrist with it. Mindless habit, pointless retribution, nothing at all — because it was just a damn bracelet.

“Still smells like sewers, too,” he muttered.

There was still dried blood on the pocket knife.

He had thought about giving it back to Shirase, when he'd left for London. It had seemed cruel. *Look at it*, he wouldn't have said, *look at it and bring it with you and never forget what you did*.

It made for a guilt Chuuya didn't care to receive. And so he'd kept it.

*Grudges can grow*, Kouyou had told him, when she'd investigated around his haunted mansion. *They have roots sturdier than most trees, and they rarely need more than space*.

*And I don't hold any*, he'd replied. *So it's fine*.

Chuuya, she'd sighed, soft and gentle, death under her sleeves and fingers on his face. He had fallen asleep in front of her for the first time, some days before; had woken up to her secret smile and hums. *Clean that knife*.

“It is clean,” he said — because he hadn't, to her. Crimson bloomed on the tip, trailing off in shattered roads all the way to the edge of the blade. It would never wash off. Its rusty metal still ran across his veins; *it will never be cleaner*.

He picked up the last object in the box and shut it.

*(He wished to find a way to explain — wished to explain the threads keeping his skeleton together in a way that would not birth pity.*

I don't blame them, *he longed to make them understand — yearned to liquify the soil and rocks of Suribachi City, the sunlight in the coldest days of winter, the bruises he'd gotten himself by racing through alleys more familiar than his own limbs. He remembered being young, and wishing the crater could take the place of his carcass; being convinced his mind would fare off better, if allowed to spread through those roads it knew so well. That Arahabaki would be delighted and alive and quiet.*

I cannot blame them, *he wished to say*. They did what I would have.

*But words were a thing of other creatures — not fake gods and not humans and not anything else he resembled. So he kept his bloodied knife, because the blood was his and the blade was his best friend's, and he said anything but what he needed to).*

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“Didn’t we agree to give her space?” were Koda’s first words, as he pushed the door of the Orphanage open. Two or three children were hanging from his legs, whining and begging for his attention; on his shoulders, Uchiyama lit up the moment he recognized who their guest was.

“Maybe I’m here for you ungrateful sons of a bitch,” Chuuya grunted, shouldering his way inside, sending a half-hearted warning glance to the kid when his fingers excitedly pulled at his ponytail.

“*And* daughters,” Tsuchiya chirped, perched on the counter, playing Poker with Rin. As she spoke, they exchanged a high-five. “Thank you very much for the generalization, Boss.”

“Forgive him,” Noguchi burped. “Bet the punk doesn’t even know the difference.”

Kenta perked up from under a pile of children, busy asking stories for each scar they located on his naked chest. “Wouldn’t that be more inclusive, to be precise?”

Growing familiar with the flowered walls of an Orphanage would have torn a younger Chuuya’s bones apart — pulling at some deeply *untrusting* part of him; knocking with a confidence he would have compared to dead-eyed cops and offers he would have laughed at, under a falling bridge, surrounded by other disenchanted people like him.

It was easier these days. The open door behind his back played a big role in that comfort, he assumed.

But he knew which tiles would creak under his feet; knew which glasses he wasn’t allowed to touch, claimed with all but a scribbled tag. But the kids greeted him by name as he made his way to his friends, blabbering about some plan of theirs he could remember hearing about during his last visit.

“What’s that?” Virgil asked, appearing behind him. Chuuya wasn’t easily startled; he still directed a dirty glance to his sneaking frame.

“Something I have to give Yuan before leaving,” he said, curtly, stealing an orange from the bowl on the table. “Is she in her room?”

“Is she ever anywhere else?” Kenta replied. A flying Jack of Hearts attempted to cut his nose off; he grabbed with ease, but it didn’t stop him from falling victim to the little beasts trying to pull his pants down. “What in the *goddamn fuck*, Rin —“

“Leave the kid alone,” she ordered, eyes still on her game. “If I was traumatized, and the perspective of leaving brought me to *your* dirty mug, I’d stay in my room, too.”

“You’re such a bitch.”

“You’re a cunt.”

“Children,” Tsuchiya called, playing with the black eyepatch Virgil had gifted her. Someone — one of the kids, he assumed — had drawn a pirate symbol on the fabric. “I’m sure you’re both whores. Can you shut the fuck up?”

“Yuan is fine,” Noguchi grunted, mouth still on his beer bottle. He rarely met his eyes when talking about her — Chuuya suspected he had genuine faith in his own ability to pretend he hadn’t developed an *appreciation* of sorts for the ex-Sheep.

It had started, according to Koda’s amused whispers in the hallways, after Yuan had made the mistake of trying to sneak out. An altercation of sorts had taken place in the kitchen, and she’d ended up kicking him hard enough between the legs to render him speechless for the next hour. She had stormed back into her room, but the show of unfamiliar street-swearing mixed with her ruthless viciousness had tickled Noguchi’s interest.

*They’re always fighting about something*, Koda had shaken his head. *He’s t-there whenever she pushes her nose out of the door. She seems to believe he’s both a stalker and the ugliest fucker on earth. Noguchi thinks she’s the devil spawn. They’re a perfect match.*

“Little brat still refuses to talk to the other kids, though,” Noguchi continued, scoffing. “Not that I *blame* her. If I had grown up surrounded by pathetic diapers-wearing motherfuckers with guns, I’d be pretty tired of children too.”

“None of the Sheep were young enough to have diapers,” Chuuya replied, helpfully, throwing the orange to his head to watch him bounce back. He picked up another one and made his way to the stairs, ignoring the strings of uncensored curses thrown his way. “I’m giving you the maps for the shit we need to do when I’m back. Do *something* with them while I’m gone.”

“*Aye-aye*, Boss,” came the chorus.

“Something that’s not crumpling them up and going to the Tournament without me.”

A little more hesitant: “*Aye, aye.*”

“Fuck all of you,” he grunted. A moving obstacle crashed against his legs; wide eyes settled on his face, and a surprised gasp left a chocolate-stained mouth — a perfect match to the

maroon lines now printed down his pants. “Sayuri, we’ve *talked* about watching where you put your feet, haven’t we?”

“Sorry!” she squealed, unapologetic. “Do you have any more money, sir?”

“You opportunistic little —“

Featherlight steps down the stairs, fingers littered in band-aids gripping the wooden railing. *If you learn someone’s steps*, one of the older Sheep had told him, before leaving him in the grungy boxes where they lived, *you will always know when to open the door*.

A deer in the headlights would have stiffened slower than Yuan’s whole frame did, as she came to a halt before the last step. Uncaring of the storm of children running through the hallway, of the laughter coming from the door to the kitchen, she stared at him — significantly less soaked and frantic than she’d been the last time he’d seen her, on the porch of a less constricting cage he didn’t know if she’d choose to flee.

Endlessly stoic, Chuuya retraced every French swear word Kajii had ever taught him.

“Hey,” he grunted, hands migrating to his pockets.

She gripped the railing. “Chuuya.”

Sayari blinked, letting go of his pants. Whatever child-proof signal she sent to the rest of the crowd in the hallway — in less time it took Yuan to actually take the last step, the space was cleared out. Someone had gotten rid of Yuan’s old gown; the overgrown jeans and hoodie she was wearing were old and faded, but they settled something in his throat. She looked tired — but *there*.

“Are you,” she trailed off. Her tone had changed when she spoke again — but Chuuya was helpless to understand *how*. “Are you leaving?”

*I just arrived*, he almost said, dumbly, and he felt it set his ears on fire. She must have heard chatter float from the kitchen. “There’s a meeting,” he confirmed, munching on his cheek. He wouldn’t risk the words *Port Mafia* around her; not yet. “I — shouldn’t tell you about it.”

The corners of her mouth touched the unswept floor. She was rolling something between her hands; the pink flip-phone he’d asked Koda to give her. “Probably not.”

“I’ll make sure the *Bishop’s Staff* is not looking for you,” he added, eventually, after debating some more.

Yuan recoiled, flinching. “You don’t — you shouldn’t have to.”

“It’s fine.”

“I don’t want,” A pause. He wondered how she’d spent the time since they’d last seen each other; if she’d replayed their conversations the way Chuuya hadn’t wanted to — if she’d told Shirase about them. “I don’t want you to fix a mess I made myself.”



*Good*, the spiteful part of him thought. *Good, you know you* —

It tasted like most food did.

“Why did you go to them?” Chuuya asked. “You might have been helpless, but you *know* Suribachi City. If you’d stayed there, you would have been in *your* territory.”

“I was the only one left,” A glossy texture overcame her eyes; something *distracted*. There were massacres he hadn’t been there to witness, and Arahabaki suffered the loss more than he could bring himself to. “I think — I don’t know if we’re all dead,” She blinked. “*They*. If *they’re* all dead. Some just... ran. I thought I could stay put and wait for them, but — it was horrible.” Her teeth sunk in her lip, too violent for the delicate, dreamy tilt of her vowels. “I kept seeing them everywhere. There was nothing left for me in that place.”

*Fifteen*, he thought. She was fifteen; she’d been fourteen when he’d left. She’d been fourteen when she’d vouched for a poisonous knife in his side, because he’d *told them* it would slow down his Ability.

Hands tightening around the phone, she whispered: “You know, I’ve always wanted kids.”

Chuuya stared. “Yeah. I remember.”

Family was something most street-kids longed for; a communal desire that felt no need to be molded into reality, or into any understandable language. They didn’t *talk* about it; didn’t mention how a few hours alone could easily rush from *peace* to *torture*, when all they’d ever known was — chaos. People. The rumble of *presence*.

But Yuan had been strangely vocal about it. *When I make myself a family*, she would tell him, *I’m going to have at least twelve kids*.

It had been the rambling of a child, partly; but he knew there was truth to it, too. She needed people more than she needed to breathe. Even now, it was clear the atmosphere of the Orphanage was pulling at her threads — slowly, *torturously* so, closing the cracks scattered all over her skin.

“It just seemed like the easiest option,” Yuan concluded. “No job would take me. I didn’t have any kind of identification. Plus, they only ever took *boys* in the factories. Some of the girls, they...” She gulped. “But I didn’t want to do that. I really didn’t, so —”

A small, insistent bug that had been flying near his ears sparked to life. Chuuya recalled the dead eyes of women in Suribachi — bony legs peeking from plastic bags. He hesitated; then: “Do you need to see a doctor?”

“What?”

“A doctor,” he repeated, more brusque than he would have liked to — strayed at the edges like every inch of him; unblunted and unsoftened by his useless efforts. “You don’t have to tell me shit, if you don’t want to, but — Rin and Tsuchiya would be glad to talk it out. Green

and silver hair? Silver hair comes from Suribachi, you know. She and her brother worked at the *Tailor*, for a little while.”

Yuan’s eyes darted to the kitchen door. “The brothel?” she dared.

“Yeah. So, if you need —” He cursed the words stuck on his tongue; spat them out. “If you need to get checked out — if something happened to you —“

“No, Chuuya. Not that,” she cut him off. Discomfort made her look younger; she crossed her arms. “I was just — I was *recognizable*, before the hair dye started washing off. Too many people had grudges. I got roughoused a lot. If I’d let someone do something, it would have been because I wanted —” A scoff. “*Something*.”

His relief felt dirty; heavy on the brink of his nose, soft enough to tickle down his shoulders. There were corpses all around the room; their bones crunched with every step he took.  
*Making this about you?*

*Who else*, he thought. *Who else do I make it about, if they’re dead?*

“A doctor might be good, though,” she admitted, quietly.

“Yeah, alright,” He nodded, and couldn’t really stop. *This*, at least, was familiar. He’d spent half of his life dragging the Sheep around the nearest thing to pass for a professional in the settlement; given how he *couldn’t* get sick, it was the perfect solution. “I’ll find someone. Someone trustable. Don’t worry about it.”

He regretted coming, suddenly. Then he gave himself a shake and told the regret to get fucked; and then told himself too, for good measure. *If you hate it, it’s probably the best solution*, Pianoman would have said.

“Here,” Chuuya handed her the plastic bag, making sure not to take any steps forward. “I have to leave, but I brought you this.”

A glint of confusion lit up her traits; it was better than the blankness and the eyebags, so he took it. She sunk her hand in the bag and searched, squinting. Stunned, she stilled.

“You,” Yuan started. Nothing else came out.

The green jacket was in fairly good condition, considering Chuuya had left it in a garbage can for the first week after taking it off — vowing to never look at it again. Kouyou had been the one to clean it up, back then, after taking one look at the rigid set of his shoulders. He’d wondered — whenever he removed the lid from the box and studied his only old possessions — whether she’d just bought another identical one to fool him.

*Would it matter?* He’d heard some parents did the same thing with their children’s pets. *That* wasn’t even a real thing. It was just a stupid jacket. He couldn’t even remember which Sheep had pushed it into his hands, after digging through the abandoned clothing — warning him that he’d better not grow into it too soon.

“I thought I’d thrown it away, but seems not,” he lied, settling his eyes wherever she wasn’t. Some strength more, and his knuckles would tear holes in his pockets. “I don’t need it, though, so you can have it. Or you can burn it, I don’t know. I doubt you have any shit with you, so I thought, maybe...”

Chuuya huffed, unnerved.

*Had thought what?* That she would enjoy the reminder that he was not a Sheep anymore? That she would wear that jacket and be alright with dragging her eyes all the way to his own? That she wouldn’t know he hadn’t thrown it out — that it had been almost two years and he was just as *haunted* by the Sheep as their only members left still were by him?

“Whatever,” He cleared his throat. “I’m gonna go. I’m already late, and those rich men cars are shit with the evening traffic. My number’s on your phone, if you need — I don’t know.” He was rambling. He wanted to leave. He wanted to sit on the floor and listen to her aggravating, *familiar* voice. “Try not to make anyone’s life a living hell and — *for fuck’s sake*, stay away from that Church.”

He dug holes in the hallway and into the kitchen with his strides, fingers itching for a sturdy door to slam. Abruptly, she called: “Chuuya.”

Lips tight, he turned.

Fingers covered in band-aids intertwined green fabric, desperate; he was reminded, pointlessly, of her hands around his arm. Pulling and pulling — *let’s go home, Chuuya*. Her frame was shaking from head to toe. His brain settled on the wet roads down her cheeks and shut down.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. He wondered, for the first time, if Noguchi had had a point — if she had no idea of what to say to *him* either.

Teeth clenched so hard it had to hurt, she sunk her nails in the leather and repeated, helplessly: “*Chuuya*.”

*This is Yuan*, he thought. *Be nice to her*.

“I’ll see you,” he said, clearing his throat. “If you want me to. Or something.”

Cowardly ways were cold enough to relinquish the season in loss; Chuuya left without waiting for her answer.

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“There you are,” Hirotsu huffed, monocle fogged up like it only was when irritation reached his temples. “Would you mind keeping Dazai from getting himself ran over?”

The Port Mafia black SUVs divided the darkening sky in two halves — pristine and *rich* and chasing the night itself. Not many passersby offered more than a glance to the assortment of vehicles; according to Mori, the greater syndicates became, the easier it became to be mistaken for the good guys.

*And most people, he reminded himself, had no particular reactions to government cars.*

Chuuya stared. “I say let him do it.”

The man wasn’t impressed. Huffing, he set to search the crowd of suited men and whispering Executives, squinting until he identified the stain of black and white abandoned on the concrete — hidden underneath one of the SUVs all the way to his chin, petulantly.

He could almost *feel* Kouyou’s urge to pull him by the ears, from across the parking lot — the perfect excuse to escape the duty to discuss matters with Ace and the Colonel, before the two Executives were abandoned as city guards during their absence.

“Oh, hello,” the boy greeted, once Chuuya went to stand over his peeking head, arms crossed. “I can’t believe we don’t get to leave you behind.”

“And I can’t fucking believe we don’t get to run you over,” He threw the orange he’d stolen from the Orphanage, watching it bounce off his forehead. “Come on. Stand the fuck up.”

“No.”

“Mackerel.”

“I have recently watched a documentary,” Dazai insisted — looking deeply more comfortable than someone under a car that wasn’t even entirely turned off should have been. “On car accidents. Did you know that children, elders, and people with previous injuries have a slimmer chance of surviving being run over? And again — we’re only talking about moderate speed. If Gramps only got in and drove it as fast as I know he could —”

“That’s not suicide,” Chuuya cut in.

A pitying look pulled his traits. “Dear. What about these circumstances is casual to you?”

Chuuya gritted his teeth, barely managing to scowl his expression into something more polite when Mori offered him a gracious nod. The man didn’t seem to want to bother with more than a look in Dazai’s direction; Chuuya inhaled.

“Alright,” he said. “As you wish.”

Nothing more than murmurs followed as he silently circled the car, tearing the driver’s door open. Despite all the eyes, only Hirotsu’s sigh was loud enough to be heard: “Chuuya, don’t

—“

By the time he was settled on the seat, foot on the gas and key in the ignition to make the car rumble, Dazai was already whining.

“No, no, *no!*” he insisted, as Hirotsu did his best to help him to his feet without touching an inch of him. Obnoxious pretense dropped from his face like a melting candle; just exaggerated enough to make Chuuya frown, squinting at the purple stains under his eyes. “It *can’t* be Chuuya. It can *never* be Chuuya, imagine how shameful that would be — a man killed by his own dog! It can’t be. Odasaku would lose all respect for me,” He turned so fast Hirotsu offered the closest thing to startlement he was capable of — a blink. “Old man. Promise me you’ll never let that happen.”

“I’m at your service,” the man said, gravely.

“Put him in a muzzle.”

“I’m almost entirely at your service.”

Dazai hummed, satisfied, reaching up to tap the man’s shoulders — needing to stand on his tiptoes to, just a bit. Then, he directed his nastiest glance to Chuuya.

Expectation weighted the air down — as if there existed the sincere, *genuine* expectation that they would start a massacre right there, right now. Chuuya slammed the car door behind him again, already fed up with the tension.

Quicker than blinks, polished shoes kicked his shins. Chuuya slammed his fist on a too hard skull, eliciting a yelp. Hirotsu sighed. The boy’s teeth snapped near his hand, fingers hooking around his middle; he pulled at the overly long strands, cursing out —

“Boys,” Kouyou called, eye twitching — barely loud enough to be heard. “Get in the car. You come with me.”

“That’s *new*,” Dazai gaped, sliding over the hood with ease. Just clamorous enough to make sure Mori would hear, as the man entered the vehicle all the others would surround, he added: “I cannot believe I’m being mercilessly kicked out of the intimate circle. *Betrayal!*”

Chuuya slapped his nape, pulling the back of his tie towards the door. “She *is* the intimate circle, you idiot.”

One of the Executive’s eyelids twitched, again. He thought he heard Hirotsu sigh, *again* — relief or exasperation. Kouyou kept her mouth shut, hushing them inside the back of the vehicle, tight hands around their shoulders — Chuuya’s own, at least; she hovered her fingers upon Dazai’s back, instead — and floating to the passenger seat.

“How come Boss is coming, anyway?” Chuuya asked, as the cars lined up to abandon the parking lot. Ink-black curtains devoured the night; they were too deep in the city to even imagine stars. “Isn’t his identity supposed to be a secret?”

“And a secret it shall remain,” Kouyou confirmed, slapping the ankle Dazai had tried to lay on the brake with her fan. “The *Five Moons*’ meetings are held in complete anonymity. You will understand what I mean, once you see it. I’m sure the demon child could tell you all about it.”

“I could,” he perked up, abandoned on his seat with little care, focused the blinding lights of his console. “I won’t, though. First meeting, I was fourteen. Such a young thing. Remember, Ane-san? Mori had me hold your arm at the airport. It was *so* boring. *However*, this one has the premises to be very interesting,” He winked in Chuuya’s direction. “Voices are the *Three Moons* won’t rest until their commanders are avenged, and their deaths explained.”

“Sure,” Chuuya grunted, not meeting Kouyou’s eyes in the rear view mirror. There was an unanswered text on his phone — *you sure you want them to find out there?* “Your enthusiasm is appreciated.”

“Hey, hey, Chuuya,” the boy insisted, feet almost brushing the head of the driver’s seat. “Did you know the Boss has *doubles* during these types of visits?”

From countless transport businesses with Albatross, Chuuya already knew the road to Tokyo wasn’t long — but the summer traffic did not disappoint his worst expectations. Kouyou, busy as she was studying a vibrant red dossier she’d been carrying around the whole week, barely managed to stitch two words together to ask Dazai to shut his mouth when he started being aggravating. The driver was an old man entirely too engrossed with the Chinese Opera on the radio.

It left Dazai as the only opportunity for entertainment.

Legs were thrown on his lap, shoes to his face; remarks about how much *better he was at this one game, Chuuya, you can’t even begin to imagine* were shoved down his ears; vivid descriptions of the bloodiest ways the *Five Moons* might decide to execute the guilty attackers were cheerfully offered.

Apart from the pounding of his head, he almost managed to let that insistent melody lull him. The hum of the car resembled the ghost haunting the halls of Albatross’ apartment — his piping system — and the murmurs leaving Kouyou’s mouth brought images of her endlessly soft guest bedroom.

More stars appeared the further they drove from the city. Adam had told him a joke about pollution, once — he found he couldn’t remember it anymore. He wondered if he was having fun, protecting humans with his new Eve.

*Heard that, master Chuuya?*, he’d told him. He hadn’t understood what he was referring to, back then. *I get a partner, too.*

The console landed on his lap, hitting that one specific rib that had yet to heal correctly. A *oof!* left his mouth, immediately shushed by the full weight of Dazai’s body crashing against his side, nudging his hands towards the incriminated weapon.

“Bet you Hirotzu’s lucky lighter that you can’t beat this level,” he declared.

Irritation spiked up, though not sharp enough to break through the slumber. “Didn’t you already lose his lucky lighter?”

“He got himself another. And I stole it again,” Dazai ignored the evident sigh Kouyou let out. “So?” He stole his hat and put it on, no care for his spluttering. “Are you going to admit you will never show a *quarter* of my prowess, or will you go through the severe embarrassment of being proved wrong once again?”

“*This* is why Mori didn’t let you in his car, fucker.”

He gasped.

The game was some duel tournament sort of deal, all colorful tassels and over dramatic lights. Dazai’s character was as feminine as usual — a red-haired princess, this time, who made a very peculiar sound whenever she managed to land a hit on the brute she was fighting against.

Unexpectedly, it rendered his bones jelly; his body slipped a bit lower down the seat with every lost round, knees pressing to the back of Kouyou’s seat. Chuuya had been running around with Rin and Kenta the whole morning. He didn’t quite know how Dazai spent the hours of the day he didn’t spend with him or the *Secret Unit*; either talking to the walls and to Kazuko, or skipping behind Oda Sakunosuke’s feet in tales he refused to mention around him.

Whatever it was, it had managed to tire even him out. Dazai’s cruel remarks grew weaker and quieter, until he seemed content to simply sink against his side and watch the screen liquify its light on their faces. He dropped his head on his shoulder, scurrying close enough to click the wrong buttons when Chuuya was about to win.

He could hear his heartbeat; or Arahaki could, called by the known.

“You’re so boring,” Dazai murmured, clearly on the verge of awareness, once he beat the level. The tip of his nose tickled his neck, shortly; his breath fluttered his eyelids. Just for a moment, he caught Kouyou’s complicated expression in the rearview mirror. “Bet you can’t beat the next one, though.”

The Hotel *Chinzanso Tokyo* was the priciest showcase Chuuya’s eyes had ever been subjected to since he’d joined the Port Mafia. His brain barely managed to take it all in, from the spotless windows to the valleys of nature surrounding it; when they dragged themselves inside — Dazai heavily gripping the back of Kouyou’s sleeve, just to annoy her — he didn’t even have the strength to gape at the chandeliers and the gold linings.

*He’d freak out tomorrow*, he told himself. He’d allow the street kid in him to stare another day. Today, the moment Kouyou handed him a car and threw a whining Dazai his way, he walked.

“Boys.”

Deadly precise — the touch of a surgeon — Mori's voice drained any sleep from both their shoulders.

He was smiling. White fingers intertwined white fingers; his red scarf was nowhere to be found — nothing but the organization's doctor. The moment those hands laid on their shoulders instead, Chuuya felt every scar in his body tingle.

"Reflect on what will be asked of us, tomorrow," he told them, from all his height.

He frowned, somewhat confused. "Boss."

"Most chess pieces are replaceable," Dazai commented. Somehow, he'd managed to wipe any trace of drowsiness from his voice; he wondered if Mori had ever even seen him show any signs of slumber. "Is there a good enough offer to no longer make you stand with us, Boss?"

The ex-doctor's face was filled with delight. "I don't know, Dazai. Is there?"

A hum. "Who knows. *Hop-hop*, Chuuya."

Too tired to linger on implications, he made his way to the elevators, barely remembering to offer a bow to the man. He felt his eyes on their back all the way to the inside.

It wasn't the sole pair.

*Special Division*, he tapped down the wall of their hallway, mindlessly beginning to undo the laces of his boots. *Room 768, 772, and —*

*779*, Dazai traced down his back. *I know.*

*Do we kill them?*

*No. A pause. Tomorrow, maybe. Depends on if they'll bore me.*

They checked the room head to toe, searching for spy bugs — removing a good number of them for Chuuya to destroy under his heel and crash in his palm. Heavy curtains were pulled over the floor-to-ceiling windows, drowning the room in merciless darkness. Someone with a sparkling sense of humor — Hirotsu, he was ready to bet — had picked a room with a bunk bed.

It made Dazai senselessly excited.

He had no time to even *attempt* to fight about the top bed — the boy was already under the covers of the bottom one. It hardly stopped him from hurling objects at his back as he undressed, murmuring under his breath, but Chuuya found himself too exhausted to argue.

He floated up the bunk bed. He laid down. He realized, somewhat pointlessly — recalling memories of waking up to a silhouette leaving his guest futon — that he had never *willingly* fallen asleep in the same room as Dazai.



He traced the fading black on his arms, more vivid near his wrists — reminded himself he wasn't bleeding. In such a heavily lemon-flavored room, he would have noticed the scent of blood immediately.

"*Psst.*"

He closed his eyes.

Insistent: "*Psst.*"

Quiet, still.

A well aimed kick at one of the columns shook the whole bed. Rattled, Chuuya held onto the railing. "What the *fuck* do you *want*?"

Wordlessly, a bandaged arm reached up from the edge of his own bed. The tips of his fingers tickled the wood of his makeshift roof, close enough for him to touch.

He fell silent.

"Well?" Dazai called, perfectly toneless.

"Well *what*," he spat back.

"I know my sleeping habits are confusing at best, but we do have a big day tomorrow, yes? I can't sleep with you breathing like that."

Chuuya wondered if hallucinations were meant to feel like this. "Breathing the fuck *how*."

"Like you're sure Arahaki will wreck your body apart as soon as you fall asleep," The concept seemed to bore him endlessly. He wiggled his fingers. "Come on. I would like to close my eyes and dream of beautiful suicides. Is that not what you want?"

*No*, he almost responded. *I don't dream.*

Still at loss for words, he settled back on the bed, hoping the motion would rattle the whole bunk again. His shoulder sank in the annoyingly soft mattress. He couldn't see the hand any longer — but he knew it'd be there, if he pushed his fingers down the edge of the cliff.

*Corruption*, Chuuya reminded himself, *was not an addition*. As such, there was no risk for its sole solution to become one. All *No Longer Human* had ever managed to do was piss the god off and scatter discomfort all over his skeleton like confetti. The silence was *good*. It had been a long time since he'd trusted good things.

Painstakingly slow — he lowered his wrist over the edge, gripping the reaching fingers.

An imperceptible flinch went through Dazai's arm; he wouldn't have noticed, hadn't he been touching him. Quick to erase any memory of a *faux-step*, the colder fingers tightened around his on, cutting his circulation off. He didn't react — it was a familiar grip, and it was a familiar heartbeat, pulsing against his fingertips.

*Some things were rarer than fear*, he thought. Chuuya could hear himself breathe.

*How unknown*, he thought. How lonely.

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The meeting was set to last two days.

Tokyo was chosen in the fragile name of impartiality — it was rare for these kinds of encounters not to end in bloodbaths. Pushed by the Port Mafia in particular, through the years, the syndicates had agreed to keep their petty wars away from their city.

“It’s a different location each time,” Hirotsu explained. He was standing guard in front of their seats, right behind the slightly elevated one Mori and Kouyou had occupied. “*Takasekai* usually picks. Nevertheless, the courtroom seems — a bit on the nose, I will admit.”

A bandaged elbow nudged him. “Heard that?” Dazai whispered, dangling his head from the edge of the seat, legs kicking upside down. “We’re about to be *sentenced* to death. Is that not more professional than having some gangster scream *burn the witch!* at us?”

“Would you shut up, for once in your life?” Chuuya hissed, eyes forward, pulling at his legs. “And sit up. I’m *not* catching you when the blood reaches your stupid head and you pass out. In fact, I’ll show off your corpse like a white flag —“

“Boys,” Hirotsu called, as the doors opened. His frame was all but tense — but he kept his eyes on the crowd settling in the remaining three sides of the room. “Time to keep quiet.”

Procedure was peculiar. Kouyou showed her face freely to the four groups — as were the right and left hands of each syndicate in the room. Delicately painted *separé* had been situated in front of the seats of the leaders, enclosing them in an incomplete booth.

It gave the whole meeting an *incorrect* aura — something that was made for the shadows of the night; yet forcibly shoved into the light of day. As a means to an end, Chuuya tried to come up with a rational number for the ounces of blood spilled by every hand in that room.

Only the *Bishop’s Staff* leader was excluded by protocol — a man, he assumed, considering he hadn’t caught sight of any female figure apart from the ones in the beds. The short rows of *Staff* made for an uncomfortable sight, in their crimson vests and dead-face masks; he hadn’t quite managed to move his eyes away from them since they’d stepped into the room.

“What a gorgeous ceiling,” Dazai sighed, as the standing silhouette behind the Shadow Blade’s *separé* barked about the damages the *Gentleman’s Bar* had gathered. It *was* beautiful

— frescoed in traditional paint strokes. “It’d be the perfect place to hang myself from.”

Hirotsu twitched, minimally.

Chuuya didn’t pay him any mind. Mori, strangely enough, talked very little. From his perspective, the two of them partially hidden from sight — he could see the amused curve of his mouth climb to the stars. He was content with witnessing the *Shadow Blade*, *Takasekai*, and the *KK Company* list off everything the attacks had cost them.

He frowned. Fingers on Dazai’s armrest, he tapped: *does he know it was us?*

Dazai directed him a slow, owlish blink.

“Breach of authority is something the *Five Moons* have quietly, but *sincerely*, declared a useless demonstration of bloodthirst,” *Takasekai*’s leader — a woman, he thought, judging from the voice — insisted. There was something in her tone that *reeked* of aristocracy — her every vowel was the opposite of the accent Chuuya sometimes still slipped in, when he was distracted. “We’re not a bunch of low gangs who can afford such petty conflicts. If the Port Mafia has nothing to say about such mindless attacks — which we have ruled out as our own — we can only assume we should take it as a declaration of war.”

Murmurs arose through the room. Next to him, Dazai extracted his console.

“You accuse us,” Kouyou summed up, her smile in place. A flower-patterned fan hid most of her face; her eyes were pleurably merciless. “On what basis?”

Eerily enough, the leader of the *KK Company* hadn’t stopped giggling under his breath once, ever since he’d strided across the courtroom with his wildly dressed subordinates in tow. Brown and gold alternated on their mantles, hems brushing the ground and hoods draped across cleanly shaved heads.

“Should we remind the Port Mafia,” the man intervened, staring her down, “That during the *Nine Rings* Conflict, we could have easily joined forces with such a promising enemy, and chose not to? I ask, is it really a wise decision — picking battles so soon after you almost lost a war?”

“Fucking liars,” he muttered.

Kouyou hid her mouth behind her fan. Her huff of hilarity went all but unnoticed. — Chuuya knew that was the desired effect. Knew her coy act would make some veins pulse. “If the *KK Company* would like to describe it as a near-loss, we surely will not take that delusion from them.”

His next, gaping inhale was evidently offended. Gladly, the Executive met each pair of eyes dripping hostility on her lap.

“We wish for clarification,” the *Shadow Blade* leader intervened, eventually. “We wish to come to a better pact, for the good of our city. Some conditions will be put in place, certainly —“

“Certainly,” Mori echoed.

The quiet took a different texture.

There had been a saying, when he was still in the Sheep: *if you’re so lucky not to be noticed by the Port Mafia — don’t gift yourself to their eyes.*

The Boss wasn’t quite an intimidating man. He resembled, Chuuya thought, someone who would *stop* at very few things. Contempt from organizations he barely recognized as somewhere around their scale was clearly not one of them. *Accusations* he did not know true —

“But if that turns out not to be a possibility,” the *Blade* continued, with minimal hesitation. “We *will* take your acts as a declaration of war, and we *will* respond accordingly. All four of us. Even if we were willing to forgive those three instances, our commanders were —“

“All four of you?” Uselessly, Mori curled an eyebrow. Dazai’s fingers paused on the buttons. “That’s curious. As far as my assets have informed me, the *Bishop’s Staff* received no threats, nor any attacks from these — mysterious forces.”

Chuuya stilled.

“Should I blame this spontaneous alliance on a common animosity?” the man continued, pensively. “Or should I blame it on the sympathization all four of you showed — and subsequently denied — to the *Nine Rings*?”

*Takasekai* insisted: “We *didn’t* —“

“Save your words. You have already accused us of four attacks we didn’t claim — I would like an answer for the fifth one, if the *Bishop’s Staff* will allow me one.”

White vests and white masks turned their attention to their direction, adorned in a greyish shoulder-to-head veil they hadn’t been sporting in their Headquarters. Gloved hands tapped aimlessly on the armrests of the leader’s seat — the only one of the bunch with a yellowish mask, closer to rusty golden than to rotten snow — as he munched over the question.

At last, with a voice much older than Chuuya had suspected, he said: “We have reasons to believe you — or whichever one of your assets hid these attacks from you —“

“Hide,” Mori echoed, amused.

Deadly calm, hands crossed at the small of his back — Hirotsu glanced back at them.

“ — might have taken something of ours.”

“Oh?” the doctor tilted his head — the very picture of innocence, for no one to see. Chuuya’s head was pounding; his fingers itched to reach for his phone — the only other nameless contact he had added, after gifting Yuan her own. “You mean one of the many girls you kidnapped, correct?”

Kouyou straightened. The rumble of murmurs grew; Chuuya realized — rather late, if Dazai's sigh meant anything — that at least *some* of the *Five Moons* had fallen victim to the *Bishop's Staff* stealing game.

“Our women have willingly offered themselves as members of our brotherhood,” the leader replied, blankly. “I will not discuss our faith in this heathen place. All the Port Mafia needs to know — is that no pact will come to a successful conclusion with the *Bishop's Staff*, should the girl not be returned to her rightful home.”

“That is certainly a marvelous threat,” Mori commented. “And I assume the other *Moons* are glad to insert this condition in the endless lists they will ask of us?” He didn't wait for their protests. “I am rather interested in something you said.”

His mask did not twitch. “That *something* being?”

“*We have reasons to believe some assets who hid these attacks from you — might have taken something of ours,*” he echoed. “Am I to presume you have any material names to accuse?”

Subtly — a dance so flawless Chuuya barely managed not to gape at it — Hirotsu nodded to the few *Black Lizards* present. Easily, they readjusted their positions, hiding him and Dazai from sight — blinding them to the expressions scattered around the room.

“Old man,” Chuuya hissed.

“Later,” the Commander whispered. His wrinkled fingers tightened around the edge of a seat; suddenly, irrevocably, Chuuya knew *he* knew.

He turned — a single eye was already there, waiting for his gaze. His eyebrow curled.

*Protection* felt — abnormal.

Scorn would have made more sense. An unsuccessful mask for the gulps and the carefulness Chuuya could feel enclose him like a water veil; a show of strength in the face of two people they believed would have killed them for sport. Men steered away from Dazai whenever his silhouette appeared from the stairs to the dungeons; eyes dropped to the ground as soon as a red glow drowned Chuuya's frame.

Fear and rage went hand in hand — scared of the unknown, they had tried to kill them. They hadn't managed to.

*Assets*, Dazai mouthed, endlessly amused. *I told you they would need us.*

“There have been talks, in the underworld,” the *KK Company* leader intervened, at long last.

Three *séparés* hid faces he could almost shape in front of his eyes, with vertiginous clarity; from the very little he managed to see through the bars of the *Black Lizards'* bodies, the tight lips of their subordinates told him enough.

“Two shadows,” he continued, too toneless. “Broken cameras and reports from those who caught a glimpse — that is all they could tell us. They move too fast for us to catch, and they

have killed with no hesitation. Their damage has been — unprecedented. We have compared our stories, and they all point to this one direction.”

“It is our belief,” the leader of *Takasekai* intervened, her tone lined in salty waves of tension. “That the Port Mafia might have found two particularly *reliable* weapons. And that the massacres we have fallen victims to in these months are to be appointed to them.”

Kouyou’s fan had come to a graceless halt; even without her eyes on him, Chuuya felt every hair on his body stand.

“To the two shadows of the Port Mafia,” Mori echoed, seemingly uninterested. Hirotsu was a too sturdy wall; but Dazai was a mirror, and there was a tinge of danger in the callous tilt of his lips. “And do these *shadows* have names?”

“Do they need ones?” the *Bishop’s Staff* scoffed. “Do they even exist, outside of the glass cage the Port Mafia most probably keeps them in — when it doesn’t need them to sow disaster in the name of supremacy?”

Chuuya felt his mouth tremble.

“To be clear,” Mori said. The lack of his gaze on them was unnerving. “What you ask of us is to reestablish our peace. Correct?”

“Under certain conditions,” the *Shadow Blade* was quick to add. “We will need reassurance in your motives. Our forgiveness cannot be taken for granted — just as we will not take for granted your promises not to betray our trust again.”

“Did you not betray *our* trust,” The word was spat with viciousness at the center of the room, gentle enough to startle most. “When you secretly joined forces with the *Nine Rings*, hoping they would take care of the insurmountable obstacle on your way?”

Thick and nauseating, silence sagged the room.

“You talk of *forgiveness*,” the Boss drawled, all enjoyment wiped away from his face. “You talk of *conditions*. Need any of you to be reminded, the *Five Moons* were not established on our requests. It was *your* predecessors who longed for a solution to keep the Mafia contained.”

*Takasekai* rose from her seat, her silhouette frantic behind the *separ  *. “What is *that* supposed to —“

“It means that *you* need us to come to an agreement,” Mori concluded, easily. “The same cannot be said for us, unfortunately.”

It tickled something in the further corners of his skull; places Arahaki could not quite reach — and, as such, were technically irrelevant. He remembered kneeling, a new hat and a new home to destroy, all because of an answer to a question he’d never been smart enough to ask himself. *What is a good leader? Why was I not?*

Yokohama drowned in illegal organizations; they kept the city afloat with blood and deals the upper floors were too hypocritical to admit to taking. None of them were the Port Mafia; none of them clogged the whispers and the goodnight stories of the settlement with the same *hunger*, as if saying their name a tad too loud would trace knife collars around someone's throat.

Gloved fingers snapped the thread; Mori sighed, once again a paragon of delight. "But those are not details we should linger on, should we? We're here to discuss peace, not hierarchy," Those few words restarted lungs around the room. "It has been some long hours, has it not? I propose we take some time to reexamine our stands, and we dedicate tomorrow to *facts*. What do you say?"

"Under one condition," the *Bishop's Staff*.

"Being?"

"Bring your shadows with you, tomorrow."

Kouyou's petrified frame, Hirotsu's unbent back — all he saw amongst the whispers. Lightning quick, the old man directed a glance to Dazai's face — he, though, only had eyes for Mori.

"We will bring someone, too," the masked man assured. That coverage was more unnerving than even the *separ  *; it gave the impression of a featureless face, as if discussing trades with a ghost. Chuuya wanted to punch him straight in the jaw. "It is them, the crimes against the *Moons* are to be chalked up to. Let them speak. Let us all decide whether conditions are appropriate. Let us come to peace, for the good of Yokohama."

*Oh*. Adrenaline tickled his fingers; for a glimpse, he could have sworn the black had been swallowed by his skin. *Oh, it's on*.

"Alright, then" Mori conceded. Ever a mirror, Dazai let out a bored sigh. "For the good of Yokohama."

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That evening, Chuuya eavesdropped on three conversations.

The first of them was hushed, as Kouyou and Hirotsu pretended to exchange pleasantries in the dining room of the Hotel, seated in the table closest to the exit. Dazai had dropped a

stolen meal on their desk, but the endless tables of buffet still filled Chuuya's mouth with drool.

The two, though, had yet to touch a piece of food.

“— in the place to demand?” Hirotsu was saying, running pensive fingers down a cigarette pack. His lighter was nowhere to be seen; Chuuya could feel it press inside his pocket. “Boss will not allow them to be punished.”

“He might have to, if he wishes to bring a treaty to the table,” the Executive replied, hands just tight enough around her cup of tea. She had been trying to catch him since the end of the meeting — Chuuya had taken advantage of old *Sheep* hiding methods. “What in God's name were they *thinking*?”

“It's Dazai and Chuuya,” the commander said, pointedly — like it meant something.

“Is starting a conflict against the *Four Moon* a wise decision? It will bring nothing but a useless bloodbath we will emerge victorious from,” she insisted. “The News will torment us again. There were too many losses during the *Nine Rings Conflict*; the *Special Division* is already tailing us. Dazai, especially, should *know* that — ”

She cut herself off; seething, she studied her tea.

“There's nothing they can do against us. They don't have enough proof, my lady.”

“But they do have something we need,” Kouyou frowned. “Without the *Permit*, we're left naked. An eventual conflict will require a great amount of Abilities; they *will* be watching. It's a sum of troubles we cannot afford,” She laid her cup down, sighing to the ceiling. Again: “What was Dazai *thinking*?”

“Only the fact that this whole mess was born from Dazai's machinations consoles me,” the man replied, with an exasperated tone he'd learned to associate to discussion on the two of them. “He has always walked a thousand steps in front us. There has to be something we're missing.”

“His games are nothing but a pointless search for entertainment,” *Dazai*, Mori had said, *is barely a person*. “Or suicide, if we're particularly unlucky. We are bound to suffer for it.”

Hirotsu searched her face. “It is alright of you to worry about them.”

“*Them*?” Kouyou laughed, disbelieving. “I trust Chuuya not to fall down that demon's traps. We will have words about this — competition or not, he's still my subordinate. He acted out against my orders. If I have any *concerns* — it is for his minimal disadvantages against Dazai. Surely not for our resident devil.”

“When did you start pretending to despise him?”

Webs spread through her glass exterior; beautiful, in some way — only because they were hers. She tapped one manicured nail on the edge of her cup; distant, her eyes traced lines on a canva he couldn't see.



Eventually, the woman sighed.

“He’s a child, Hirotsu,” she offered. “It’s all he will ever be, no matter how hard he fights it. He is a victim of his age, and the way he acts will shape him into someone who he is *not* — not yet.”

“Someone like him?”

*Him?*, Chuuya wondered.

Kouyou raised her up to her lips. “Someone worse, perhaps.”

Confirmation of Dazai’s supposed plan came from his second eavesdropped conversation — if it could be called such; given he doubted either the mackerel nor the Boss of the Port Mafia were stupid enough not to notice the silhouette lurching outside Boss’ room.

Still, they talked freely. He listened.

“ — not worth it,” Dazai spun his chair around, still sitting upside down, phlegmatic. “It will not last longer than two weeks. A month, if you’re lucky. They will break it, and we will too, because we will be left with no other choice — and you *will* have paid with your assets and blood.”

There was something peculiar on Mori’s face — an unfamiliarly pale mixture of something too resourceful to be fear and too careful to be confidence. The tilt of his vowels, perhaps — when he had pretended to know about *shadows* and whatnot in the meeting. “Nothing to say about your secret play?”

*Caught you off guard*, Chuuya thought, out of nowhere. Dazai looked too inconsequential to scare Yokohama’s most feared one — and yet.

“Not a secret play. Merely a belatedly told one.”

Amusement curled up his lips. “Another man would have you both executed for this. Do you understand the risk you put us in?”

A shrug. “You’re not another man.”

“You left me to their vulgar accusations with no knowledge that they were right,” Mori let him know. “You called the *Special Division* on us. Even the precinct — the state of that train station, dear. Do you truly not think there ought to be some consequences?”

Chuuya waited, gloves creaking.

“What comes next is more relevant,” Dazai offered, eventually, eyes to the ceiling. “You can have your consequences later. I’m already in my first time out since the Hospital, aren’t I?”

“Wouldn’t want to reach three time outs.”

“Wouldn’t want that.”

“You sound awfully confident in this upcoming conflict,” Mori considered, with a brand new tone. Chuuya plastered himself against the wall, hiding himself from his back-and-forth, hands crossed at the small of his back. “Where did you even gain the information?”

“From the rats in the sewers.”

He thought the man might have rolled his eyes — instead, all he did was hum. “So you *have* established contact.”

“Not quite,” Dazai huffed. “I do have access to some information, though. Rats and giraffes are coming to the city, and no treaty will manage to hold them back.”

“You know what they will offer.”

A pause. “I do.”

“What do you think about it?”

“I have already told you,” Dazai leaned his hands on the ground, pushing — halting the seat. “Remember? You asked me to evaluate him. I gave you the truth. If you trade him, you will be left with one roof less in the storm that is about to come. And trust me, Mori — it is a big one.”

The Boss paused. “Give me numbers.”

“Unimaginable,” Unfocused eyes settled on the door — Chuuya knew he couldn’t see him, but the weight of his gaze was hard to shrug off. “Like nothing we’ve ever seen before. It will be beautiful — close enough to touch. Who knows, maybe it will kill me, finally. Maybe I’ll find it. Maybe —”

A small group of men from the *Bishop’s Staff* had been left to guard the courtroom, along with mistrusting pairs from the other syndicates. Chuuya directed his evening run there to check something he already knew; the *Staff* was well aware of who he was, — of what he had *taken* — and they knew he was half of the shadows the organizations had requested to meet.

“They want the redhead,” he heard them whisper, easily camouflaged by their mask. “They refuse to tell us *why* him in particular, but it’s their unmovable condition.”

“He should be ours,” the other replied. He had an open beer in his free hand; he wondered if his religion allowed it. “He took *Candidate 177*. Even if she’s returned, he should be punished for what he dared to do.”

Chuuya tightened his fists in his pockets, hunched on the roof, peering into the circular windows. He wouldn’t have heard a thing, hadn’t it been for Arahaki — unwilling to thank the circumstances, he let him growl and scratch down his spine, as infuriated by the idea of Yuan going back there as he was. The god cared for no one and nothing — but they were one and the same, and he *knew* who Chuuya had devoted his life to protect.

*All you are is a cage*, he thought.

Perhaps it went both ways.

“The other one,” the man asked. “Do you think he’s as young? Some believe it could be the Demon Prodigy, that strategist. But why would the Port Mafia lay its faith in the hands of two brats?”

A disbelieving scoff came from his companion. “Have you even *heard* of what they’ve done? If you think you’ve ever seen a corpse, you’re wrong,” Unnerved, he looked around the hallway; then, lower: “They know no mercy. They don’t spare anyone — not even the children. That one leader from the *KK Company*, the one they talked about in the News? They laid *pictures* he’d secretly taken of his son around his body, and left the child on the verge of death, with a toy three inches deep in his chest.”

“The things they do — the *numbers*,” His grip around his rifle grew suffocating. “Did you know they’ve started telling bedtime stories about them to the children from *Takasekai*? All to make sure they won’t go play in the areas they haunt at night. *Be careful, or the monsters of the Port Mafia will get you.*”

Chuuya was quiet.

“The Demon Prodigy and the god of the Port Mafia?” the man murmured, frowning. “Tales can be exaggerated.”

“These aren’t *tales*,” the other hissed. “And these aren’t children. They are *wraiths*, if I’ve ever seen one. And if we let the Port Mafia groom them into their worst — then what will we have?”

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As he had promised to the kid in a green jacket, when he returned to the Hotel, Chuuya let his eyes trace the glimmering luxury of the halls.

Pierced by the moonlight, paintings and ceramics mocked him gently — less of a spit in the face and more of a giggling nod. The chandeliers had been cleaned by hand. The leftovers the waiters were grabbing from empty tables were few and complex, and they probably tasted good — just not *too* good.

It wasn’t that Chuuya wanted to live like that — surrounded by liquified treasures and things only his eyes would use; money spent for the game of it. But managing to afford a life like

that would have quietened down some needy part of him — one that knew what cockroaches and vomit tasted like; one that had grown tired of the rain seeping in through the cracks.

Kouyou's tuts tickled his ears.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, staring up at an entire wall of exposition wines. "I know."

He laid on his bed and studied the ceiling — still too close, still too far. He could have perforated the mattress, had he sunk a foot in the fountain of *Tainted*. Could have slipped down, made a hole in the floor — made another and another, until the grass tickled his back. Could have studied the stars. *You need not wake me again.*

Fingers knocked on the column of the bunk bed.

Caught red-handed in his most notorious crime — locking the cage three times; throwing away the key — Dazai was sooner recognized by Arahabaki than by him. His presence rumbled up and down his nape, shivers that shivers were not — raw *dislike*, yes, but adorned by familiarity. The god's most loathed; his only recognizable heartbeat.

"What do you want?" Chuuya sighed.

Another knock. *Come down.*

"Fuck *no*."

Some more knocking.

*Was it genuinely too late, he wondered, to find Hirotsu and beg him for a new room?*

Stubbornness was a personality defect they shared; as such, the conflict dragged itself through the hour, until he could only assume he would never manage to scrub the sound of his knuckles kissing the wood from his mind.

He showed off the repertoire of French words Kajii had taught him as he jumped down, quiet enough not to kill the stillness of the moonlight filtering through. The thud of his socks on the parquet; the tick of some ancient clock he had not studied from up close, uncomfortable in the sheer *endlessness* of that room — the rustle of sheets, where Dazai had kicked them to his feet, sweating the end of the season off.

He was curled up against the wall, as if he could just ignore him. "I will hurt you," Chuuya promised, moving around until he could lay on his side, pointedly sinking both elbows and knees into the nearest bony parts he could reach. They were so disgustingly *growing*, he thought, with contempt. Their limbs didn't even know where to go. Their bones didn't know where to stretch. "I will *hurt* you. Maim you permanently. If you don't tell me why you couldn't just let me *rest*, after you put us in such a shitty situation —"

Rustling of sheets and screeches of beds. His voice vanished.

Cheek sunk in his same pillow — *there was a knife under there*, he knew, *because there was one under his own* — nothing but a white shirt to interrupt lines of bandages up his arms,

close enough to feel his breaths — Dazai laid his eyes on him.

Eyes.

A bundle of bandages rested in his closed fist, at easy reach. Something about the brush of too-long curls on eyelashes he wasn't familiar with was nauseating — purely because it caught him lacking on a subject he *knew*. Something about the necessity of his own gaze to *move*, to choose on what eye to focus on — something about the pale, sweat-wrinkled skin against the suburned one — was *vertiginous*.

*He looks young*, he concluded, stunned. He looked human.

Chuuya cleared his throat, settling his gaze over his shoulder. As soon as he realized what he was doing, his tongue snapped against the roof of this mouth — dragging his eyes to the other pair again. *This means something*, he thought, again and again, because it always did — he had been reaching forward since they'd met, willing or unwilling, no matter if it was *his* boot on *his* chest.

"That's *new*," he grunted, at last. "What got you in a fuckin' sperimentational mood?"

"I need something from you," Dazai said, easily. Deal after deal; more familiar than the dip of their bodies on the same mattress. "This is what you get in exchange."

It strided down his bones. Dazai wore a faded blue shirt and pathetically bright boxers; *he wasn't made for this much naked skin*, he thought. No tie and no coat; no hair clips either. Only braces and rationality. He looked at Chuuya's shirtless chest like he was seeing past the scars — envying. "I didn't ask for shit."

There was no tension in the line of his shoulders; nonetheless, he felt as if transactions weren't supposed to feel so utterly devastating on the mind. He hadn't asked for his vulnerability — as much as someone like him could have any. "But now you feel like you owe me something," he explained, as if it was obvious.

"Wow," he drawled. "You *are* an asshole."

"You can touch, if you want," the boy offered. His uncaringness grated on some delicate part of his nerves. *That's your skin*, he wanted to remind him — to punch it in his skull. *That's your body. You're not a fucking floating brain.*

"Why would I want to *touch*," Chuuya muttered, but couldn't help himself from studying the portion of skin a bit more closely. It was easy to miss — paper thin scars surrounded his hidden eye, spreading from that unusual epicenter like the leftover marks from lightning.

Something about the eye in itself felt *weird*. It was the same color as the other one, nothing like Chuuya's own, but vaguely — *distracted*. As if it had never seen a thing, and couldn't bother with studying the world that was now offered to it.

He squinted. "You can't see shit from that one, can you?"

Dazai wriggled his eyebrows. "Which one?"

“How did you manage to end half blind?”

“I tripped and the eye fell,” he sighed, sinking a bit deeper into the mattress. His voice was a breath; Chuuya adapted to it; matched its unwillingness to despair the silence. “And then it rolled down the street, and I made Ace chase after it. Unfortunately, it ended up in the sewer grate. Mori shoved it back in. And now here I am, with his gifts on my skin.”

Chuuya was unimpressed. “Alright. Why the bandages? The eye looks fine. ‘You insecure or something?’”

“I like my eye very much.”

“Then?”

“You sneaked out to see the guards at the courtroom, didn’t you?” Dazai asked, not waiting for an answer. “Mori has recovered from his shock quickly — he already organized his publicity agenda. Were they as terrified as he wishes for them to be?”

He huffed. “They tell bedtime stories about us, did you know?”

“Do they?”

“At *Takasekai*. ”

“That’s nice,” he commented. “Bedtime stories are almost like fairy tales.”

“Apparently we’re wraiths,” Chuuya traced his reflection in the empty bulb; it followed the working one seamlessly. The loss of vision had to be recent. “Monsters. Bad people who will be groomed into something even worse. Merciless killers who play pretend as adolescents.”

“How cheerful,” the Demon Prodigy whispered, unblinking. His fingers reached out; he grasped a strand of his hair, tucking it behind his ear — and then around it, again and again, tightening around the cartilage like a ribbon; until Chuuya nudged his knee with his toes.

He couldn’t quite pinpoint the last time he had shared a pillow with someone. His status in the Sheep had often granted him freedom of privilege — or as much of it as the slums could offer. He’d slept on the floor any time missions with the Flags stuck them in a room.

Childishly, he longed for a pile of books — of pillows, maybe; something to build a wall between their bodies, make sure that nothing of them would come into contact. *You stay on your side, I stay on mine*. He wondered if *No Longer Human* could work like this — radiate from his sunburned body like streams of moonlight; bring the silence long enough to sleep. *You stay in my side, I’ll stay in yours*.

*If you’ve heard them talk too*, he wanted to ask and didn’t — afraid the desperation would seep through, afraid he’d know that Chuuya couldn’t dangle *his* humanity to them as a proof — so Dazai would *have* to instead, at the cost of his play pretend brush strokes on a self-portrait. At the cost of admitting that one of them, always *only* one of —

“How fucking original,” Chuuya, fake god of the Port Mafia, replied.

“It’s what Mori wanted, anyway.”

He hummed. “I *got* that.”

“Did you?”

“You wouldn’t have risked it, otherwise. Boss is working on his own reign of terror,” Pieces added themselves to the puzzle out of his control; a mixture of *want to take a walk with me, Chuuya?* and gazes he wasn’t naive enough to believe the man had never noticed. “He’s convinced the two of us can create one without involving the entire syndicate. Without falling into the Prior Boss’ senseless methods.”

“Less perpetrators,” Dazai commented, rather academically; *here’s point one, get to point two*. “Less monsters to blame. A bloodier story on the underworld mouths — *look at what the Port Mafia can do. Look at what even its kids can do,*” He raised his hand again, chasing a square of light reflected by the chandelier; it ran down the lines of his palm — to that one mole on his scarred thumb. “Ane-san can be the face of the organization. He needs us to be the hands.”

Chuuya reached up with two fingers; pinched the skin between his thumb and index. *Silence.*

The cocoon of warmth and quiet melted his bones with every breath; he had been feeling unsettlingly *tired* since the last time he’d used Corruption. Eyelids fluttering, begrudgingly, he said: “Then we’ll be the damn hands.”

“It’s kind of contractual, Hatrack.”

He huffed. “For the sake of this prophetic conflict you’ve been blabbering about?”

A pause. “Spying isn’t really nice.” It didn’t seem as if the knowledge came as a surprise to him.

“What is it that you want?”

“To die,” Dazai responded, easily. “But I don’t suppose that’s what you meant.”

“You gave me this,” He trailed one finger down, tracing gun-made calluses and life-lines of intertwined skin. Arahabaki had a backhanded need to know what would bring the end; Chuuya dragged his bitten nail lower and lower, ignoring the twitch of Dazai’s arm as he brushed the sweaty bandages, sticking to his skin — his rolled up sleeve; the cliff of his shoulder; his overheated, sun burned cheek — only to land on the white lighting strikes around his eye. They were slightly elevated under his touch; roads someone had dug too deep and refilled over the brim. “For some ridiculous reason. What is it that you want from me?”

Fingers enclosed his raised wrist.

*Needles and pins*, he thought — except Arahabaki was nowhere to be found, and Chuuya had yet to decide whether it was something he wanted or feared. It had to be exhausting — being filled with such an endless, quiet absence. The weirdo probably enjoyed it. Shipping containers and pet snakes. And —

“Trust,” Dazai said, simply.

*You have it, Chuuya would have never said, you have all of it.*

It felt greedy. He had bled in his hands, had bitten down his contempt and let the voices fade in the background; had ignored the stains of fault he wore with carelessness — not with pride; but not in silence either. He’d been tortured by Professor N because of him. He’d been dragged into the Mafia because of him. Shirase was in London and Yuan couldn’t look him in the eyes — he slept in an apartment littered in photographs he’d been coerced to take and would now beg to repeat.

And yet.

And *yet*, stupid and inevitable. He had pushed the door open to the one creature in existence who might erase him — *who else but himself?* — and he had tied the key around Dazai’s neck; a hangman knot for a boy who wanted to die. A piece of trust for someone who had been willing to let Yokohama burn a little longer, for the starved luxury of giving him a choice.

An evident lie — they never had one. But Chuuya wasn’t cruel enough to spit in the face of something gentle.

*You have all of it. What more could I give you?*

“Why me?” Chuuya muttered.

The fingers abandoned his wrist; he called his arm back. Tore his eyelids apart — detested, acutely, the *nothing* he was met with, shaped like an unbandaged face, like an eye staring at him.

“Who else?” Dazai said.

It filled him with something sharply *unlikable*, that he had learned to associate with the other boy. “Mori.”

Amazement made him blink. “What a funny thought.”

“Hirotsu, then.”

“The old man is smart enough to know his place,” was the only acknowledging he gave. “I might allow him to guard my back, on rare occasions. But I wouldn’t give him a gun to point at my forehead, unless I’d decided the time to die had come.”

Stunned, he blinked. “Hirotsu wouldn’t *kill* you.” The sole idea was laughable. After the petty, borderline *violent* trials the two of them had put the man through in the first year of their acquaintance, punished in no way, he wouldn’t bet on the man *not* having a soft spot of sorts for them.

Genuine skepticism painted his tone. “Ane-san would.”



“I didn’t bring her up,” he protested.

“Because you agree.”

He thought: *when did you start pretending to despise him?* “She’s not stupid enough to —“

“Chuuya,” His tone was final — funerary and inauguratory; the edge of the blade and whatever would be waiting underneath. Shut doors of meeting rooms; the quick hush of voices as soon as they appeared in the *adults’* presence; the whispers and the glances of the organization; the bedtime stories and the names; *those aren’t children*. “It’s just us.”

No, he snapped. His lips didn’t move, and yet he swore — *no, that’s not true*.

He had much more than him — had searched for it with a hunger that was *unseemingly* and denied, wanting to share the shadows with anyone but the boy who had locked his every door but the one that led to them. A too powerful body — looking for anything drenched in enough adrenaline to get his hands out of his pockets.

Albatross had been breaking into his apartment long before Dazai had started breaching through his own obsession — and he had done it with a damn *key*. Chuuya had trusted every person who had ever lent him a genuine hand, and he had laughed more, and he had wanted them around, and he had been *glad* for their presence.

Albatross was dead, and his trust was a sword of Damocles.

It was a ridiculous pretense. Chuuya had plenty. Chuuya needed none of it; needed few things less than the riskier of them all. *It’s just us*. Surely the Port Mafia had to be crawling with shadows.

*Deep down*, he recalled. *You and I are the same*.

He sat up, as if electrified. “Fuck you.”

Acceptance — *predictable*, his every line called him — pulled Dazai’s face into emptiness. “How vulgar.”

“Fuck you,” he insisted. He wanted to punch something. He wanted to punch *him*. It was nauseating. It was draping all over him like spider webs, locking him in, locking him out. A spear breaking his chest in two, voices that he knew weren’t real. *The same. The same*. “Fuck you, we’re not —“

“I’m not in the habit of asking for things that are already mine,” Seemingly bored by the conversation, Dazai turned to face the wall, kicking the blanket even further. “And I’m not in the habit of gaining what I will give back.”

*You have it. You have all of it.*

“You’re incredibly stupid, but not *impossibly* so. You’ll understand.”

Energy surged to his hands — he watched them glow. He stared at his back.

“You’re free to sleep, now,” Dazai yawned; most certainly a facade. Dismissed — in any tone Mori might ever showcase. “Plan is in motion.”

“*Plan?*”

A pause. “One you will hate me for.”

“I already do.”

“I know,” He sneaked a look — both of his eyes pensive. “We share that, at least. Do remember that I’ll get you out nonetheless.”

Chuuya’s lips moved around nothing, for a moment. “Out of where?”

Dazai’s head fell again. “The net.”

*What?*, he couldn’t ask. His head was full of water. He had never been more tense.

Where had he gone *wrong*, he wondered, a tad hysterically. What bullet had he saved him from; what fights had he picked that he shouldn’t have; what cage had he locked himself in? Chains tasted of rust no matter the crime — he couldn’t recall when he’d made the mistake of shackling himself to someone who would sooner use the key to crack his own skull open, than to escape.

If he could be forgiven for not noticing the wall that had steadily built itself between them and the organization — how would he excuse every brick he had personally laid down?

“Leaving your back to the door?” Was all he managed to say, at last.

A snap of tongue on palate. “Leaving my blindside to you, partner,” he replied, purposefully saccharine. *This means something*, he insisted, through the glacial stillness in his veins. Chuuya couldn’t remember ever turning and not meeting his gaze. “You should be used to it, correct?”

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Dazai had put sleeping pills in his dinner.

“*Mange tes morts*,” he growled, as he stumbled around the room to get ready, opening cracks on the floor with every step. “Fucking — shitty fish eyed motherfucker —” The ancient clock

on the other side of the room was a death sentence. almost an hour late. The meeting had already started. “Motherfucking useless fucking piece of *shit*, shit —“

Given it was the middle of the morning, the Hall of the Hotel was filled to the brim — men and women in formal clothing snapping at their phones, and smiling receptionists answering rude questions with controlled tones. Slaloming through their bodies was easy; consequently, the woman who slammed her shoulders against his own left him speechless.

“Look where you’re going,” she told him, nose scrunched up — as if she could see past Kouyou’s tailored coat and smell the slums on his skin. A familiar look.

For good measure, he made sure to snatch her diamond bracelet off her wrist as he scoffed.

“— don’t know what to do, really,” he overheard her lament on her phone, as she walked away. “My sister put her *heart* on this frivolous wedding of theirs. My brother had to pay for all of it, and she *still* refuses to tell me about the plan —“

Chuuya stilled.

Dirty glances rained on him; expensive people enjoyed those who dared to stop the morning march as much as they enjoyed freaks who talked to themselves. “Oh, that piece of —“

The doors of the courtroom opened under a simple kick of his foot, screeching wrenchingly *loud* in the low murmur of conversation coming from the inside. Every eye in the room fell on him, coordinated to the likes of an orchestra — Kouyou’s blade-thin smile; the four syndicates’ skeptic eyes; Dazai’s barely contained grin from where he stood at the dead center of the room.

Right next to *Takasekai*, hands closed around a curled up net, was the group of armed men from the *Special Division For Unusual Powers* who had been tailing them for weeks.

The silence grew endless.

Chuuya clenched his teeth until he could *feel* a whine climb up his chest — he put his hands in his pockets and stuck his nails in his palms, deep and *deeper*; until the bubbling blood suffocated the sound. He thought of electricity — studied the red dots their rifles had graffitied down Chuuya’s shirt, and tasted a bile so bitter it choked him. *Takasekai* and the *Division* had their guns of him — it was nothing new. The Net, though —

He beelined to the center of the room.

“Well?” He could feel Mori’s scorching eyes pierce his back even through the *separ  *. He vowed to murder Dazai as soon as the formalities had been taken care of — *painfully* so, god forbid the fucker enjoyed it. “You assholes wanted to talk to us, didn’t you?”

Whatever was on his face made most gazes lower; once he was standing next to the other boy, twin laser targets on their chests, nobody seemed to have anything to say.

*Slept well?*, Chuuya tapped on the ground, as antagonistically as possible.

Dazai turned to look at him.

“It’s useless,” he sighed, obnoxiously loud, eyes on him only. A curtain of carefully masked astonishment had wrapped itself through most of the bodies facing them — an ocean gaping at two pebbles. “They’ve been staring in silence since long before you decided to curse us with your presence.”

He was looking at him a bit strangely — like something unexpected had happened, and he hadn’t yet decided how to better manipulate him into not noticing. *Slept well?* “What’s that supposed to — ”

“Children.”

The word came from the *Shadow Blade* *separè*. It echoed off the walls, along the throats of the *Special Division*’s rifles and *Takasekai*’s guns. Most eyes followed the trajectory set by that sound — the agents in black, though, kept their hungry eyes on Chuuya. He couldn’t keep his eyes off of them; couldn’t stop wondering how the Mafia had reacted to seeing them enter, after so carefully keeping them from Chuuya. At his back, Kouyou made a face — *remembrance*, he thought. Warning.

Disbelieving, the leader of the *Blades* concluded: “The shadows of the Port Mafia are — children?”

Released, at least, chaos erupted in the courtroom.

“You promised to *bring* your assets —“ one of the Executives from *Takasekai* barked.

The *KK Company* laughed their skepticism out. “Two children killed our treasurer? Two children *devastated* our defense lines? You —“

“— a matter of *deals* —“

“— want us to believe that they —“

“We have *seen* what they have done, the Mafia —

“— hiding them?”

“Captain Nakayama defeated *hordes* of enemies, and you want us to *sit* here and believe —“

Dazai tightened his lips, mindlessly rolling his head from one side to the other. The tune he whistled was too low to beat the frequency of the rage from the sidelines; but Chuuya was close and attuned and *mad* at him, so it took him less than a moment to understand.

The room began to shake.

It was invisible — the road of heavy gravity that surged under his feet, spreading across the pavement with none of its characteristic crimson glow but all of its intrusiveness; attaching itself to everything brave enough to exist. It climbed the bodies of every man of the syndicates, shackles of air strangling their wrists and necks until they had no choice but to

notice; only the *Special Division* and the Post Mafia were left out of the embrace — and the silhouettes hiding behind their *separé*.

Dazai snapped his head to the side, sharply — *asking* for attention the way Chuuya had done countless times — and every body dropped to the ground.

A vicious fall — clefts wrecked the floor wherever elbows and knees landed, eliciting shouts from shocked mouths; napes uselessly pushed against the wet blanket of gravity, fighting just enough to keep it from slamming their faces on the concrete and cracking them open.

A cloud of smoke rose from the mess. Through its curling waves, Dazai crossed his arms, offering a curled eyebrow to the struggling audience.

“We were *told* you wanted to talk to us,” he repeated, pointedly, just petulant enough to mock the wet screeches of effort coming from the fallen. “What is it that you want?”

As one, with a beat of hesitant confusion, faces falling with the realization of having been fooled — *half* of the red dots from the *Special Division*’s and *Takasekai*’s rifles abandoned Chuuya’s chest, and settled uniquely on Dazai’s own.

*[“Who’s Melos?” he frowned. The crowd of traditionally-dressed couples hadn’t stopped rotating with the music once, since the beginning of the wedding; Chuuya wondered if their feet hurt.*

*The Rose Hotel was certainly a good location to hide precious info on the GSS’ eastern trade, considering the high-security penthouses littering the highest floors — it didn’t much look like a recommendable location for any type of celebration, though. Everything was gray and dull and tacky; even the floor radiated a menacing aura, with its frescoes. His complaints, though, would not make the wedding infiltration any easier.*

*Dazai had no such understanding.*

*“Someone much more interesting than all these boring, boring farceurs,” he groaned, draped around one of the columns. He looked like those protesters he had caught on TV, chained to a tree and sweating their weight off in its name. Chuuya mourned the lack of restraints.*

*“Someone so much more entertaining, who doesn’t have to take part to some tacky wedding with a tacky slug with a tacky hat —“*

*“What the fuck did you just call me?”*

*“Listen, ‘Run, Melos’ is a great name,” the boy insisted, waving his concerns away. “Trust me on this. The perfect name for such a cruel chastisement. I can hardly imagine a worse punishment than having to pretend to be you.”*

*He scoffed. “You think I want anyone in this world to live their last instants convinced I’m some suicidal freak?”*

*“I don’t see why not,” he sighed. “Maybe I should have agreed to let you murder all these people. They’re pissing me off.”*

“Well, now I’m not doing it!”

“Yes, I feared you would say that,” Another sigh. Dazai fixed his tie, abandoning his beloved column. “Come on. We need to get the slums-accent out of you, or no one is going to believe you’re me. Repeat after me —“]

“Oh,” the leader of the *Bishop’s Staff* said.

He was the first of the bunch to recover, seemingly untouched by the restrained circle of his men at his feet. It was fleeting — but insistent — the thought that his face would look just the same underneath that mask. “I see,” he continued. “You’re trying to make us doubt ourselves.”

“We aren’t doing anything,” Dazai replied. “We’ve merely been informed about some curious voices. A dramatic flair to all of them, certainly — but I’ve noticed they all lack details,” He tilted his head to the side. “You swear we have power. You know there’s two of us. Do you know *more*?”

”We do,” a *Division* man snarled.

The *Special Division* men settled their guns on Chuuya again. They had files — they knew who he wasn’t. Still — *Takasekai* kept their attention on Dazai.

“You’re *both* responsible for the kidnapping of *Candidate 117*, then.”

“Who cares about your pathetic whores,” the *Shadow Blade* leader snapped, jumping to his feet. “The Port Mafia used them to trap our representatives in the train station and get rid of them. They *pushed* us against each other, all for their sick entertainment. Captain Nakayama was murdered, and someone has yet to pay the price of my second in command’s life.”

“Captain Nakayama was a fool,” *Takasekai* intervened, waving the matter away. “They wiped an entire floor of some of the most relevant figures in the entirety of Yokohama clean. Do you have any *idea* of the publicity issues we’ve had to deal with? There were *senators* and *actors* in that ballroom. They’ve been tormenting us. The Media are persecuting us —“

Chuuya was reminded, abruptly, of the blue light of a TV screen — the waves of color dripping all over the floor of Albatross’ dining room. Verlaine had been dead for three days. The television had been turned on for two. *We sadly interrupt the national broadcast to inform the audience of beloved actor’s premature disappearance —*

“The explosion was blamed on a group of anti-capitalist protesters,” he interrupted. “What kind of messes have you been dealing with, exactly?”

“We lost half of our deals, all because the position of our treasure was leaked into the Black Market,” the *KK Company* snapped, cutting the woman off. All of the leaders appeared too enraged to pay any mind to the suffering bodies at their feet; Chuuya fingers’ tingled along to their moans, protesting the carefulness hiding the glow of *Tainted* demanded from him.

“Playing dirty to gain territory and merch routes — that’s something us syndicates know too well. But this isn’t a simple *threat*, no matter how intensely that three-way traitor you sent our way insisted. The Port Mafia crossed our borders and brought devastation with no ultimatum,” In the heat of the moment, one of his arms appeared from the edge of the *separè*; a well-dressed wrist, slender fingers. “And *you* two are to blame for it.”

“They acted under my jurisdiction,” Mori intervened, at last. If he hadn’t been used to that particular tilt of his voice — that featherlight *amusement* — he might have joined every other unrestrained shoulder in the room in stiffening. “Is that something you can pin on them alone?”

Dazai hid a snort behind a cough.

“I can pin their *methods* on them,” *Takasekai* hissed. “You might have chosen to house two devils in your cage, but I will *not* do you the honor of blaming you for two teenagers’ mindless, *senseless* violence.”

“I understand,” the ex-doctor assured. “My boys are much smarter than I am.”

“Your boys are killers.”

“And your men were innocents bystanders, who didn’t gladly murder in the name of the *Nine Rings*?” Chuuya intervened, blankly. “The same organization whose alliance with you’re still stubbornly denying?”

The man spluttered.

“Not a threat,” Dazai repeated, calling the room’s attention back to him. “What we did was an attack — *not* an ultimatum, you say. But, I assume, the presence of the *Special Division*, squadron 156, is meant to be one, correct?” He lowered blinking eyes to the red spots on his chest. “What guarantees me you won’t take care of your belated revenge by asking them to shoot me?”

“Your Ability would probably stop any bullet,” the *Shadow Blade* replied, cautiously. He frowned. “His — yours? The Gravity Manipulator was supposed to be —“

“Ah,” Dazai tilted his head to the other side, pensively. Unclenching his fists, Chuuya watched the bodies scattered around the room drop to the floor. “*That*. You know what? I have a theory.”

The leader of the *Staff* took a step forward. “That theory being?”

“You prepared a whole list of requirements the Port Mafia would supposedly oblige to, were we to agree to your treaty,” the boy explained. Blood bloomed across a music sheet — the note of interest he sometimes gained, when the possibility of close-enough-to-touch death presented itself to him.

“At least one of those requirements must have something to do with *Candidate 117*, as you informed us. With another series of disadvantages — weapons shortage, control over the

territory, control over *us*,” Dazai nodded towards Chuuya. “Your initial proposition was probably rather unoriginal. *Do this or we will attack. Four Moons* against *One* would definitely prove itself to be a mild bother. But that was all, until the *Special Division* initiated contact with one of you.”

“It’s in their best interest that the *Five Moons* maintain peace,” Chuuya added, as the point the boy was trying to reach spun slower and slower in his skull. “Too many Ability users, too wide of a territory. They don’t want conflict any more than the government wants it. They must have offered you something in exchange of something else — all in the name of this treaty.”

“The *Ability Business Permit*.”

The boy’s voice seemed to startle even the passed out corpses on the ground. In the corner of his gaze, he saw Kouyou’s smile slip out of her face. Her gaze snapped to Mori’s silhouette; Hirotsu curled an eyebrow.

With certainty, Dazai repeated: “The *Special Division* will grant all *Five Moons* an *Ability Business Permit*, if we come to this treaty. Is that it?”

Inscrutable as the leaders’ faces were, only the silence came as an answer.

Laughter, eventually, didn’t appear from any of the syndicates. It came from the rows of the *Division*.

“The Demon Prodigy is as intuitive as we’ve heard of,” the woman commented. She had stepped forward as he spoke; her black and white attire had easily camouflaged her through her men, but the badge on her breastbone spoke of rank — and so did the confidence with which she met every eye in the room. “You got it right — down to the dots and the commas. To think the syndicates believed it would be such a *shock* for the Mafia.”

“Peace is not worth a *Permit*,” Dazai replied. *Minami*, Chuuya managed to read on her badge. “It’s certainly not worth five of them, and not for the organizations the Government has been trying to dismantle for decades, now. There is something else.”

“Obviously,” *Minami* nodded. Her dark hair brushed her shoulders; the smile she offered them was adorned by braces — a mirror to the boy’s one.

*She walked*, he considered, *like someone who’d been shot more than once*. Most of all, she walked like every *man of the law* Chuuya had ever met — a hint of cockiness that bordered the illicit; a confidence that he would have liked to rip off their chest with a well-aimed kick; and the smell of money clogging his airways.

“A small price to pay, all things considered. The *Ability Permit* would grant you the freedom you’ve been searching for almost a century now. All you have to do is sign a treaty that will keep the Mafia’s — *mindless and senseless* violence, if I can quote, contained. And promise to play nice with the other criminals on the playground.”



The condescension of her tone birthed more than one grimace across the room. Disrespect was the one thing most men of the underworld could agree on; even Hirotsu, he noticed, pulled at the hems of his gloves.

Dazai paid the attitude no mind. “And?”

“And?” she repeated.

“The other thing you Government guys want.”

“Oh. Yes,” She was still smiling; for some reason, it reminded Chuuya of things that had long since lost a meaning — white walls and white lights, lab coats and green lines of numbers. He had been dreading the government cars since they’d stepped a foot into his home. *Not again*, he had thought, nonsensically. *Not again*.

Her dust eyes abandoned Dazai — falling on him instead.

“We also want Ability User A5158,” Minami explained, seamlessly. “Code name should be — Nakahara Chuuya. Correct?”

## Chapter End Notes

dazai: see run melos is meant to make our enemies doubt who’s the gravity manipulator between us

chuuya, has had stories abt the “redhead who climbs roofs upside down” spread since he was eight: ur sure this will work

dazai: no but it’d be funny

posting this chapter literally two minutes before my class starts, so i have to fly!! i hope you guys enjoy, and thank you so so much for the love on the last chapter! have a wonderful day, keep yourself warm, and thank you so much for all the love <333

see you next time!

p.s. also, i have no idea if that was ever confusing, but i’m moving from an idea of the special division being unofficially aware of the users in the port mafia — but not

outrightly. that would make them an illegal organization IN THE LAW, since they have no permit. so it's very much (as you'll see next chapter) a "we all know you have power but if you don't admit it we have nothing". they wouldn't have been fooled by dazai and chuuya's tricks, but some of them would have hesitated — because they're not entirely aware of dazai's ability.

# WIND

## Chapter Summary

*“It’s quite the sum to leave behind,” the Ability user mused, scratching the dog’s ears. Intuitive like only animals knew how to be, the poor thing had been inconsolable ever since her owner had fallen ill — she’d perched her muzzle on the edge of her bed three weeks ago, and she had yet to remove it. “Atonement has no prize, I know. But if it had, would I not have reached it? Hm? My beautiful darling?”*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xviii*

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Five hundred billion yen.

“It’s quite the sum to leave behind,” the Ability user mused, scratching the dog’s ears. Intuitive like only animals knew how to be, the poor thing had been inconsolable ever since her owner had fallen ill — she’d perched her muzzle on the edge of her bed three weeks ago, and she had yet to remove it. “Atonement has no prize, I know. But if it had, would I not have reached it? *Hm?* My beautiful darling?”

Cherished and wide, the moon peeked from the emerald curtains of the windows, reflecting on the ancient glass of a grandfather clock. *15 September*, the calendar she’d plastered on the wood read — she truly *disliked* that old, tacky thing — the date circled with her favorite quill.

She had once vowed to fly up there, to the planets and the moon — find an unpoisoned land to share with her dog; come up with some method to live forever.

They had been the hysterics of a child. She was far too old for them. But old friends were quick to gather around a deathbed — pushed by nostalgia, pushed by hunger. No one had been allowed in the room.

It mattered very little, she knew. Five hundred billion yen would be found in no time, if the world still turned in the same rhythm as before. As for the death bed —

“Yokohama,” The dog’s eyes snapped up, enthusiastic. “No, not for a walk, darling.”

They would come from everywhere. They would smell it with ease. And for the last moments of her life — she was still a sinner.

“Maybe they’ll even do something good with it,” Hirabayashi Mitsuru mused, a voice so frail not even the dog would hear her last words. “Maybe they’ll — go to the moon with —”

She brought her knife to her darling dog’s neck. Peacefully, she inhaled the last air she would ever taste.

*[— are sorry to interrupt the current broadcast to —]*

*Registered Interrogations.*

*SDUP — 156th Squadron.*

*Coordinator — Agent Minami Momo.*

*Ability...*

*[...saku? No, I'm not. Oh. Yes, I do know. Are they coming already? What a shame. I knew, but — Yes. Yes. Be careful, would you?*

*(You —)*

*Ane-san, I don't have ti—]*

*...User — A5158*

*Subject — 'The Arahabaki Project'*

*tape i.*

**AM:** *So. Let's have a talk.*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *A5158, Nakahara Chuuya. Sixteen years old. You're a bit young to be sinking with the ships of crime, aren't you?*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *We have had our eyes on you ever since the Sheep. You were a household name; one of our thickest files, too. What made you leave an organization you ruled?*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *What, you're not going to open your mouth? After your new friends merrily threw you in our hands?*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *Alright. We'll see how long it lasts.*

[Registration cut short. Time: 45 minutes and 0.9 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

*tape iii.*

[Registration cut short. Time: 59 minutes and 7 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

*tape vi.*

**AM:** *Attacking Agent Nekoyama wasn't very nice. He's just obeying my orders.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *If you didn't want to be touched, you could have just told us. He was trying to remove your handcuffs. You stuck him in the Infirmary.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *How did you do it, anyway? A headbutt, street style? You broke his nose. You must be stronger than you look.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *You got a nice tattoo. It must have hurt like a bitch to get it done, though. What? Surprised I saw it? Your shirt is all wet. Do you know what we call what they did to you?*

(White noises).

**AM:** *Disappointing. I believe the correct term is waterboarding. Not our preferred method, but you are revealing yourself to be — quite the shy guy.*

(White noises).

(Snort).

[Registration cut short. Time: 41 minutes and 0.7 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

*tape viii .*

[Registration cut short. Time: 50 minutes and 9 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

*tape xi.*

[Registration —

*tape xv .*

**AM:** *You're not a prisoner, you know.*

(A weird cadence; statics, underneath) — *[Am I not?]*

**AM:** *Oh. You're going to answer, finally?*

*[Haven't you spent the last week and a half with a cactus up your ass because I wouldn't say a single word? Be grateful, at least]*

**AM:** *I'm surprised you chose to collaborate.*

*[Nah. I'm just bored]*

**AM:** *Bored.*

*[Yeah. Staying silent was entertaining, as long as you were annoyed by it. But when you stay silent too — it's just boring]*

**AM:** *I appreciate your collaboration.*

*[Fuck your grandma and her shitty ashes]*

**AM:** *We are not your Mafia. Keeping you here for as long as we have brings us no joy.*

*[I don't find you a fuckin' delight either]*

**AM:** *There's an easy solution to the problem. You owe us information, legally.*

(Laughter) — *[You have a loose definition of the word 'legal', Agent]*

**AM:** *Do I?*

*[Yeah. I do wonder if your... tickling sessions were really necessary. They were shit, by the way]*

**AM:** *I'm sure they were. Teenager psychopaths tend to have a higher pain tolerance than 73% of the population. Did you know?*

*[I call bullshit]*

**AM:** *You don't think a kid laughing as he gets tortured would be a sign of instability?*

*[Don't use that word]*

**AM:** *Why not?*

*[Because I'm not like —]*

(White noises).

*[Fuck, I hate cops]*

**AM:** *I'm not a cop.*

*[Same shit. Your holier than thou pisses me off to no end. You know, maybe if you actually cared about the kids you spit so much bullshit about —]*

(White noises).

*[Anyway]*

**AM:** *No. Go on.*

*[You're useless. That's it. As I've been telling your groupies — I'm an employer in a stupid jewelry shop that doesn't pay half as good as you want me to tell you] — (Yawn). (Handcuffs rattling) — [Maybe if you shits offered me minimum wage, I'd be more inclined to talk]*

**AM:** *That's how you want to play it, then? You're an honest worker of the State, and we have wrongfully been keeping you here for a week.*



*[Yeah. You got it]*

**AM:** *Alright. Want to discuss your Ability?*

*[Ain't you the Special Division for Unusual Yadda Yadda? I'm the one who should be asking you. You know an organization lacking an Ability Permit can't legally own Ability Users]*

**AM:** *You and your partner pretended to each possess the other's Ability.*

*[Do I look like someone who'd work well in paired projects?]*

**AM:** *You don't look like someone who ever went to school.*

*[Fuckin' rude. Am I allowed to talk about my stuff without a lawyer, anyway? Also, whatever you swear to have seen in that alleged meeting with the Five Moon — you do know you're not allowed to use any of that information without admitting to have secretly collaborated with criminal syndicates, mmh? Wonder how the general public would feel about that. We'd have no issue spreading the story. Want to tell me more about whatever Ability show you swore you saw?]*

**AM:** ...

*(Rattle) (Commotion) — [Oh, put the guns away. What am I going to do, exactly? Use the Ability you electrocuted out of me to destroy the seat? That tickled, by the way. This shit is so uncomfortable]*

**AM:** *You want the other syndicates not to know what to expect. That's a smart move, certainly. You were forced to show your faces, destroying your whole — “The Shadows of the Port Mafia” bit. You kept as much of the upper hand as you could. A smart move.*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *A move that I would see no need to bring forward, if you didn't suspect the right occasion to take advantage of it was about to come.*

*[You think?]*

**AM:** *I think your Boss wouldn't have gifted his pupils' faces to the lions, if he had thought any of the people in that room would survive the month.*

*(White noises).*

*[My Boss]*

**AM:** *Yes.*

*[My Boss is a piece of shit]*

**AM:** *Yeah?*

*[Yeah. Makes me stay late and close the shop every night]*

**tape xvii.**

**AM:** *You know, when I was looking through your files, you struck me as a foreign.*

*[Did I?]*

**AM:** *French?*

*[As you know, no.]*

**AM:** *The hair, those eyes. The freckles. You don't look much Japanese at all.*

*[You probably know more about my origins than I do. No, that's basically for sure. Is this meant to taunt me or —]*

**AM:** *Your eyes, in particular. Were you born like that?*

*[Yes, I was]*

**AM:** *No, you weren't. It's Arahabaki's fault, isn't it?*

*[I thought you'd said you didn't know anything about Arahabaki. Didn't you want me to answer your questions?]*

**AM:** *And so I lied.*

*[And so you did]*

**AM:** *My grandfather had a thing against those kinds of eyes. It's called heterochromia, you know?*

*[I'm not stupid]*

**AM:** *He would tell me, "Momo, be careful of people with those eyes. Demons are fighting their way out, poisoning from the inside." All very dramatic.*

*[What a cheerful fucking story]*

**AM:** *"They're rotten," he'd tell me. "Rotten, you see?"*

*(White noises).*

*[Momo]*

**AM:** *What?*

*[Your name is Momo]*

**AM:** *Yes.*

*[Ugly name]*

**tape xx.**

**AM:** *Are you going to talk? Or did the punch dislocate your jaw?*

*[That punch couldn't even break a brat's nose. You really need to train your groupies]*

**AM:** *You know, one thing I haven't asked — what do you think about your cellmate?*

*[Who, that guy who never talks?]*

**AM:** *That's surprising. I didn't take you for the type to attempt to make friends here.*

*[Heard from the guards he's got a fucked up Ability. The 'Wound Reaper', or something?]*

**AM:** *Quite. His Ability allows him to reopen any and all wounds whoever he hits has ever received.*

*[Oh, you guys must be foaming at the mouth from his refusal to help you out. Nice torture toll, yeah?]*

*(White noises)*

**AM:** *My greatest wish would be for him to never be allowed anywhere he could use his Ability, actually.*

*[Of course]*

**AM:** *I'm not lying.*

*[What do I care? This is my interrogation, isn't it?]*

**AM:** *Talk, then.*

*[This Madame I know is thinking of divorcing. It would be — the fourth time, I think?]*

**tape xxiii.**

*[It's very obvious, actually]*

**AM:** *What is?*

*[You spend your miserable lives controlling every Ability User you can get your hands on, filing their existence away on those pretty dossiers of yours. Government or not Government, you're damn well aware of what happened to me. A Singularity that shouldn't have been given to anyone — I bet it doesn't look good on your resumes that you've lost sight of it. You don't know how I — allegedly — work] — (Snort) — [And you're pissing your pants because of it]*

(White noises).

**AM:** *Abilities are an evolutionary defect.*

*[Defect]*

**AM:** *Under some circumstances. They are activated when needed; if they hadn't been needed, we wouldn't have them. Need is hardly a positive situation. We have reasons to believe you might have not manifested your Gravity Manipulation either, had you been left to your — prior existence.*

*[Gravity Manipulation, ah? Prior existence — bet you know all about that]*

**AM:** *We're not the Government.*

*[You're close enough] — (Groan) (Screech of a seat) — [Fucking hell, put those guns away. You're so paranoid. I really don't know how involved the creators your Division were with the Arahabaki Project, but I wouldn't be here if you didn't know anything. I bet you noisy fucks have a whole dossier filled with information about it. The experiments... all of it]*

**AM:** *Do you want it?*

*[What?]*

**AM:** *The dossier. Do you want it?*

*[In exchange for?]*

**AM:** *Your collaboration. Analyses, tests. To verify your state, and the danger it poses to Yokohama as a whole.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *You see, commander Santoka, he believes — he believes we might help you find out how to control the surge of power inside you. Gain something from each other, both of us.*

(White noises).

(Laughter).

*[So that's it] — (More laughter) — [You want your fucking pet project back. You're mad I got out, and now you want me back? Oh, you motherfuc—]*

(White noises).

(Punch).

(Laughter).

**tape xxxvii.**

**AM:** *What's your best memory?*

(White noises).

**AM:** *Are you playing the quiet game again, or is your life that miserable?*

*[I need a time period]*

**AM:** *Let's say this year.*

*[Street racing with my friends]*

**AM:** *Illegal racing?*

*[Yes]*

**AM:** *Do you need to cough? You can. You do have extraordinary healing times — Arahabaki is to thank, I imagine — but getting beaten up so often can truly harm someone.*

*[Go ram that pen of yours up your ass]*

**AM:** *How vile. I haven't seen you so angry since the waterboarding. You truly disliked that, didn't you? Have some bad memories with water?*

*[I'll have some bad memories about shit when I get out of here. Lookin' at it so often gave me a terrible gag reflex]*

**AM:** *Would you like to talk about Dazai Osamu?*

*[Trust me when I say there is nothing I would like to talk about less]*

**AM:** *Does he know about Arahabaki?*

*[Who?]*

**AM:** *It can't be easy. If I were in your shoes, I don't know if I'd be able to tell anyone. They would all look at me with different eyes, wouldn't they? Maybe they would admire me. Maybe they would fear me.*

*[If you're the Government, shouldn't you have all the information you need on me? I might not remember much, but I sure as fuck wasn't experimented on by the Queen of England]*

**AM:** *It wasn't just Government men, you know? There was an outsider. A genius. A man with innovative ideas on how to fully develop children's Abilities.*

*[Lab coats are lab coats]*

**AM:** *Would you like me to tell you his name?*

*[No]*

**AM:** *You don't want revenge?*

*[Wanting to know stuff about myself caused nothing but shit over shit. Look me in the eyes, Agent. I don't care]*

(White noises).

**AM:** *Did you lose someone?*

(White noises).

*[There's one thing I don't get]*

**AM:** *What is it?*

*[Why do you even need me to agree to your stupid conditions? I've been here for a shit ton of time. You could have done all the experiments you wanted. I passed out more than once, and I know you have methods to keep even Arahabaki quiet]*

(White noises).

**AM:** *We don't.*

*[What?]*

**AM:** *We don't have methods.*

*[The fuck are you talking about?]*

**AM:** *Arahabaki protects you. Even when you're unconscious — it won't let us pinch you with half a nail. It doesn't activate its full state, but it — it wounded some of our men. Clearly, the god keeps it's guard on the body it's been given.*

*[Arahabaki isn't a god. And he doesn't trust anyone]*

**AM:** *Not even you?*

*[Least of all]*

**AM:** *And yet, he protects you. And yet, you have found a way to share his space. We need it.*

*(White noises).*

*[Oh]*

**AM:** *Oh?*

*[You are fucked]*

**tape xxxvii**

**AM:** *Would you like to discuss Black n. 12?*

*[I would like you to choke on your tongue and then shit it out]*

**AM:** *Do you hate him because he killed your friends, or do you hate him because he's what you might become?*

*[So now governmental agents are shrinks, too? How poliedric]*

**AM:** *That's a big word, for a street kid.*

*[I know tons of big words. I could tell you many more, if you'd like]*

**AM:** *No, I can imagine them.*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *Black n. 12 was an overwhelming threat. If you let us help you, we could prevent you from following in his steps.*

*[I can control my homicidal urges much better than he ever did, I can assure you that]*

**AM:** *Because you have Dazai Osamu?*

*[He's got nothing to do with —]*

**AM:** *Case is, he does. You don't strike me as an arrogant boy, no matter the appearances. You do understand that he's the only reason why your destruction could be sealed, don't you? You do understand that you're dependent on him?*

(White noises).

**AM:** *He's a leash around your throat more than we will ever be.*

*[What he is, is a piece of shit]*

**AM:** *You —*

*[He's thrown me from helicopters, drove our car into the most toxic river I have ever had to submit my nostrils to, tried to set my hair on fire, poisoned me multiple times, attached literal knives to my seats, had me tortured, put itching dust on everything I own, stabbed me more than once — he's hired hitmen specifically to take me down, cursed me ten seconds into meeting me so that I'd never have a growth spurt, vandalized my walls, participated in a scheme that killed my friends, somehow convinced a gang of stray cats to attack me — and I could add so much more. So much weirder more]*

(White noises).

*[Don't you waste your time trying to put him in a worse light than any I could shine on him. Do you think I enjoy this? Do you think this is fucking ideal? He is the bane of my existence. Fate is probably not even a thing, and yet there he is — created purely to torture me in ways not even your governmental freaks could dream of. He is bound to stick his metaphorical middle fingers in my eyes even when we're in a fucking grave]*

(White noises).

*[And yet, he has yet to stick me in a tank and put a Singularity — not made for human bodies to withstand — inside me. Annoying as it is, it makes my decision pretty easy to take].*

(White noises).

**AM:** *And yet he let us take you.*

(White noises)

**AM:** *What if he's not there, one day?*



*[You're so stupid]*

**AM:** *What if he dies? Then what?*

*[Then he makes the world a favor]*

**AM:** *But not you. Because you don't know how to control Arahbaki. Because no one knows how.*

*[But letting you split me open on a metal table will give us all the answer, yeah? Making me into your shitty godly pet, just like he was for the European authorities —]*

**AM:** *Allow me to repeat myself. Black n. 12 was an overwhelming treat —*

*[I noticed it when he slaughtered my family]*

**AM:** *No, not for them. For the city.*

*[I protected the city. Don't you sit here and try to convince me I'm like him]*

**AM:** *On a purely mathematical level, you are.*

*[Two thousand three hundred eighty three lines of codes, ah?]*

**AM:** *What did you say?*

*[Don't worry about it. What do you care about the weirdo? He's dead]*

**AM:** *He is. Did you know he's the reason why the Port Mafia needs the Ability Permit?*

*(White noises).*

**AM:** *We've always had our eyes on you guys, but the risk Black n. 12 and you rained upon Yokohama... It's something we need to keep a close eye on. It's something that cannot be left in the hands of people who we don't know if we can trust with the Permit.*

*[And yet you'll give it to them. Because I'm here, and according to your monologues, the Moons will write down their treaty by the end of September. That doesn't sound much, "I'll do anything for the good of Yokohama", does it?]*

**AM:** *Protecting this city is —*

*[You cowards don't know anything about protecting this city]*

**AM:** *And the criminals and illegal Users wreaking havoc do?*

*[The Port Mafia keeps this city afloat. Don't even try to fucking deny it. It's the Mafia they call when conflicts need to be sedated. It's the Mafia stopping the low wars from touching the city itself. It's the Mafia welcoming the Users your Government would stick in a tank and prod at otherwise — all to create their own weapon and then get pissed off when it escapes.]*

(White noises).

*[You don't give a shit about Yokohama. You don't give a shit about Arahabaki becoming like the Guivre. You and those men you work for just want your toys back. You don't give a shit about me or any other little experiment the Government has wasted their money on, so stop pretending you need to save me from the thing you put in my skin. He's mine. End of it]*

**AM:** *Black n. —*

*[His name was Verlaine]*

***tape xxxix***

**AM:** *Doesn't it make you mad?*

*[Tons of stuff does]*

**AM:** *That they haven't even tried to get you back?*

(White noises)

***tape xlii.***

**AM:** *Flags.*

(White noise).

(Chair being rattled).

*[What?]*

**AM:** *That's the name of the family who you lost, correct? Pianoman's Ability was one of my first scheduling jobs. Interesting. Truly. Not that we ever managed to prove he had one.*

*[Get that fucking name —] — (Chair being rattled — [Out of your dirty mouth —]*

**AM:** *We should talk about them.*

*[Go fuck yourself!]*

**AM:** *Shall we start?*

[Registration cut short. Time: 7 minutes and 9 seconds. Reason: A5158's Ability activated in its minor manifestation. Agent Minami to be transported to the Infirmary. Increase doses to —]

***tape li.***

[Registration cut short. Time: 53 minutes and 0.1 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

***tape lvi.***

[Registration cut short. Time: 15 minutes and 9 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

***tape lx.***

[Registration cut short. Time: 34 minutes and 7 seconds. Reason: No Response from A5158]

***tape lxiii.***

**AM:** *He was quick.*

*[Who?]*

**AM:** *Your Boss.*

*[To do what?]*

**AM:** *Give you to us.*

(White noises).

*[How's your broken arm?]*

**AM:** *I asked, and he said "Alright, then." You were a small price to pay.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *His right hand woman didn't move a finger either. The guards, your partner... Nothing at all. The taste of nonchalance sagged my nose.*

(White noises).

**AM:** *I know how it feels, you know? I didn't just — wound up at the Special Division. Commander Santoka took a big risk with me, after I... was kicked out of my organization. I decided to dedicate my life to something better, though.*

*[Is this the part where we bond over being rejects? Spare me the sob story]*

**AM:** *Mine or yours?*

*[What organization?]*

**AM:** *What?*

*[What organization threw you out?]*

**AM:** *Oh. The Bishop's Staff.*

(White noises)

**AM:** *I gave them a kid in exchange for money. They took the kid and gave me nothing. Then they... decided he wasn't fit for the role. And threw him out, too.*

*[Of what? The window?]*

**AM:** *Yes. Actually, yes.*

(White noises)

*[Sucks to be you]*

**AM:** *Sucks to be you, too.*

*[No, not really]*

**AM:** *You're a child who kills children. That can't be fun, can it?*

*[I don't—]*

(White noises).

**AM:** *A5158 —*

*[Call me that name again and I will make sure yours is the first skull I break]*

**AM:** *Nakahara. Will you collaborate?*

*[Go fuck yourself]*

(White noises).

(Water).

(Groan).

***[ — broadcast to announce the death of Yokohama's resident Billionaire, Hirabayashi Mitsuru, on the 15th of September — ]***

*Case number: 13667890*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. was [...]*

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It took two weeks in the *Special Division* Headquarters for the so-called *Wound Reaper* to speak up again from his adjacent cell.

Chuuya hadn't been entirely sure about his presence, for the first few days — no complaint had ever come for his relentless pacing just one wall by, or the irrelevant, cursing-lined speeches he tended to go in specifically for the hidden camera in the corner. Then, three hours after he had been dumped onto the floor, *soaked* and with his teeth clenched so tight one of them had been dangling in its gum since — a half chuckle had come from the grated slot near the ceiling.

Given that he'd already been unspeakably aggravated, Chuuya hadn't even managed to keep his air in his lungs long enough to stand on his elbows. “You got a problem?”

He hadn't spoken for a long time.

Right when the coughing had started to scratch his lungs — and his pointless insults to the hidden camera to grow repetitive — a rumbling, deep voice had offered: “Don't we all?”

It was the last Chuuya had heard of him, until the scratches he had been tracing into his choker signaled the fifteenth day of his stay.

“You know, I think you got it right,” he said, at some indefinite point, sitting on the ceiling. *Tainted* was partly suffocated by the three different injections he was given every morning; he had kept the fact that at least three more would have been needed to render him useless to himself. “Agent Ma'am says you've yet to speak a word. That was what I was doing too,” *Tainted* grasped at his nails; he held onto the little left in his veins. “I should have just kept it up.”

He wasn't expecting an answer. There wasn't much to know about the *Wound Reaper* — not a real name; not an origin; not motivation. He only knew the *Special Division* wanted him.

“It wouldn't have worked.”

The surprise was enough to land him to the ground. Eyebrow raised, the bleeding gash from a fist pounding along, he questioned. “Why not?”

“They would have prodded,” the *Wound Reaper* said. His voice had the scratchy candor of something that wasn't much used — he couldn't have guessed his age. “And you're many things, but your veins aren't empty. They would have found a good number of reasons for you to talk.”

Chuuya wasn't quite sure if he was being insulted or. “But not for you?”

“I have killed everyone who might have ever forced me to my knees long ago.”

“That must have been a hell of a week.”

“There is a road to untouchability,” the *Wound Reaper* insisted, undeterred. His tone lacked any inflection; he sounded eternally tilted in question, but not particularly concerned with any answer. “And it’s paved in fear. I don’t know about you, but I assure you — *these* people find nothing fearsome, if it owns something to care for.”

“I don’t know if I agree,” Chuuya laid on the metal ground, hands behind his head. He sniffed the blood on his upper lip up; counted the foot-shaped condensation he had left on the ceiling. “Feels like they’re only waiting for a chance to humanize us into submission. *Wasn’t it mean, the way they treated you? We would treat you better.*”

“Manipulation isn’t a welcome.”

He shrugged. He raised his arms to study them — devoid of gloves and of most black lines; a surprising lack of hunger that had his stomach tightening on itself. Mistrusting. “I know. They don’t have entrance matts here.”

The sound of rustling surprised him — the man had been absolutely still for as long as he could remember. A bit closer, the *Wound Reaper* said: “The underground calls you a god.”

“And the upper floors call you a future collaborator,” Chuuya replied, even if there wasn’t a question mark in that declaration. “Are they both lies, or both truths?”

“Does it matter?” he commented. “I don’t think so. Or rather — I think it only matters for what it can do for both of us.”

He pulled at the buckle of the choker. “There’s an us?”

“We would both benefit by confirming the voices. Isn’t there?”

Chuuya thought about bedtime stories. The way Yuan looked at his hands. The way a broken eye had looked. Just how much blood the edges of Doc’s severed corpse had bled on the floor — how much of it had already dried, by the time Chuuya had remembered he was meant to be a bit better than everyone else.

“If they want a god,” the *Wound Reaper* said, with the ease of someone who had heard every single voice about him to ever grace their city. “Give it to them,” A pause. “It will only make it more of an added point onto people’s fear of *me* — when I do kill you.”

He scoffed.

“Or when the net does.”

A beat. His fingers stilled. “What did you say?”

The man didn’t speak again.

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Hours later, once his body had woken him up with the same ease it carried on reports-writing days, the door of the cell — *your room*, Agent Minami had called it; and, *could be better if you talked* — opened with deadly precision.

“Up,” Guard 051 told him. “She’s waiting.”

The man’s eyes were tired, but framed by wrinkles of genuine cheerfulness. Windows were not something the underground floor of the *Special Division* Headquarters’s planimetry had allowed — he assumed it was the middle of the night, as it usually was during his interrogations. Among other types of torture — more straightforward ones — trying to mess up his sleeping schedule was well-acclaimed.

He was led to the communal bathrooms, where the three syringes 051 was in charge of sticking into his neck were emptied out. Showering gave him the time to get used to their effects — drowsiness, mostly, and the uncomfortable feeling of *something* poking at the blood in his veins.

If Chuuya had wanted to be helpful, he would have told them N’s had gone stronger at it.

Helpfulness wasn’t among his concerns.

“Move. We’re already late.”

*He’d been doing good*, he considered, as 051 led him to the interrogation room. *Tainted* was mostly in check; throughout the torture and the taunts and the endless conversations about his every supposed weak point, Chuuya was surprised he had only made the mistake of activating it twice — each resulting in an added syringe.

*Arahabaki won’t let us touch you.*

Selfishness could not be called so when it saved someone’s life. Unperturbed, he referred to it by no other name — a Singularity’s selfish, selfish, *selfish* desire to stay afloat, clinging to the dirtiest plank of wood.

He’d take it.

“So,” Minami said, switching the recorder on the table on. “Did you sleep well?”

Few things annoyed Chuuya more than discovering his first impression on someone was correct. He tended to assume the absolute worst out of everyone wearing an uniform — being



proved right only resulted in a bother for himself.

Minami couldn't be older than twenty five, but she *breathed* like someone much older. She reminded him of the old woman who'd owned the *Old World*: squinting eyes and a too-relaxed smile, and a square of dark hair enclosing severe features.

She'd always known when one of them was trying to sneak a glass under her nose. She'd always looked at Chuuya with an implacable sort of gaze, a bit too attentive — as if picking him out and sorting him as *different from them* was the easiest thing.

“You gave me the normal handcuffs instead of the ‘*national threat*’ ones,” Chuuya offered, showing off his naked wrists. They'd only ever removed the shackles for the waterboarding and the nail-ripping; he couldn't see any of the tools for either, though. “Has our friendship reached *that* stage?”

The croaky texture of his voice caused him a grimace. He was a walking bruise with several healing concussions — most of the wounds would be gone in a few hours. In the face of her polite grin, he felt like adding his knuckles to the bundle of bones he'd broken.

“Consider it a gift. Fifteen is an important number,” Minami said, seemingly blind to his frustration. “I thought about bringing you a cake, but I wasn't sure of what flavor you might like.”

“I hate chocolate,” Chuuya informed her.

“That might just be the strangest thing you've told me throughout your stay.”

There were no Guards with her today. A pile of letters rested in her hands — laying back onto the seat, she abandoned them on the table, intertwining her fingers on her chest instead. “I have a question for you.”

He settled his legs upon the table, studying the vaguely lighting-shaped scars on his feet. “So you've told me.”

“Why did you join the Port Mafia?”

“The criminal syndicate?” Chuuya stared directly into the red circle of the recorder. “That would be a shit life. Why would I do that?”

A corner of the Agent's mouth trembled. The line between raw exasperation, sadistic anger, and begrudging appreciation had grown blurrier and blurrier the more time she was forced to spend with him — these days, he was never quite sure of whether she was about to electrocute him or laugh at one of his insults.

Through the drapes of torture — the flashes of her face he sometimes saw in the middle of his sleep, tensing his muscles for a fight; the now familiar sound of her intakes of breath before she broke a bone, snapped a nail, pushed his face into the water, *talk, talk, get out of the tank before you get stuck there again, get out of the tank before he takes your* — Chuuya almost thought he *liked* her.

“Your jewelry shop,” she conceded. “Why did you start working there?”

“I mean. Life ain’t fucking cheap.”

“You could have applied for other jobs.”

“Could I?”

She tilted her head. “The Government could have given you another life, if you had wished so. You must have known you would have been granted almost *anything*, if you had gone to them.”

“If I had become your lab rat, you mean.”

“It doesn’t have to be so grotesque.”

“No, I think it does,” Chuuya yawned, throwing his head back. “They took me in when I had nothing else. They welcomed me as one of their own. It’s more than any of you lab coats freaks could have ever offered.”

“So, you’re the sentimental type.”

“I grew up on the streets,” he shrugged. “I’m the, *whoever throws money at your feet*, type.”

*A twist of fate*, Lippman had called it. *I have no nice metaphors to offer. You were thirsty, and we had water.*

*Water I was threatened to drink*, Chuuya hadn’t said.

Except he was no chess piece, and he wouldn’t just keep his head low under a prodigy’s maniacal mechanizations — demonic or not.

He had joined of his own volition, anyway, hadn’t he? He had chosen to kneel in front of a doctor turned killer — the sum of all the lacks he’d had — and offer his neck. He had let the Flags mold him into someone who *wanted* to be with the people who he had sworn to destroy.

What else had there been?

“It would have been boring, anyway,” Chuuya added. “A waste of my potential.”

The woman hummed. “You think you have potential?”

“I know I do.”

“The leading kind?”

A buzz of sorts was enclosing the room, choking the summer heat out of it. He wondered if it had rained more in September; if the hems of Kouyou’s kimonos were kissing the puddles on the ground again. “Shop manager has a nice ring to it,” he mused.

“And yet you failed, as King of the Sheep,” Agent Minami considered, just a hint of a smile. Restricted by the handcuffs, his hands twitched. “And your so-called Flags are dead.”

The heels of his boots sank against the edge of the table. He pressed harder — fantasized, in the way of mischievous kids and evil men; melting that metal until it stuck to his soles, running them up and down that woman’s hands. Leaving a mark. Leaving a shadow. Leaving a scar no one would see.

“The Flags had another manager,” Chuuya concluded. “A smart son of a bitch. Someone who would have killed you way before you even had a chance to open the door of your car for me.”

“But you couldn’t do the same,” she said. “Your Boss ordered you to come with me.”

Fifteen days had never been longer. “Great. Now you’re getting dumber.”

“Am I?”

“You already used the insecurity tactic,” he informed her. “If you wanted to sit here and give me an identity crisis over the fact that I was thrown away like a bargaining chip, maybe you should know that you’re — about two years late.”

“It doesn’t change the facts.”

“It doesn’t change that I don’t give a fuck,” he insisted. “Have you considered that maybe I’m here because I want to be?”

Agent Minami paused.

“I did, actually,” she admitted. “But I truly feel like that would be overestimating your —” She tightened her lips. “Your *potential* .”

“Manipulation won’t bring you anywhere,” Chuuya stared at the ceiling. “I’m too used to that shit. Basically immune.”

“People die with worrying frequency around you, don’t they?”

There was a vent on that ceiling, too.

He had incessantly studied the one in his room, the first day — worked it until it was loose enough to be removed. He had put it back into place and closed his eyes, preparing for two weeks of hell. And then he had kept his mouth shut.

“Not that we can prove any of it,” Minami was quick to add, tracing the outlines of the letters. “But for the little we *do* know — you have quite the lakes of blood under your feet.”

“I bet the *Governmental Secret Agent* must feel quite the kinship with my soles.”

“Does it ever get slippery?”

He snorted. “What a dumb question.”

The punch could have been avoided — Chuuya felt it shatter across his nose a bit belatedly, tearing a hiss out of mouth. Back of the seat digging into his nape, he laughed at the led lights on the ceiling, disbelieving.

When his vision focused again, Minami was on her feet, tracing her bruised knuckles with one finger. Tongue-in-cheek, she met his eyes.

Judgment came with the taste of rust in his mouth: “It’s your fault they’re dead.”

*Adam would despise her.*

A weird thought.

He had sent him a birthday present — he recalled, pointlessly. The small package had been left at the Headquarters. Madame Tanaki hadn’t stopped giggling for the whole day, after he’d opened the *Jack-in-the-Box* — its puppet being a very accurate doll look-alike of Adam himself.

Chuuya had brought it with him to France. Had watched Rimbaud’s — Verlaine’s — window devour it on the night of a storm; by the time he’d stepped outside to recover it, it had been a clump of wood and mechanical parts. Nurturing toys had never been a luxury of his. It was just a box. He had kept the little Adam toy, though.

Just —

“Them,” Minami continued. “And every single innocent bystander who has and who *will*, end up a victim of Arahabaki’s rage.”

A tear of blood ran down his upper lip — he licked it off, just to hear his bones rumble. Eyes on the lights, he reminded her: “Arahabaki didn’t do shit.”

“A5158,” she insisted. “You *are* Arahabaki.”

*All you are — is what I will escape.*

“And?”

“*And*,” Minami insisted, “Maybe, if you accepted to work with us — to be explained what these horrifying experiments actually *are*, instead of what you *remember* — we could find a way to understand how you work. A way to push Arahabaki in the background. To get this curse off of you.”

Chuuya stared. “Curse.”

“They named it after him. Arahabaki is not the god of good luck and peaceful lives. I’m sure you know that.”

*[“What you need to understand,” Mori said. “Is that fate is much more real than anyone would think it is.”*

*Light filtered in through the stained windows, draping kaleidoscopic curtains across the former doctor’s face. Chuuya didn’t as much enjoy their walks as he treasured them; as he understood that every moment spent with the Boss was one moment more the man had to keep his mask on — and one more possibility to see the cracks.*

*He wasn’t curious about Mori, per se. He just needed to get him on the pedestal his loyalty had decided to build for him — to watch him turn into a tool that would mold Chuuya into something more acceptable than what he’d been in the Sheep.*

*Second hand natural talent was fine.*

*“What happened to you, Chuuya — I’m not saying it was bound to happen,” the man explained. “I’m saying there’s a reason why it did. Just as there’s a reason why I’m here, with blood in my hands and a resurrected organization. The man who taught me medicine — He told me that people are much like organs. We exist to function, and we function to exist.”*

*Killing the prior Boss certainly couldn’t be written down as part of the man’s crimes, on a logical level. It had been the right choice — perhaps that was exactly what made it so earth shattering; so delicate on the tongues of those who still suspected, and those who needed no show to have faith.*

*Power thirst didn’t fit someone like Mori — thinking that he might have done it in the name of sincerely believing he was meant to, somehow, made more sense.*

*“There were tons of test subjects for the Arahabaki Project. Tons of variables. Tons of kids. Dazai seems rather convinced you were one of them, and not some capsule created to contain the power.”*

*“He’s not being serious about it,” Chuuya scoffed, hands deep in his pockets. “Have you heard his motivations? He’s just stuck on his high horse, and can’t admit that he’s as clueless to the answer as I am.”*

*Mori hummed. “I’m not sure I agree with that.”*

*He kept his eyes to the floor.*

*“Whichever it is,” the man insisted. “Whether you’re a body that was created to solve an issue, or a child who was taken away — we have no way of knowing. But it doesn’t change things. Whichever one it is — you were still created for Arahabaki. The two of you are — forgive the sentimentalism — made for each other.”]*

*“You know,” Chuuya lowered his gaze on the woman. “You would almost be funny, if you weren’t the next best thing to a cop.”*

*Minami curled an eyebrow.*

He sighed. “I’m not *cursed*, Agent. Here’s a truth for you — shit happens everyday, and it happens to everyone.”

She shrugged. “Everyone?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not everyone.”

He paused.

“The upper floors won’t tell us much about the Arahabaki Project. But *this* — this I know: they lost data, during your battle against Paul Verlaine,” She leaned forward. Chuuya was uninterested in intellectualism. Chuuya was uninterested in the gaping admirer who had snooped through the files of a national secret — who had stolen the test subject for herself. “They’re not convinced you’re the real deal.”

“As you said, the data was destroyed,” he echoed, blankly. “There’s no way to prove either.”

“There’s not,” she agreed. “But if the ones who made you aren’t persuaded to say yes, what gives *you* the right of doing so?” The led lights danced across her face; dug caves down her cheekbones, in the space between her lips. *You can have him*, Mori had said. *For now*. “Child killer, legend of the underground — vessel of something so great, they called it a god. What gives you the right to compare yourself to any other human being?”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow.

She shrugged. “You’re a good kid, Nakahara. I truly think that. The way I see it — either you’re cursed, or human experiments just generally make for terrible leaders.”

*[“What you need to understand,” Dazai sighed, obnoxiously, starfishing in the middle of Albatross’ floor, “It’s that, for most people, it’s irrelevant whether fate is real or not.”*

*The mirrorball on the ceiling could turn into a fan, when needed; Chuuya wished he’d found out sooner. He wished it made a disturbing enough sound to muffle the other boy’s voice.*

*“Spying on the Boss’ private conversations is not allowed. Not even to the stuff that comes with bandages,” he reminded him, through the sweat. His mop of hair and bandages was a single point of heat on his lap; he kept pushing him off, and Dazai kept returning.*

*“It was your conversation, too. And you’re my dog, so I’m allowed to know everything.”*

*“I hope the heat melts the skin off your bones and kills you.”*

*“So do I,” he sighed, dreamy.*

*The subject was let go of; or so he thought. By the time they had torn apart most of their clothing, cursing out the unbearable march of the hottest day of the summer — by the time Chuuya’s eyes were bored enough to count the bruises up every naked inch of Dazai he could find — the boy spoke up again.*

*"Fate might be real," he insisted. "But you weren't chosen because of some higher design."*

*"You don't know that." He didn't know either; the desire to fight him about it was an unavoidable call.*

*"Destiny is irrelevant."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because if it weren't, men would not fear existence the way they do."*

*He paused. Smacked him on the forehead. "You're the suicidal freak. Not everyone is scared of life."*

*"No, they are," Dazai assured him. "They're afraid it might end too soon. They can't predict it. They know every day could be the last — as much as they pretend not to worry about it, it's the underlying thought staining every instant of their existence. It's all they will ever know. They can't even imagine what freedom from that dread feels like."*

*It was too hot for philosophy. It was the wrong person to discuss life with. It wouldn't stop Arahabaki from being where he was; he didn't want it to.*

*"So destiny isn't real," he concluded, "because if it was, people would know that everything is predicted, and that they have no way to stop it. And they wouldn't be afraid?"*

*"Precisely."*

*"And since you act like that, you're allowed to believe in fate."*

*"Quite."*

*"And that's all the proof you have that anyone could have been sagged with Arahabaki."*

*"It's all the proof I need," Dazai shrugged. "It wasn't a godly master plan. It wasn't fate. If there's a book to write, it's still being written."*

*"A book, or the Book?"*

*"That's not something you need to concern yourself with," he replied, undeterred. "You weren't a prophetic perfect fit for Arahabaki. You don't have something stored inside you — something the Singularity liked, or recognized. You're just developing a megalomaniac complex, and you want to believe you're special," It didn't seem as if he believed a word of it. "Want to know what you were, though?"*

*Look where it brought me, he wanted to say. Look what it took from me.*

*"Whatever," he grunted.*

*"An unlucky kid," He planted his head on his lap, stubbornly, again and again. "Don't think yourself important. You were just an unlucky kid."].*

“Well,” Chuuya concluded, pulling his legs down. “The way *I* see it, you’re either an asshole or a governmental radicalist.”

Minami’s lips parted, overflowing with intention. Uncaring of etiquette, the metal door of the interrogation room was slammed open.

“Agent,” Emergency was dripping from every sweaty inch of the man’s face, leaving stains all over his grey suit. Knuckles turning white from his grip around the doorframe, he breathed out: “She’s dead.”

Of every emotion he had watched reach its peak upon the woman’s face — the one that drained the color from her cheeks wasn’t familiar. He didn’t understand — he found he didn’t truly need to, embraced by the suffocating tension dropping Minami’s jaw to the ground.

“*Shit*,” she said, passionately. “Already?”

“We just got the call. Her — her maid —“

“Agent,” She threw a look in Chuuya’s direction. “That’s enough,” She stood up, reaching for her gun. “Kid, 051 will escort you back to your room. We will continue this conversation later.”

“After the funeral?” he dared, pushing his confusion where she wouldn’t grasp it.

Astonishing, a flash of honesty set her eyes ablaze. Unrecognizable, thinner than touch, and yet —

“Nothing you need to worry about, A5—“ *Physically*, almost, her words shut the door on their way out. The Agent breathed. “Chuuya.”

His lips parted.

*Fear*, he thought. She was afraid.

Right before her colleague boldly dragged her out, Minami’s eyes glanced towards the letters she’d left on the table.

An assortment of ideas crowded his skull — the things Arahabaki had to offer through the weak layer of drugs; the pulsing of his healing wounds; the echoing sound of Guard 051’s step, closer and closer; the handcuffs dangling between his fingers; the Agent’s words — *she’s dead*.

Without thinking, Chuuya threw himself to the door, slamming it shut before 051 could fully enter its frame.

“*Hey!*” the man shouted, raining fists down the surface, shaking the metal behind his own back. “Open the *fucking door* —“

“Come on,” Chuuya muttered, staring at his joint wrists, pushing all his weight against the door. Flickering weakly, the familiar red glow grew in intensity with every breath he took,



embracing his palms — until the slumber of the syringes was little more than a buzz in his skull. “*Come on—*”

He sunk his fists on the doorknob, sinking the edge of the door into the frame, and he ran to the table, grabbing the letters.

Tearing them apart took a patience he didn’t have, and a peace the Guard’s kicks against the door wouldn’t allow him. His eyes skirted down the words quicker than he could comfortably say made him understand; he threw taxes and work instructions to the ground, searching, *searching* —

Pausing.

A snake was scribbled across the back of a yellowish envelope, cartoonish in its features — but surprisingly well done. Its blush and overjoyed eyes were all but a faithful depiction of reality; Chuuya felt no regret in ripping it apart.

*Hey*, the overly perfumed paper read, in a shaky calligraphy, unfairly elegant still — unmistakable simply for existing venomously in Chuuya’s visual field. *You still haven’t given me my souvenir from France.*

He breathed. “Fucking *finally* —”

Guard 051 ripped the door from its hinges, barely waiting for it to land before stepping inside. His kick hit Chuuya right in the abdomen, landing his vaguely dizzy body against the table; air escaped his lungs in a sprint, choking him.

“You,” the Guard snarled. “Get *back here.*”

Chuuya waited for the man to come closer, gaping and coughing on the ground. The moment his fingers clawed at the chain of his handcuffs, he stomped a glowing-red boot on the man’s foot, relishing in the wet *crunch!* of bones breaking and in the scream that left his mouth.

He wrapped his arms around the Guard’s neck, caging him between his limbs and the handcuffs — with a snarl, he slammed the man’s forehead onto the table, watching his skull crumble like paper against the metal. Blood rained down his face — Chuuya pulled his hands towards himself, breaking the chain against the man’s nape until he heard a *crack!* .

His corpse fell on the floor.

The handcuffs quickly followed, pushed off his bruised wrists. He spat on the ground. “That’s for that shit you called bread,” he let him know, kicking the governmental badge off his chest.

Chuuya stepped over the mess, and ran out of the room without looking back.

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*The plan* — was all Dazai had traced on his knuckles, pushing him to the *Special Division's* side of the courtroom with a dog-remark — *is for you to finally disappear from my sight. Please, do enjoy your stay.*

The plan, it seemed — because the words of an asshole could only mean, *figure it out yourself* — was to cause Chuuya an aneurysm.

“Stupid —“ he drawled, dragging one of the Guards by the neck, slamming her face on the nearest waiting-seat until it cracked. “— goddamn —“ Her body fell like a lifeless doll, tripping the man charging against him; Chuuya grasped his head between his hands, focusing the heightened gravity in the dead centers of his palms, until his skull exploded. “— *fliers!*”

He threw the third Guard against the wall, as the blood from the bullets he'd ricocheted back at him drooled over the *Missing Dog* flier pinned right there — the same one from the airport. The same one, he would bet, that Kajii had framed in his office.

“*Fuck you!*” he snapped, again, kicking the door next to the piece of paper open.

The Headquarters of the *Special Division* had been built with mazes and potential break ins in mind — if he had felt grateful enough, he would have admitted the cursed fliers-signals were doing most of the work. Windows simply weren't a *thing* in the building — the walls were too sturdy for destruction to be worth the trouble. It also, unfortunately, wouldn't help with what Chuuya was slowly realizing the point of that escape had to be — the less Guards he encountered and the more archivists he pushed against the wall.

By the time the glass door appeared at the end of the hallway, Chuuya knew — he had subjected himself to two weeks of sloppy torture to snoop through the archives of the *Special Division*.

Steadfast, he ticked off the *number 453* on his mental revenge methods list — a *do-later*.

A group of armed men appeared from one of the side doors, opening fire with no hesitation. Chuuya jumped into the air, sticking to the ceiling as the projectiles brushed against his dust-shaded clothes. The rain froze in the air — trembling along to the gravitational energy dropping the temperature of the hallway to the floor.

“I'm done,” he informed, helpfully. The men's jaws were slack. “I'm so *done* with this shit.”

He didn't wait to watch them fall, sliding down with the help of the rivers of blood flogging the road — he jumped as far as his weightlessness would allow him, ignoring the emergency sirens, and threw the glass door open with a kick. Barely, he caught sight of a glasses-wearing

silhouette in brown clothing — it escaped from the opposite door, leaving Chuuya alone amongst the shelves and the muffled screeches.

He debated following him. Chuuya was ready to bet most cameras of the building had been *mysteriously* turned off, though — and there was no way Minami wouldn't see his empty cell and understand.

He brushed the thought away, and threw himself to the bookshelves.

“What is it, *what is it*,” he murmured, naked fingers brushing up and down old paper, his own crimson glow illuminating them enough to read their titles. “What is it that you want me to find, Mackerel?”

Identifying relevant dossiers ended up not being as hard as he had imagined it — the endless bookshelves were organized to a slightly maniacal point; either the *Special Division* had never envisioned someone breaking in, or they cared very little about the help they were giving to their own thieves.

*Or if they have nothing to worry about*, he considered, pausing. *If they're misleading.*

Outside, the siren grew louder. The rumble of steps and rifles urged him to hurry up. Never ending information would have been theirs to gain from snooping around that place — answers to how most Abilities in the city worked, descriptions of international threats, progress tracement on Ability Users experimentation —

He stilled, fingers stuck on a dossier.

*On the matters of A5158 —*

Chuuya saw the light of shooting firearms before he actually heard the Guards break in — he threw himself behind the nearest bookshelf, papers flying from his hands; he landed with his fingertips on the ground, and *pushed*.

Scarlet roads sneaked underneath the furniture, cracking the pavement — reaching bodies he could only partially see. The crowd of Guards dropped, their rifles drilling deeper holes on the floor, snapping the bones of their hands from the effort — Chuuya's attention was stolen by the flier floating in over their shrieking heads.

He had printed the flier in his mind on his first day back; a quick look told him nothing about these copies was different — except for the date printed on top of the paper.

*23th of April.*

“Asshole,” he said, unnecessarily. Perhaps the two weeks of monologuing had gotten to him. “*Asshole*, why make this so overly *complicated* — “

He jumped to his feet; in a storm of groans and screeches, the Guards' bodies sank deeper and deeper as Chuuya jumped over their broken legs, searching for the beginning of April on the dates organizing the archive.

An unsurprising number of thin dossiers filled the bookshelves from the 23th of April to the current date — Chuuya busied himself with searching for copies of the same topic. It had to be something that had been studied starting from April, something that had ended on —

Four dossiers stared back at him from the ground — the only matching files over the number of a pair. Scribbled on their greenish covers, the titles read: *On the matter of Hirabayashi Mitsuru's death, and its unavoidable consequences.*

Agent Minami, he thought — her genuine terror. *She's dead.*

He grasped the dossiers and stuffed them under the back of his shredded shirt. It made for an awkward walk, no matter how thin the files were; nonetheless, Chuuya ran out of the room, charging through the last floors of the building.

The *Entrance Hall* — a non-descriptive space of greys and whites, vaguely reminiscent of the front desks rooms of the CEO companies he had sometimes been tasked to gather protection money from — was blessedly empty, illuminated by squares of led lights and the torches a small group of Guards near the door was carrying.

Chuuya felt a grin wreck his face in two — some exasperated sort of *euphoria*, however exhausted; exhilaration that brightened even the torture sessions in the back of his skull, sending shivers down his spine.

The night sky right outside the doors — *yes*. The open space. The space he needed to rage in peace.

At last, his steps called the attention of the Guards. Their torches settled on him, and he could imagine what he looked like — a teenager dripping blood and shredded clothes, gleaming red in the middle of their *Hall*, hands in his pockets and teeth bloodied. “Well,” he offered. “It’d be nice to have some music. For a dramatic exit, y’know?”

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September was a balm on the burn marks summer had left all over the flesh of Yokohama — lines of trees slowly curving along to the change of the season; car windows fogging up with agonizing slowness; the low murmur of the few passersby, unwilling to dance and jump in crowds to this or that *end-of-the-season* festival.

Four bodies were plastered against the glass doors of the Headquarters *of the Special Division for Unusual Powers.*

Chuuya walked out of the only opening not in pieces, welcoming the breeze against the drying blood on his skin.

He breathed in.

His eyes found the set of urban cameras towering upon the entrance; he tapped lithe fingers on the light poles they were attached to, watching their glass shatter. An eerie silence draped itself across the empty street.

*Snap.*

Chuuya bolted forward, feet sticking to the nearest light pole, immediately sending out trails of *Tainted* down the concrete — to the six silhouettes jumping out of the alleys enclosing the building. A choir of startled screeches reached his ears — he tightened his grip, dragging the bodies closer to the pole, readying to —

He paused. “Guys?”

“*Motherfucker!*” Noguchi spat, uselessly attempting to drag his immobilized hands to his throat, fighting the invisible grip suffocating his lungs. “Fucking — *let...*”

“Shit,” Speechless, Chuuya let his hands fall. The squad dropped to the ground, coughing wetly between curses and gasps. The cracks underneath their bodies shook with every bark out of their constricted lungs. “What the fuck are you guys doing here — what the *fuck*, I could have *killed you* —”

“We noticed that,” was all Kenta managed to say, forehead plastered to the concrete. Next to him, Rin was vomiting drool, punching her chest to get the bile and the blood out. “Trust me, we — we noticed that. Oh, my God. Oh my —”

Virgil squeaked, on his knees. “We almost died there.”

“We *almost died there*, what the *fuck* —”

“Guys,” Chuuya snapped, eyes to the doors of the Headquarters. “Move.”

“*What?*”

“*Move*, not here, we have to —”

“How did you even escape —” Tsuchiya protested, dragging herself to her feet with the finesse of the elderly. “What did you even *do* —”

Koda was the first to catch up with the issue. He began to run, hands hooked onto Virgil’s wrist and Rin’s belt to pull them down the road, ignoring their protests. Chuuya jumped from light pole to light pole, trusting them to follow through the storm of too-distant bullets — soon enough, they left the new Guards crowding the entrance of the building behind.

Gunshots occasionally echoed from the revolvers the squad had brought along; by the time he’d guided them inside a sewer-water flooded alley, the *Special Division* Headquarters

weren't visible nor audible.

"Shit," Rin concluded, slipping down the wall.

Chuuya leaned his back against the stony side of some fashionable building, flattening his palms to put an end to their spasms. Whatever had been inside those two weeks of syringes, it hadn't been enough to put neither *Tainted* nor Arahabaki to sleep, but just sufficient to leave his whole body tingling from the overuse. He sucked a breath in, counting to three.

He longed for his gloves — no matter if the skin was clear. They were probably trash in some incinerator at those HQs; he sunk his hands in his pockets, instead.

"*What,*" Chuuya started, "Were you guys thinking, exactly?"

The squad all looked a bit worse for wear — their black uniforms were dusty and crinkled; the blue lines under their eyes deeper than usual; their shoulders just a hint too curved to be normal. Chuuya found himself the subject of a stunned scrutiny, as if the six had abruptly realized he was actually standing in front of them.

"*What were we thinking?*" Tsuchiya repeated, in disbelief. She stepped forward, and delivered a punch right to his shoulder. "We were thinking of getting you out of that damn *place*, you *moron*."

He blinked. "What?"

"You've been there for two weeks!" Virgil intervened, hands intertwined under his chin, wide eyes refusing to let his own go. "And no one wanted to stage a mission to recover you, so —"

"So we took it upon ourselves!" Another punch to the other shoulder; Kenta's cheeks were reddened. "A large faction of the organization was in a frenzy. You know, for someone who insists he isn't much liked — you sure had a lot of people demanding you were brought back. Well, not directly to the *Boss*, because you know —"

"He's fucking terrifying," Rin intervened.

"— but we went to Executive Kouyou, and she denied our requests with a *clearly* heavy heart. Seriously, never seen the woman that tense. Voices are she spent two weeks all but begging Boss to get you out."

"Not even an asshole like you deserves to be killed by the Ability Cops," Surprisingly enough, the scoff came from Noguchi. He was leaning on the wall furthest from the group — but Chuuya was too used to his *searching-for-wounds* gaze, and seeing it drip down himself gave him a whiplash. "There's been a fucking storm."

He poked at the edges until they were blunt, until the pieces slid down where they were *supposed* to. Chuuya still didn't understand.

"*H-Hirotsu,*" Koda added, hands stuck between their bodies, uncertain whether to reach out or not. "The Commander himself almost tried to prepare a *Black Lizards* attack to get you

back, but Boss stopped him. He has been ten times more irritable than *u-usual*. He and Kouyou have been muttering among themselves for two weeks.”

“We’ve been *preparing* for two weeks,” Tsuchiya seethed. “And you got out *on your own*? Do you even know how much time we wasted on this shit? We had to make sure we weren’t followed — we had to find a way to keep the Boss’ spies’ eyes off of us — we had to come up with a plan to remove you from one of the most well guarded Ability prisons in Yokohama —“

“Tsuchiya used her Ability to lead a pack of cats inside the Headquarters,” Virgil nodded. “They were supposed to — *How* did you even get out? Didn’t they drug your Ability off of you?” His eyes widened. “That’s not to say you couldn’t kill people without your Ability! It would just be more complicated, and — and the Guards —“

“I killed them,” Chuuya said. His tone tasted empty to his own ears. He was confused. He hated being confused. “The drugs never worked on me. I just killed them all and escaped.”

A bubble of silence embraced them.

With a rumbling laugh, all but humorous, Noguchi was the one to stalk forward and abruptly pin Chuuya to the wall, holding him high enough to meet his eyes. “And you stayed there for *two fucking weeks*, when you could have escaped *any fucking time*?”

Tsuchiya sighed. “Noguchi —”

“Don’t piss me off,” the man drawled. “The fucker knows what he’s done.”

“Can’t he just say he was worried about him?” Rin muttered.

Chuuya pushed him off, stepping on his foot with just a hint of Ability. “What the *fuck* are you guys talking about?” he snapped, as Noguchi cursed out, searching their faces. “The plan was *always* for me to get out. That shitty Dazai and I —“

“Dazai?” Koda stuttered.

Suspicion crawled down his spine like ice. “Yeah?” Their lost gazes were colder than any water he’d been drowned into. “There was a plan. Not that the idiot fucking explained it to me, but there *was*. I needed to stay with the *Division* long enough to make the *Four Moons* believe the pact was in place, and he needed me to find some documents —“

A thought thundered. Frantic, he turned to Noguchi. “Yuan. Yuan — they wanted her to —“

“Yuan’s fine,” he assured him. “We’ve been guarding her. The brat found out the idea was to give her back, and she’s been nothing more than a ball of terror. But I wouldn’t have let them take her,” He raised his chin, challenging him to think otherwise. “Fuck that. They can use grown motherfuckers as bargaining chips.”

Kenta made a face. “She’s been freaking out about you getting captured. Wanted to come with us tonight. We had to lock her in her room.”

“No, she hasn’t,” Chuuya replied, on instinct.

“Boss.”

“Can we focus on the matter at hand?” Virgil snapped his fingers. “What do you *mean* you and Dazai had a plan? So this was never a life or death situation?”

“*Life-or-death?*” He made a face. “Who the *fuck* do you take me for? You think I’d let one or two fuckers in a suit take me out? They stuck me on a god-awful seat and tickled the fuck out of me for two weeks. That’s the high opinion you have of me? That the *Government* would kill me? *Of course it was a plan.*”

“He didn’t tell anyone,” Rin blurted out. “He didn’t tell *anyone*, how were we supposed to —“

Chuuya paused. “He didn’t *tell?*”

“He’s been poking the metaphorical sleeping bear for two weeks now,” Virgil intervened, awkwardly. “He’s refused to listen to our proposals to get you out, laughed in the face of anyone who was worried about it —“

“He went around singing this weird jingle about hoping they would electrocute you,” Koda murmured. “*Twinkle twinkle little spark?*”

“Apparently,” Tsuchiya lowered her voice, somewhat pointlessly. “I mean, it’s just a voice, but — they say he made some crude comments in front of Executive Kouyou — and she tried to *smack* him right in the face.”

Rin huffed. “The Demon Prodigy getting slapped? They’ve been talking *non-stop.*”

He stared. “She what?”

Kouyou Ozaki was stuck in a fearful awe of all Dazai Osamu had ever dared to be. It was doubtful, if she even saw him as a kid any longer — an assortment of carefulness and irritation crowded her eyes whenever she laid them on him; air she couldn’t ask Golden Demon to shatter — a taunting smile she was too mindful to touch.

And yet, she allowed him to poke at her; she never touched him unless he gave a somewhat invisible permission. She had reprimanded Chuuya about putting Dazai’s life in danger when he’d first used Arahaki. She didn’t quite *like him*, he knew — but she held him in her hands with the same fierce protectiveness that her fingers had painted over every wall of the Port Mafia.

Swearing she had *dared* to touch him with a nail — accounting Boss; accounting all of it; accounting, *be grateful* — was too outlandish of a mental image to believe.

“He didn’t tell you,” Chuuya echoed. *And yet.* “The piece of shit didn’t tell *anyone?*”

“Would we have come to the fucking *rescue* if he had?” Noguchi snapped.



Silence sagged the alley.

Warmth was immediately noticeable when it stained his body — the two points of heat on his ears blurred his vision for a blink, spreading with detestable efficacy as a disgustingly vibrant fire ran up and down his skeleton. Whatever it was the squad caught on his face — in the split instants before he closed the curtains shut — it erupted in disbelieving gasps.

“Oh, my God,” Kenta groaned, hiding his face in his hands. “Oh, my God, he’s so stupid.”

Virgil shaped up the least respectful face he had ever seen his traits offer. “Boss, are you being serious?” he squeaked. “That’s — I mean, *obviously* — “

“Wait, what are we on?” Rin interrupted.

Koda sighed, clasping a hand on Chuuya’s shoulder. “He didn’t think we would go this far. That’s why he looks constipated.”

He shrugged his fingers off, gaping. “I don’t fucking look like — what the fuck? Who cares if the bunch of you are suicidal enough to attack the —“

“Is he blushing?” Tsuchiya blinked.

“He’s blushing,” Noguchi confirmed.

“Who’s — who’s *blushing*, you — I’m still your Boss, remember?” Chuuya blurted out, stalking out of the alley; ignoring the snickering that hit his shoulders on his way out. “You better shut your mouths and pay some respect — after you pulled that fucking stunt that could have — *who* needed you to save *me*, anyway, I don’t —“

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Kouyou should have been his first stop — if not her, then Mori. Instead, dossiers under his shirt and not the faintest about his own feet, he strided to a blue-neon bathed under-bridge, and made his way down the stairs of *The Alley*.

“You better be here,” he called out, barely managing not to shatter the stone. “You better be *here*, you waste of —“

“Oh, magnificent,” a voice groaned. “You didn’t die this time *either*?”

By the time the leaking pipe had attempted to shower him in sewer water, a hand had closed around his wrist — almost tearing his hand off to slam him against the cold wall.

Chuuya had a knife taken from him before he could even realize it — he stuck his stolen shoe over the attacker's calf and reversed their positions, making sure to *wait* for the sound of bone crashing against stone. Eyes thundering, and droplets of blood landing on the blade still pressed against his throat, Chuuya snarled.

"This is fine either way," Dazai informed him, helpfully, pressing the knife harder.

Before he could crash his skull against the wall again, something sharp against his calf made him yelp — when he lowered his eyes, Kazuko was sinking her teeth in his skin, blinking.

It was quiet.

A mixture of feelings danced its lazy steps in front of Chuuya's eyes — exasperation from a lifetime of existence; tiredness from two weeks of sloppy torture; an unpleasant buzz carving roads in his skull; Agent Minami's fear and the smell of an upcoming storm. He glanced down, meeting the snake's gaze.

Hysterically, his unimpressed eyes were enough to open the beast's jaws, releasing his captive calf.

"You know," Chuuya said, utterly calm. "I'm almost happy to see you. You revolting offspring of hell."

"Great," the boy huffed. He refused to look at him — refused to be haunted by what *two* eyes had looked like next to each other, in the Hotel. Far too close, Dazai studied him with tactile disappointment, sporting a bruised cheek and a chocolate stain near his mouth. "Torture gives you good taste, now."

He lowered his knife.

Chuuya stepped back, allowing him to curl onto himself, coughing obnoxiously. The sound of the broken pipe suffocated the distant traffic; the falling sun and the neon lights painted the little alcove in soft shades, filling the space between them with a scrutinizing sort of silence.

Utterly exhausted, unwilling to admit only *Tainted* was keeping him upright — Chuuya put his finger between the boy's eyebrows.

"Your stubbornness to continue living would *almost* be touching, if I didn't suspect it was born out of sheer luck," Dazai mused, eventually, batting his hand off. "It does make us an amusing pair, that's for sure. Did you get what I needed?"

"Did you receive the curses I spent two weeks sending you?" Chuuya drawled, feeling dizzy from the sudden *lack* — given and taken. He studied his naked finger. Whatever hint of silence the syringes had tried to give him, it was nothing compared to this. "*Two weeks*, asshole. I thought I'd stay there for three days *max*."

"So you did. Did you curse me a lot?"

“I wrote your stupid name with my blood on the walls after the first nail they ripped off.”

“How romantic.”

They stared each other down. With a huff, Dazai extracted a pair of gloves from his pocket, and threw them right onto the bleeding gash Chuuya could feel on his cheek.

The dim light painted rusty shadows on days-old bandages, giving an eerie depth to the chapped lips tightening in thought. Right before he could move, Dazai reached for one of his hands — tapping the three missing nails, as if waiting for a hiss he didn’t emit.

Chuuya put the gloves on.

“If I had known the *Division* wasn’t half as chivalarious as I believed, I would have orchestrated for you to be sent there sooner,” Very academically — wearing the gaze that mafiosi refused to meet — he asked: “Did it hurt?”

He scoffed. “They can’t touch me.”

“Doubtful,” Studying the pull of the leather as he pulled them up, Dazai tilted his head to the side. Kazuko gathered around his feet, lethally quiet. “According to my calculations — which are slug-proof, by the way — apart from the healing side effects of chibi-induced torture, you were supposed to leave the *Special Division* HQs unscathed. We don’t want Mori to get mad.”

“It’s scratches,” Chuuya replied. “Get over it.”

He didn’t. “My plans don’t have scratches.”

“I think they do,” He knew the boy caught the pointed gaze he laid on his bruised cheek. Boiling underneath the skin was an old friend — anger turned his words ugly; grasped the little left of his roots and turned his accent into the Settlement’s crickets. “You’re a fucking jerk for not telling them.”

Dazai didn’t seem impressed. People couldn’t change in two weeks; Chuuya was hit by the horrifying realization that it was the longest they had been apart that whole summer. “Am I?”

“I don’t care if you decided you like pain. There was no need to turn them against you. My squad is not fit for an attack on the Headquarters.”

“They didn’t die either? Shame.”

He seethed. “Ane-san should have smacked you harder.”

“Liking *pain* is —” Dazai smiled, almost. It widened the bruise on his cheek. “Definitely not the issue. And you know she wouldn’t dare.”

“Maybe *you’re* the fucking issue.”

“Maybe I forgot. Maybe your absence is not as noticeable as you think.”

Chuuya laughed — it tasted cruel. “Maybe you’re not the prodigy you think you are.”

“Maybe I need to fix the *incognita*, once and for all. It’s no surprise someone of your ant scale got stuck in the machine,” He tilted his head to the other side, pensive.

Abruptly, bumping hard enough to leave his head pounding, Dazai pushed his forehead against his own — plastering the two of them against the darkest corner of *The Alley*.

“*What the f—*”

A whistle left Dazai’s mouth; quiet enough to be a breath, overwhelmingly close to his own lips. His mind connected the dots — his shoulders stiffened, fighting to keep him still against the stone. The sound of steps crowded over the curtain of water — butterfly quick, Dazai’s eyes darted to another corner of *The Alley*.

A bug.

*The papers*, the thumb on his knuckles tapped. *What did the papers say?*

Chuuya wasted no time pretending he hadn’t snooped all over the dossiers on his way there — he pressed his lips together, tight enough to hurt, and whistled back.

*Target dead.*

Dazai said, low: “I suppose we should hurry then.”

Barely, he refrained himself from pulling his head back and smashing the boy’s forehead again. “*Hurry?*”

Dazai dragged him away, leaning down just to tap Kazuko’s head where she’d entangled herself with her feet. In one smooth move, he extracted the gun from his back, raising it over Chuuya’s shoulder to shoot. A choked gasp came from his back — unflinching, he turned to watch three men in the *Shadow Blade*’s uniform drop to their feet and roll down the stairs.

The gun took out the bug on the corner of *The Alley* next; Dazai motioned him towards the corpse-covered stairs. “We should probably hurry, yes. They’re about to take the old man out.”

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They weren't fast enough.

"Boys?" Madame Tanaki stuttered, as they ran through the entrance of the Headquarters. Her mouth parted the more she took them in — the blood stains and the gun Dazai had yet to let go of. "Chuuya, how did you —"

A storm had seemingly snaked through the entrance Hall, leaving dried blood on pieces of overturned furniture and weapons in the hand of the crowd sagging the room. The tell-tale smell of a conflict activated Chuuya's Ability on the tips of his fingers, pushing the glass doors open with a little too much strength, calling stunned gazes to him.

"I'll explain later. I'm fine," he assured her, eyes running, trying to decipher the funerary looks adorning the mafiosi's faces — the murmurs that had nothing to do with the wide eyes they were offering *him*. "Did something happen?"

"A — A delegation came for the Boss," the woman explained, pale. "His contacts from the Cabinet. The *Black Lizards* brought them to the office, and then Hirotsu came down muttering something about — someone dying, I think?" Her eyes grew glossy. "And — and then..."

A ring of people occupied the far end of the Hall, all enraged voices and vicious discussions. Chuuya's gaze fell on their shoes; the blood footprints they were leaving on the carpet — the glimpse of a pale, wrinkled, utterly *familiar* hand sneaking between the endless pairs of legs.

His feet moved on their own.

There were words leaving his mouth, and the distant echo of a wheezing breath, wet and sick. Undeterred elbows, cracks opening on the floor — the voice he could barely hear out of his lips got him through the flood of mafiosi, closely followed by Dazai's shut lips.

Everything was red, was black, was *green* — Tsuchiya's hair, as she leaned over the holes in Hirotsu's body, one, five, *six* of them, blood on her shoes, hissing under her breath whenever the man's eyelids dropped. Two of his *Black Lizards* were applying pressure on every point that would help stop the blood flow, uselessly. Every breath out of his mouth bloomed red on his lips — the sound of his breathing was nails on chalk.

As one, uncaring of the quiet that fell upon them — obedient as they had never accepted to be in their handler's presence — Chuuya and Dazai crouched down.

"Oh," Hirotsu said. A watery texture was draped over his eyes; they settled on them. "Chuuya. Good evening. I knew Dazai would get you out of there."

"I leave for one night, old man," Dazai pointed out. Tsuchiya was moving too quickly to understand whether it was working or not. "And you get yourself shot by pathetic Shadow Blades pretenders?"

A violent cough rattled his frame, pooling drool down the white collar of his shirt. "Ah, you — you know, Dazai. Nothing worse than any *Run from the handler* rounds."

The boy huffed a laugh. Moved a bit to the side; hid the man's pained face from the crowd.

Chuuya was floating.

*Leftover side effects from the syringes*, he considered, rationally. Leftover side effects from the torture. Leftover side effects from the last time he'd seen a corpse on the floor, and known he had lost something.

His mouth opened to vomit out the bile: "What the fuck are you doing?"

Tsuchiya announced: "It's not stopping."

"Then *do something!*" The *Black Lizard* holding his Commander's elbows snapped.

Dazai's hand sneaked forward, tapping the cracked display of Hirotsu's ancient wristwatch. It had been the next stealing target of the bet he'd lost at the Arcade — because they fought too much, Mori thought so, and Hirotsu did too, even if he never said; and *fights were to be solved peacefully*, so the Arcade it was. Chuuya watched him trace the webbed glass, humming to himself, distant from it all. *Why don't you grab his damn hand?*, and, *if he touches us, we bolt* and —

"He needs to be brought to the *Hospital* —"

"He'll die on the road there if you don't stabilize the bleeding —"

"There's only so much I can fucking *do!*"

Chuuya removed his shattered monocle from the ghostly pale valleys of his face. It earned him nothing at all; Hirotsu's eyes were on the chandeliers, deaf to the fight upon his body, blind to any of them. He held it tight in his fist; *waited* for the glass to break through naked skin.

"Don't worry, boys," Hirotsu reassured.

He had always been aggravatingly tall — Chuuya had cranked his neck to meet his eyes, because *of course* he would meet them; he had watched him stand and wait for an ocean of men to come at him, unflinching and unbeatable.

*I'm not worried*, he didn't offer. *I'm not worried. I don't even trust you. I didn't even think you could die.*

Wetly, the man promised: "I would never inconvenience the two of you by dying."

"I," Chuuya started.

"Then *maybe*," the *Black Lizard* growled, grabbing Tsuchiya's shirt to drag her forward. "You fucking *whore* should have thought about it before *destroying your bitch sister's tools!*"

His self control snapped. He sunk his fist in the man's face, watching him land against the wall and crack it, knuckles pulsing, head pounding.

"Be useful or be quiet," he ordered.

The man stared at him in disbelief, through the reddening fingers he had pushed up against his now broken nose. A flash of recognition petrified the anger on his lips — he crawled back against the wall, silent.

Chuuya dragged Tsuchiya's hands back on the Hirotsu's chest, climbing to his feet. Shaking with repressed energy, crimson crowding the corners of his vision in a way that he *knew* was visible — he stared at the mute crowd surrounding the scene. "Keep your mouths shut until he's not bleeding his guts out on the floor — let her *save his shitty life in peace* — or I will slaughter every single of you myself," Chuuya commanded. "Do I make myself clear?"

*Tainted* erupted up and down his skin, enlarging the space around Hirotsu's body with every step back the unwanted audience took. He had despised the fear in the eyes of those men for months — but there were no other echoes for him to catch, and there would never be.

*If they want to tell bedtime stories about this too*, he thought, at last. *Fucking let them.*

*If they want a God*, the Reaper had said.

"Either you do something actually useful," he spelled out. "Or you *leave*."

Endlessly slow, eyes on the floor, the crowd began to dissipate. Behind that wall of black and red, Madame Tanaki's tears landed on her desk, hands trembling in an interrupted reaching-out. Blood handprints were left on the glass doors; someone would have to clean those.

"Chuuya."

Distant; right there. Dazai's face was too close again and Hirotsu was dying at his feet. He nodded towards the door on the other end of the Hall — the only way to the dungeons.

"Mori is waiting for us," he said. If the wiped clean state of his face was meant to be something, Chuuya wasn't in the mood to search for answers. All he saw was blankness — it made him madder than either of them could afford.

He glanced at Tsuchiya; she was too busy and too bloodied to meet his gaze. *Tell me*, he found himself thinking, astonished, unfamiliar, never to be spoken out loud; never to be accepted. *Tell me what to do*.

"Go," Hirotsu said. Glossy eyes settled on him alone. He nodded. "Chuuya, it will be fine."

He *raged*. "Fuck you."

The man laughed — he coughed because of it, all red, down to the tips of his hair. "I'm truly glad you're back."

Three men in the *Shadow Blade* tunics had been shackled to the columns of the dungeons.

Bruises and cuts climbed all the way up their shaved heads, caves and wounds illuminated by the dim LED lights of the endlessly distant roof. *Golden Demon* paced the path that led from one prisoner to the other, majestic and patient, shining over the unevenly grainy stairs and painting faces on the cement — waiting for Kouyou to order the next hit.

The Executives — Ace's contemplative face observing a map precariously hung on the nearest wall; the Colonel's overly frustrated one muttering to himself; Kouyou's focused eyes studying the prisoners — surrounded Mori, hands behind his back and a somewhat uncharacteristic composure overflowing on his features.

His eyes found the two of them almost immediately. "Just in time," Boss offered, just shaken enough to appear touchable. His eyes darted to the stairs. "How's my Commander?"

"Tsuchiya *Vet Version* Mi will probably save him," Dazai replied, nonchalantly. "But he will need to go to the Hospital, and I can't predict how long the recovery will take. He *is* prone to heart failures, is he not? He might be asked not to strain himself."

Chuuya stared. "*Heart failures?*"

A stunned breath echoed.

The tip of Kouyou's blade touched the ground; *Golden Demon* disappeared into thin air with the same franticness that made the woman stride to him, eyes wide and hands outreaching. "Chuuya," she exhaled, clenching her palms around his cheeks, uncaring of the melodic whines coming from her abandoned targets. Her fingers tightened, dragging him closer, studying every inch of him. "How did you —"

If Chuuya had thought his ears were on fire before, he was quickly proven wrong. "I'm fine, Ane-san."

"I *told him* you weren't —" she started, before clenching her jaw. "I *tried*, little god."

He paused, throwing a look to Mori over her shoulder. His reaction to what sounded like a breach of authority never came. All the man did was allow a glimpse of amusement to fly by tired eyes.

"It's fine," Chuuya echoed, a little lost by the fervor. A bit lower: "It's *fine*. I'm not the one you owe loyalty to."

Astonishingly — a hint of protest dripped down the marble tassels of her chiseled face. Before she could open her mouth again, another voice spoke up.

"I told you he'd be just fine."

Dazai had made his way to the Boss; dark cloth and dark bruise on his cheek, nothing but a malevolent shadow to an overly powerful man. His eyes were on the prisoners already; still, it was clear he was talking to the Executive. "You should learn to trust me a bit more," he added, seemingly blind to the anger tightening the woman's grip around his face. "Ane-san."

She took a step forward. "*You* —"



“He got me out,” Chuuya was quick to stop her, begrudgingly. She snapped her head back to him. “He helped me escape. We had a plan. I had to gather information on — whatever it’s happening.”

“You had a plan,” she repeated, stone-faced.

“I would have told you, if I’d known *someone*,” He sent a pointed look to the other boy, “Wouldn’t *bother* to. Only Boss knew.”

“Indeed,” the man agreed. He grabbed the dossier Dazai offered him — squinting, Chuuya patted his own back, trying to recall *when* he’d stolen them from him. “You did an excellent job, Chuuya. I do hope the Division wasn’t too...” He laid glinting eyes on him. “*Harsh?*”

The question underlining the concern was all but screamed; ignoring the gaze the Colonel and Ace exchanged, he raised his head: “They didn’t get anything out of me,” He rubbed the lingering blood off the cut on his cheek; Dazai’s eyes zeroed right there. “We might receive some complaints about my escape. I did not exactly — hold back.”

Even without bringing up Arahabaki and his sudden protectiveness, Mori seemed to understand what he meant about the torture. He nodded, clearly satisfied; then, offered him a hand.

“Let us start, then,” he beckoned, knocking knuckles on the map of the city. “You certainly have some catching up to do.”

Chuuya bowed.

The facts were: Hirabayashi Mitsuru, ninety three years old, born and resident in Yokohama, had died of natural causes the night of September 15th — mere minutes before an Agent had broken into Chuuya’s interrogation room and dragged Minami away. The facts were: for some reason, mere hours after the woman had died, every syndicate in the city had perked up — and the *Shadow Blade*, in particular, had broken a treaty not yet been finalized.

“My most competent commander was an obvious target,” Mori explained, staring down the prisoners. *Golden Demon* had appeared again; her swords tickled the men’s chins, ineluctable eyes drinking the blood staining their shredded tunics. “They know conflict is coming. They hit our most notorious battalion — both to cripple us, and to send out a message.”

“The *Black Lizards* aren’t prone to accepting new commanders,” Ace frowned. “They’ll need whoever might temporarily take his place to prove their competence. And few men in the organization have the same strategic prowess as Hirotsu.”

“We can expect more attacks, starting from tonight,” The Colonel had moved to stand behind him; Chuuya was startled by his subtle motions. “They will not waste time. And with Nakahara back, and this attack — the treaty is as good as destroyed. The *Moons* will move.”

“The treaty was never going to happen,” Kouyou replied, snapping her fingers. *Golden Demon* sunk her blade into one of the Blades’ sides, ripping a shriek out of his mouth. Over

the screams, she added: “The *Moons* knew it very well. And the *Division* can’t be trusted. No temporary peace is worth an Ability Permit.”

“I have reasons to believe Chuuya would have been, though,” Dazai commented. Every thread in his skull pulled, begging him to cut them off. “For some absurd, masochistic reason, they *really* want him.”

“We will discuss Chuuya and the *Permit* another day,” Mori intervened, halting their screaming match before it could start. “We need to worry about *this* issue, for now. The situation will escalate. It has the potential to become bigger than even the *Nine Rings Conflict*.”

Ace tapped away on his phone. “The *Hounds* and the *Black Widows* have engaged in a shout-out near the Ishikawachō Station,” he reported. “And — my men believe *Takasekai* might have started their march.”

“The *Shadow Blade* is planning to attack the *Bishop’s Staff*,” Kouyou said, kneeled in front of one of the prisoners, fingers digging deep into a wound on his chest. “They want to take back their hostages *and* take them out from the competition in one single hit.”

“I hardly believe the *KK Company* hasn’t acted yet,” the Colonel muttered. “Those bastards smell money like bloodhounds. They will surely initiate conflict with the *Temple*, and *GSS* won’t stay put. Their borders are too close.”

Chuuya was fed up. “I don’t understand.”

Dazai’s only visible — *real* — eye brushed the inside of his head. “How surprising.”

“I *will* make *Golden Demon* gut you,” he threatened. Dragging his eyes back to Mori, he insisted: “Why did this grandma’s death alert the entire underworld?”

“You must have heard of Hirabayashi,” Mori answered. “If not in the Sheep, then the Flags must have mentioned her at least once. She was known as the *Daikokuten of the Underworld*.”

Surprise tore an exclamation out of him. “*That’s* who died?”

The *Daikokuten of the Underworld* — as most men who wouldn’t risk taunting the woman’s name with their *disgusting tongues*, as Pianoman had put it, referred to her as — was Yokohama’s blood-richest heiress; the safe-keeper of a fortune so endless many stories had been spread across the underground, all too keep the real sum a secret.

The so called *deity of fortune and wealth* was the daughter of a peace treaty between two of the most prolific and vicious syndicates of the pre-war Yokohama; her first decision as a leader of that new union, had been to disband the two organizations — focusing only on the accumulation of ancient fortunes.

Her decision had both freed Yokohama from one of its biggest predators, making way for the current syndicates, and created a cult of sort around her person: the *Daikokuten* had sworn to

never marry and never have children, spending every day of her life growing the fortune she would one day leave to the claws of the underground of her beloved city.

*She said she would make a game out of it*, Pianoman had explained, counting fake banknotes — never licking his fingers to do so, because that denoted *unfamiliarity to richness*, Chuuya, yeah? — and fighting over his next drink with Iceman. *The money would go to whatever organization would be worthy enough to seize it, and to keep it. The nutcase wanted afterlife entertainment.*

*For all that money?*, Albatross had huffed. *I'll wear a maid dress and dance along with the Colonel's physarmony.*

“How much?” Chuuya asked, before his brain could catch up with the information. “How much did she leave?”

Mori exhaled, curling his fingers together. “Five hundred billion yen. More or less.”

Electricity tickled the air, only partly blamed on the flickering led lights. The Colonel whistled, low and impressed, sharing a surprisingly complacent look with Kouyou. Even Ace — nevermind the distracted way his finger was tracing some bracelet carved in gemstones on his wrist — seemed impressed.

Next to Mori, Dazai tilted his head from one side to the other, shaking nonexistent water out of it. “That’s a shame. I bet Odasaku it would be *at least* a dozen hundred more.”

“That’s,” Chuuya searched for a term that would not reek of *street-kid*, and came up empty. “A fuck ton of money.”

“Most certainly,” the Boss agreed.

A new voice peeked from behind his legs. “Enough for *at least* five dollhouses.”

“Elise!” Dazai exclaimed, crouching down to wiggle his eyebrows in her face. “There you are. What would you say, if I told you it’s even enough for *six* of them?”

The girl *humpf-*ed, caressing her crimson gowns — the same shade of the blood Kouyou was still dutifully extracting from her prisoners’ insides. “Money is stupid. Asking for things you want is *much* easier.”

“Every syndicate in the city will start a riot to get that large of a sum,” Chuuya concluded, disbelieving. “It could be a conflict out of any proportion we’ve ever witnessed. No alliances, no clear battlefields, no *anything*,” Excitement mixed with concern — some of it his, some of it not, some of it undistinguished. “Was the hag out of her mind, or did she want to go out with a metaphorical *boom*?”

“We can only assume,” Ace shrugged. “Still, it’s not a matter of thought. We *will* get that money. No one but the greatest syndicate in the city should gain control over such a prize. Correct, Boss?”

For a single moment, shorter than a blink — he thought the man might say *no*. That he'd laugh one of his cynical croaks, shake his head, say, *no, we will watch them massacre each other*. He couldn't quite decide if it would be uncharacteristic or not.

"Obviously," Mori said. Stunningly — expected, nonetheless, in some corner of him — he turned his gaze to Dazai, then moved it to Chuuya himself. "Our shadows will win the prize for us."

With no preemptive explanation, Dazai cleared his throat. "Give me a day, I suppose. I'll find you her base."

"How foolish would it be, to assume she might keep the data to her fortune in her home?" Ace intervened.

"Very much so," the Colonel scoffed. "I'm willing to bet half of the syndicates are already on their way to the villa. The old woman wanted entertainment — she must have chosen an obvious place to start the race, but not *that* obvious."

"There's only so many locations," the boy shrugged. "Chuuya and I will retrieve the codes, and then it'll be only a matter of keeping them close. I believe it's safe to assume the conflict will be a maximal version of Capture the Flag."

Elise gasped, clapping excitedly. "*Yes!*"

Chuuya, who had kept silent, raised a hand. "I don't think a day will be necessary."

A petulant sigh left Dazai's mouth. Finger poking the cut on his cheek, he explained: "I'm more than flattered by your faith in my abilities, partner, but even the smartest creatures —"

"No," he cut him off, slapping his hand away. "I know where the hag left the codes."

Even Kouyou turned to stare. "*What?*"

"The Sheep were very interested in the prospect of earning that much money without doing anything," he answered the collective choir. "We lived off stolen goods — that fortune would have kept us afloat for years. We spent months investigating."

*I spent months investigating*, he corrected, in the private space of his own skull. He'd refused to sit and wait, lunging in the certainty that when the day would come, violence would have been the only thing to matter. If the other syndicates wanted to save the questions for when it would be too late, they could. The Sheep didn't have their funds; the Sheep didn't have their weapons; the Sheep didn't have territory in the upper city. The Sheep only had Chuuya.

"I even considered killing the grandma, at some point," he recalled. "But it didn't seem like a large-scale war would have been a wise move."

"How surprising," Dazai muttered. "Rationality."

An overly bright glint flashed in Mori's eyes. "This is certainly lucky. And *where* are the codes?"

Chuuya stepped forward, leaning his hands on the rough surface of the map. The territory of the Port Mafia had been highlighted in a thick red line, dots caging the coast by the hook of the Sankeien Garden, spreading throughout part of Yokohama Chinatown, and building its borders near their own Hospital. It was, if not the largest, among the widest sheets of land the underground held in the city.

He tapped the scarlet mark with one index. “Here is the first one,” he said. His finger slid down, tracing the less vivid line of *Takasekai*’s borders. “And here’s the second. The third, the fourth —” He traced invisible *Xs* down the map, touching every clear perimeter of the *Five Moons*. “And fifth. I’m pretty sure it was six codes, before the *Nine Rings* went to hell. But they’re five.”

“That’s cheating,” Dazai intervened. “You read that in the dossiers from the *Special Division*.”

“The documents *confirmed it*,” he insisted, with a dirty glance, before focusing on Mori again. “The Colonel is right. If she wanted the conflict to begin, she couldn’t make this the world’s greatest treasure hunt. It’s *keeping* the prize that will be difficult. She paid attention to whoever held the reins of the city, and she made it so that at least *one part* of the puzzle fell in the hands of every major syndicate.”

The Boss hummed. Tracing the dotted lines with inscrutable eyes, he admitted: “It would force all the major organizations to join the conflict.”

“It still doesn’t change the fact that we don’t know *where* our own code is,” Ace pointed out.

“But it shrinks the field,” Dazai replied, Squinting at the map, he added: “Actually, I think —“

It was Arahabaki, who was nothing at all, who felt it.

Side effects were side effects — among them were scars, and among scars there were marks that were more than dead skin. Spiders crawled under the most naked layer of his skin, lighting his frame up in the same shade of Elise’s cheeks; vicious, his head snapped to the boulders the prisoners were shackled to.

The *Blade* Kouyou had her hands deep into clenched his fist, fixing his grip on a bracelet around his wrist. A mechanical *beep* shattered the silence — his bloodied jacket seemed to swell, then exhale.

Chuuya’s lips parted. It was Dazai’s voice to call: “*Ane* —“

Snapshot flashed his mind to the point of blindness — a hand on his upper arm, his own fingers tightening around bandages, both pulling, both pushing. Mori’s voice speaking the unspeakable; the Colonel’s Ability turning the ground into liquid; the world exploding in golden.

Through the glittering white and yellows and red, and his ringing ears, he thought he heard Elise laugh; right as the dungeons blew —

***[...gone? What do you mean he's gone?***

***(He escaped).***

***You allowed the Port Mafia to regain A5158 in the middle of the deadliest conflict we —***

*— there's water everywhere.*

*In his nostrils, in his eyes, in the wounds he cannot remember being inflicted, in the wounds he cannot feel any longer, in the wounds he never had. It works in flickers; the impact makes his whole body tingle and his ears pop; when they pull him back by the hair, all he sees is black.*

*It's the familiarity of it that startles him.*

*Feelings are to be shared with the god in his chest — but whether floating is a god's memory or a boy's nightmare, the pull and drag does not give him time to understand it. He recalls tubes sticking out of his throat, weightless limbs swimming in a place smaller than any contained bomb should be allowed. He doesn't fear not breathing; he fears the ease of it.*

*A mother's womb, he thinks. Familiar, in its simplicity, because not human —*

***[...what? Yuan, is that — What? Stop screaming. What is going on? Who? Yuan. Yuan?  
Yuan, answer the —]***

*— Albatross is a weight on his legs, and a curse on his lips.*

*He's in his apartment, hands on his photographs — or he's on the ground in the Old World, hands stained in blood, the epicenter of devastation, the very picture of gulped down guilt. There are too many corpses, too many photos; he speaks to the ones who stubbornly cling to oxygen — just not stubbornly enough.*

Sorry I broke into your place, *he says, to the bubbles and the metal edge of a cage.* Sorry I killed you.

*Albatross is a weight on his legs, and he is angry. He is angry. He is always angry. You should try it, sometimes, Doc had told him, and he wonders, are you proud? Are you proud? Do you regret?*

*A picture, he thinks. A child holding a man's hand, breaking the oceanic horizon in two. A father and a son and a tank filled with poison.*

*There is water —*

***[Yes, sir. I apologize. We... We will deal with the problem. But — Have you considered my idea?***

***(Not yet)***

***Yes, sir.***

***(Let us hope — Sakaguchi, let us hope it doesn't get to that).***

***Yes, sir.]***

— His phone had yet to stop buzzing.

“Are you absolutely sure you don't need a check up, sweetie?” the nurse insisted. His whole demeanor was a painful show of carefulness, anxious caves under the bluish half-busted lights. “Your concern for your sister is more than touching, but she wouldn't want you to risk an infection —“

*Not my sister*; traced his lips, unwilling to focus on it. Instead, Chuuya replied: “I'm not going to get anything. Are you done asking?”

Truly, he wasn't worse off than he had been after his escape — five, six hours ago? The night felt never ending; the streets were sagged with intention and lights, as if Yokohama had perceived the beginning of *something* even before the blood started flooding the streets.

Bruises and cuts and cuts and bruises; Chuuya would heal. A mixture of *Tainted* and Dazai's reflexes had saved them both from most of the consequences of the explosion — seemingly more cheerful than ever, apart from the bleeding scratches on his face and the broken veins in

his only visible eye, the boy was flirting his way into information with one of the other nurses.

It was an uncomfortable sight.

Not quite because Dazai *wasn't* into it — the day Dazai wasn't into charming women for a purpose and for his own eyes, the sky would fall — but mostly because he seemed to be a bit *too much* into it, for it to be another a mere date asked to the nearest beauty. Hands tight around the plastic seat his legs were bouncing against, Chuuya tried to keep his eyes on the wall.

*Devouring*, Mori would have said, *is easier from up close*.

It was something Dazai did with ease. *One more chance to find a partner for my romantic suicide*, he would tell him. Chuuya wanted to go up there and punch him, repeatedly and painfully — right until he'd get the nauseating *nothing* out of his features.

Rows and rows of suited men standing guard at the beginning of the hallway waited, politely, for the worst to happen. A floor and a flock to each Executive, and one for the Commander; only the Colonel had been left mostly unscathed, and Mori was secretly licking his wounds in his own office.

*We cannot let them know I was at the Hospital*, he had said, as the *Black Lizards* dragged them out of the dungeons; a mess of lights and colors and voices, and Kouyou's blood on his hands. *Bring Kouyou, Ace and the Colonel there*.

*Three down*.

He had never seen Kouyou in a medical vest. He had never seen her in anything but her kimonos. Did she sleep in pajamas? Did she sleep at all?

"I mean," the nurse said, biting down a smile, as Dazai brought her hands to his lips. She had to be older than thirty. "I mean — oh, *stop it* — once this is over..."

His phone was still buzzing.

The idea of throwing it against the nearest wall was tempting, at least out of habit. The idea of throwing *someone* against it was even more so, but no nurse had yet pissed him off to that degree. He couldn't risk them to drag him into some hospital bed, anyway — rules were rules.

Another giggle drooled on the pavement.

He stood, roughly enough to make the plastic seat creak — the pair turned to look at him. In Dazai's gaze, he saw the bored impact of a thread being snapped — the unwillingness to *grab* and *hold on*.

"Mackerel," he ordered. "Can I talk to you for a second."



It wasn't a question, so, obviously, the boy pretended as such. It took him almost too long to sigh some sugar-sweet excuse to the woman and step into his direction; Chuuya was subjected to the eerie spectacle of his features readjusting themselves into something extremely more annoyed. *When someone was quick*, he thought, hard earned windows on a wall of a boy, *you just had to be quicker*.

"I'm *working*, Hatrack," Dazai said, pointedly, as soon as they reached the stone-faced guards. They hid themselves from sight only partly, standing right in front of a vending machine — the brightest source of light of the hallway. "In case you forgot, this is for *your* benefit. I couldn't care less about seeing Kouyou snore in a hideous hospital gown," A pause. "If she's still alive, that's it."

*I don't want your help*, he might have said, in another life. But Dazai enjoyed it. Dazai was also, at his core, pure manipulation under pretty eyelashes. *Not like this*.

He felt stupid, all of the sudden — a feeling Dazai always did his best to maximize.

The words out of his mouth weren't planned: "I kinda think she might own a Hospital kimono."

Moonlight breached through rain-filled clouds; genuine surprise made Dazai blink. Whatever he had expected him to say, it wasn't this — a feeling *Chuuya* always did his best to maximize.

He snorted. "Yes, I could see that."

Distant beeping machines and echoing murmurs from behind the walls; unable to beat the silence, they simply laid next to it. Chuuya leaned his shoulder against the glass of the vending machine; its sea-like glow painted landscaped on dirty bandages; the hum of the metal box bellowed down his spine.

"News about the old man?" he asked.

"Still sleeping," Dazai's eyes stayed set upon his shoulder, observing the guards. At least some of them were part of the *Secret Squad*; Chuuya didn't recognize any of them. Most had died during the attack on the HQ in the *Nine Rings* ' Conflict. He wondered if the boy had even bothered to learn the new ones' names. "Medically induced coma. They're worried his heart might not react positively to the recovery; one of the bullets grazed the aorta. He won't be up for at least three weeks."

"*Three weeks?*" he echoed. Recovery time was hardly longer than a week in the syndicate; after that, it was usually referred to as, *suck it up and do your job*. "Shit. And Boss?"

"Boss will have to allow it, if he doesn't want his best Commander to have a heart attack in the middle of a battle," The boy shrugged. "Ace's probably going to be up in a few hours. Most he's got is a broken leg and some damaged ego, which will immediately be healed once Mori lies to him and tells him he saved his life. As for Kouyou," he said, more tentatively. "They don't really know."

“She’s still in surgery?”

“No, she’s out,” Dazai shook his head. “But she’s not waking up,” He huffed an obnoxious laugh, clearly set on dying with his facade on. “She did have a crater in her chest. Look at it in a positive way, though. Maybe she was trying to remind you of your old home.”

*If he stared hard enough* — long enough; *obsessively* enough — *at the ground*, he mused, *would it crack?* Abilities were to be discovered. Perhaps gravity could reach the unreachable. Perhaps it could stop a heart without him needing to be blamed for it.

All was still. All was quiet. His ears were ringing. Chuuya was angry.

Chuuya was awake, and he was *ready*.

*Soon*, he promised, god or vessel, either one. No blood had been offered yet; it was just a matter of time. *Soon, soon, soon.*

“You’re a piece of shit,” he said, calm. “And I don’t care about *fuck* that leaves your mouth. We have more pressing matters than your entertainment.”

“That is almost always the case. Existence is not quite made for satisfaction, unfortunately,” Dazai sighed, temple against the glass, somehow looking as if he’d said exactly what he’d hoped he would. The nurse from before peeked around the corner; Chuuya stared at her until she left.

At last, the other dragged his eyes back to him, leaning a bit closer. “So. What do we do?”

He straightened.

Facades and hospital rooms and giggling smiles; Chuuya didn’t know anything about those incognitae. He was instinct on a barbed wire, always too tense, always unprepared to the silence. But *this*, no matter how insistently the roots of his denial spread — *this*, pushing his back against someone who he knew, for whatever reason, wouldn’t let the bullets hit him; bleeding the world out under the melody of synchronized minds; *it’s just us* — this, he understood.

“You’re the plan guy,” Chuuya said, mockingly. His hands hitched for a fight. “Whose face do I stomp to the curb?”

“Ah, but you beat me on the search for general areas of the codes,” Dazai bowed, removing his hat with a quick sweep. “Although, I do think I might know where the old hag left *our* own.”

He sent a half-glance to the guards behind his back, mostly inattentive. Lowering his voice, he insisted: “And?”

Dazai opened his mouth.

His phone buzzed.

“Oh, my —“ He fished the device out of his pocket, almost snapping it in two as he opened it; the too-bright display left him jaw-slacked. “What the hell is it?”

Several missed calls from every member of his squad littered the screen, all attached to each other and all followed by voicemails; Chuuya blinked at their names through the cracks on the screen, moving to the top of the bar to see the latest contact on the register.

His bones turned to dust.

“Oh,” Dazai said, blinking down. “What a coincidence.”

Chuuya was down the stairs before his feet could catch up with his mouth; he heard his lips shape some sort of order for the guards in the hallways. Fingers almost widening the cracks in the screen, he selected the contact, pressing the phone to his ear as he sprinted out of the Hospital.

“Come on,” he muttered, blind and deaf to every body he bumped against. “Come on, come on — *Yuan?* Yuan, what the fuck is going —“

“*Chuuya?*”

He stumbled, only for a moment — choked by the terrified stutter echoing in his ear. Accelerating again, he took the roundabout right outside the Hospital gates, jumping ten feet in the air to cling to the buildings. “I didn’t answer, there’s been —“ He cursed out, tightening his grip on the phone. *The one time she actually called him* — “What happened?”

Panicked breaths filled the silence, slightly metallic, slightly wet.

“Yuan,” he insisted. “Kid. Talk to me.”

“I didn’t — I didn’t know if you’d answer. They,” A sob. “They told me —“

“I’m fine. I’m *fine*, I promise, what’s —“

“There’s someone,” she whispered. It was barely loud enough to be considered *words*. “They have guns. I think they —“ A loud *thump!* stuck the words in her throat. Her voice was too echoey; she had to be hiding inside her closet. It took a moment for the words to register, too low and too nonsensical. “I think they killed the kids.”

*34 missed call from: Koda Katsumi.*

Chuuya’s feet touched the ground. Bile and blood were interchangeable pebbles stuck between his teeth; he bit down, uncaring of the glowing clefts tearing the ground apart. “Get something sharp and stay hidden. Do you hear me? You know how to fight. Don’t. *Don’t* —“

“Chuuya,” she repeated. Familiar, in its simplicity, because it was a call for help. Familiar, in its instinctiveness, because it was *Yuan*. “I think it’s — I *t-think* it’s the *Bishop’s Staff*.”

Utter clarity settled every teetering bone in his body. He flew higher and higher, uncaring of concrete and walls, uncaring of gravity, uncaring of most things. *Fuck that*, he thought to

himself, calmly. *Fuck that.*

“It’s fine, Yuan,” he said. The oldest syllables to ever fill his mouth. “I’m coming.”

An assortment of words from the dozens and dozens of missed calls got stuck under his eyelids, haunting him with steadfast perseverance all the way to the Orphanage. *We can’t leave, they said, the kids called us, they said, Chuuya, my brother, they said, can you go there, can you come here, Chuuya, answer your —*

Fresh blood pooled down rusty metal, regrouping on the cold concrete, staining the wheels of half-destroyed vehicles busying the midnight street. Impaled on the higher spike of the entrance gates, sideways, was Sayari — eyes open and lifeless and green and settled on him.

Chuuya was eight — *because that was what Shirase had decided* — the first time he witnessed a massacre.

He remembered little of it — water and glass and neon lines of codes, the excruciating weight of unexplained vassalage; the feeling of *everything* in a space that could barely hold *nothing*, and then freedom, freedom, the sky and the sea and *freedom*.

With it came blood. The oldest story in the world — in the only world Arahabaki would ever consider his own — went like this: *with it came blood, and with blood came I.*

His soles stuck to the cement; blood was quick to dry, quicker to keep him still. There were corpses in the garden that led to the front door — small chests overflowing in bullet holes. Round faces he couldn’t have named, scarlet cheeks and glass eyes, viscera flooding the ground. Buckets of it; bottles of cat-piss perfume, the stench of rotting flesh and children’s toothpaste.

The door had been left ajar; polite, almost, in its lack of care. He had memorized the path to the kitchen the squad would lunge into for endless afternoons, planning and talking and preparing for a night at the *Tournament*, staring at the ceiling, Yuan’s footprints invisible but *there*. Walls smeared in red, destroyed furniture, corpses asleep on the couches, at the table, on the floor, on the counter.

The bodies face-to-the-ground on the stairs were probably the patrons. He had never met them. They were too big. They weren’t kids. They just shared *rigor mortis* and an early tombstone.

“Yuan?” he whispered. “*Yuan?*”

Harsh breathing. He knew it didn’t come from him; knew it had been a long time since death had managed to get such reactions out of him. One foot after the other, one climb over the children abandoned on the steps after the other; he walked the stairs, autopilot and just conscientious enough to keep *Tainted* in place.

Endless, *endless* blood was splattered on the old walls and the creaking wooden tiles of the floor, crimson turned black by the moonlight coming from a broken window. His boots sank

in it. A grotesque stage occupied the highest floor; to complete it, a kneeled silhouette, head hung low, legs abandoned in those heathen lakes.

“Koda,” he called, in all the wrong tones. “Koda, you need to get up.”

The man’s smile stayed untouched.

He had worn a similar look each and every time Chuuya had sat next to him, waiting his panic attacks out, muffling the loud noises and the world as much as he could — *bliss*, of its own right and its own illogic. A distant gaze; hands spasming, abrupt and with no clear rhythm.

The only difference was the corpse on his lap, smashed skull tucked safely in the croak of his elbow — marble feet trapped in bloodied fingers’ motions. Uchiyama’s dinosaur themed pants were red before and ever more so now; whatever had been used to kill him, it had left a crater in his head, a chasm Koda had yet to stop running the tip of his index all over. He smiled at his brother.

Chuuya crouched down in front of him.

A corner of his mind was pushing, was *pulling*, was lighting up in whatever color the sunset took in Suribachi City, *Yuan* — a corner of his mind asked, and he denied. He crouched down in front of the first friend he’d made after the Flags were killed, and he called: “Koda, you need to move.”

“*Shh*,” the man warned him, as courteous as always. “*Shh*, don’t wake him up. You *k-know* how hard it is to *g-g* — *put* him to, to — sleep.”

“Koda,” he insisted. “Give it to me.”

A glint or confusion warmed an imperceptible flame in his eyes. “Him.”

“It,” Chuuya repeated, reaching out, stony, undeterred — the man was a soldier, and he might just listen to a general. “Koda, that’s a corpse. Give it to me.”

He hummed. He rocked Uchiyama’s body in his arms, once, twice — dangled and lulled and stared. A mixture of brains and viscera was slowly pooling into the dinosaur shirt. “That’s not *v-very* nice, Chuuya.”

“Koda,” Sharper than someone else might have — sterner than what Madame Tanaki would have thought polite; hard enough to snap his eyes to his face. “Give your brother’s corpse to me.”

*That’s how you think about it*, he didn’t tell him — he hoped he could make him understand; wordless but *felt*, wrong but necessary. All he had left behind in the *Old World* were corpses; all the Sheep were, was corpses; all Verlaine and Rimbaud were, was corpses. Few things interested a powerful thing more than the rotten state of mortality, and what Arahabaki didn’t see — Chuuya had less chances to feel. *That’s how you remember them*.

Koda didn’t move.

His mouth parted; Chuuya recalled drunken stories from his childhood — *I hated how I talked, and so I never did; and now I talk all the time, because who cares* — waited for him to talk — was unsurprised when he didn't.

Motionless was better than fired up, he reached out, and he picked up Uchiyama's body.

Wrong move.

The feeling of his back hitting the floor was unfamiliar; the hands tightening around his throat even more — the bloodshot eyes settled on him were a stranger's hysteria, blinking tears away too fast. "Give him back," Koda growled, *whined*, not noticing or not caring of his brother's corpse falling to the ground, "Give him back," he begged, almost stuttering too hard to be understandable, "*Give him back!*" he screeched, throttling him, and —

Through the haze of suffocation, Chuuya kicked him away. He watched him land against the wall, head first — crawl forward, stare at the corpse when Chuuya leaned down to pick it up, walking backwards — away from him.

"No," Koda croaked.

"Koda," he ordered. "I'm not taking him away. Alright? He's dead. We can't hurt him. You hear me? I'm just laying him here," The back of his knees hit the ratty old couch at the end of the hallway; he laid the corpse on the pillows, stealing one of the blankets on the back to hide the mess of Uchiyama's head. There weren't enough blankets in that Orphanage to cover up everyone — not Sayari, not the bodies on the stairs. "I'm just laying it there. You can come here. But he's dead. This is a corpse."

"Chuuya," Koda said, numbly, from the floor.

"This is a corpse," he repeated, sixteen and fifteen, in an Orphanage and a bar, and Doc had no legs, and Verlaine had Lippman in his car trunk. "I'm sorry, Koda. He's dead."

Hurried steps up the stairs — Noguchi's wide eyes and Virgil's choked sob, Kenta's silence, a crowd in that bloodied hallway, a speechless circle around Koda's fallen frame. Chuuya wanted to say something; Chuuya thought knowing death so closely should have made someone more adept to it. Chuuya wanted to say something.

*It doesn't mean a thing.*

"Stay with him," he said. And he hadn't checked yet, hadn't done anything more than stare at the *Bishop Staff's* symbol painted in blood on the ceiling, the same as a piece of skin he'd seen — and yet, he *knew* — "They took Yuan."

Noguchi cursed. It grew and grew in intensity, echoing off the walls, smudging the crimson lakes. His hands were tight around Koda's shoulders; his fish tattoo was all scrunched up.

He moved. He turned the corner. He had never been invited into Yuan's room, but he found it all the same, instinct over sense, as it went.

Scraped walls, a shaky bed, a destroyed plastic desk. Chuuya's jacket had been left on the flat pillow of her bed — a makeshift case for it; starkly bright and clean among the chaos of old clothes the patrons had put aside for her. An old blue bracelet on the nightstand; an unfinished pack of noodles on the floor.

Dazai, wearing his hat, leaning his upper body out of the window.

"How inconvenient," he commented, tapping his gun on the frame. "Those fanatics took our code," He sent him a glance. "And your traitor sister, I suppose."

*Not my sister*, Chuuya thought, for the second time in a never ending night. "The code was here."

It wasn't a question, but Dazai hummed his confirmation. "The Orphanage is in our territory, and it pays a monthly fee to us. Many bastards from upper names in the Mafia were abandoned here. It's a clever place to hide something all organizations would kill to have," He tilted his head to the side. "Or. Well. It *is*, if you're like the *Daikokuten*. Longing for some brats' viscera all over your idea. I see the appeal, but not the functionality. Dead children are dead children."

Chuuya clenched his fists until he tasted the leather. "Have some fucking respect."

Dazai turned around, offering him a furrowed brow. Confused, he asked: "They're just corpses."

He didn't know what scraped down his skeleton harder; being spied on, or the knowledge that Dazai had had no reason to observe his little show. "They weren't, once."

"Relative," was his reply. "They're corpses now, so who's to say they haven't always been? Corpses who breathed. Corpses who were waiting for this day," His eyes traced the invisible; rooms Chuuya had never even been allowed to receive an ajar-door to. "I wonder if they cried, right before it happened."

*I don't think you lack morality*, he recalled, nonsensically, having told him — an infinite time ago, knees deep in the snow of the cemetery. *I think you lack the understanding of where to direct it. That's why you don't stop until someone tells you to.*

At the heart of it, that was the problem — at the heart of it, Dazai made *sense*.

Chuuya stepped forward — brushed the visions of hanging knots and train rails out of his eye; pushed the mouth of the gun he'd stolen from Dazai's hands under his chin, tilting it up.

*Look me in the eyes*, Iceman had warned him. *No one deserves your gaze more than the dying, and than your enemies.* *Longing*, the thing in his gaze. The Demon Prodigy would never be distracted in front of a threat. The Demon Prodigy would only die when he thought so fit.

*Longing.*

Realization struck him like lightning.

“You knew this would happen.”

“I suspected it,” Dazai corrected, swiftly, no hesitation. “The codes being located near the main organizations was a rational hypothesis even before you confirmed it; the place itself mostly remained an incognita. Between here and the *Under Port*, I thought. But, then again —” He blinked, slow and wide. “The *Bishop’s Staff* had two fish to catch, and I bet the *Daikokuten’s* men knew. The Orphanage just made sense.”

Pulsing underneath — dragging him by the wrists, by the stitches he did not remember removing; choking him whenever the world tilted on its axis. Chuuya was always angry. Chuuya had never been more angry than he was now; and he would be angrier tomorrow, and the day after it, and the day he died for it, with it — *because* of it.

“We were at the Hospital,” he spelled out, tortuous and sharp between his teeth, “For *hours*.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Dazai said, flippantly. “If I had told you, we would have never known whether the code was here or not. We have no way of figuring out *how* it’s hidden — it’s much easier to have somebody else understand it, and steal it from them. You would have ran here and alerted them, killing the *Staff*, too,” He snapped his tongue against his palate, dragging it across the metal braces on his teeth. *A child who kills children*, Minami had called him.

“To have been the first to figure out where the codes were, it means they have people who know more than we do. Specifically, *how* to find the code. Information *I* will personally rip out of those masks of theirs. And, well,” He shrugged. “You’re not very good at taking prisoners. You have a thing for leaving bodies behind.”

“They’re not even *here*!” Chuuya snarled, uncaring of how loud his voice echoed against those grieving walls. “You didn’t gain *shit*. I could have told the kids to escape —”

“I didn’t know the *Staff* would go straight for massacre. They could have left them alone. I doubt some noisy children would have stopped them from finding the codes — but they *would* have been suspicious, if they hadn’t found anyone —”

“*Fuck* that, as if *you* —” Favoritism made no sense. Chuuya would have alerted them all — he couldn’t have saved a few and damned the others. And yet — “Yuan and Koda —”

“I’m sorry about his brother,” Dazai said, unconcerned and deeply sincere. “It’s a shame he got caught in the crossfire. But the codes aren’t just left around. The *Daikokuten* was an Ability User. This is the confirmation we needed that the *Bishop’s Staff* knows how to recover them.”

Chuuya stared.

At the heart of it, that was the problem — at the heart of it, Dazai made *sense*.

But that wasn’t the problem, he knew. It was simply the facts. The problem was Chuuya himself — and whatever meaning someone would some day give to the understanding he couldn’t help but feel for the worst person he knew. *Deep down*, he’d sworn, *you and I are*



*the same. Just don't kill the kids, he reminded himself. Just don't kill the kids. Just don't kill the kids.*

*You're a child who kills children, Agent Minami had said. That can't feel good, can it?*

Chuuya pushed him off, watching him stumble. He wondered what it felt like — jumping down and not worrying about calculating the landing. He wondered if the glass shards he had stuck on him at the *Gentleman's Bar* had scarred; if Dazai had ever figured out that Chuuya feared wounding him beyond either of their salvations. Wondered whether even an inch of Dazai cared about his anger; if he witnessed it with the same blankness he gave to everything that did not resemble his own carcass.

*I want him dead, he thought.*

Not every day, but every instant. Chuuya wanted to bite his blood until he found something real — wanted him to *hurt* because of it, the way humans did. He had wanted him dead from the first moment he'd made him bleed. The dead did not give a shit, and Dazai existed for the Port Mafia, and the Port Mafia existed for him.

*I will kill you myself, he decided, then and there, in the devastated roads of his brother's wake — in the rubbles of Suribachi City — between the Sheep's whispers about intruders on the border. No one but me.*

“Go die,” Chuuya concluded. Hirotsu and Kouyou and all of them — there was no time. “And then do the one thing you're useful for.”

Hilarity pulled the sides of Dazai's face atrociously. “Being?”

He stuck his chin up. “Give me a plan.”

Something a bit more honest darkened his sole eye.

From the open door, Koda's screams floated inside, glass shards on paper — vocal chords wasted on those who would not return. *That is a corpse, he reminded himself. These are all corpses. You're not. You don't get to.*

“The hag got what she wanted,” Endlessly calm, Chuuya set his eyes on the pink cellphone buried underneath the debris of Yuan's fallen desk. “War is on. We're destroying the *Four Moons*.”

agent minami: we have files on arahabaki with your face on it. we have literal videos of you walking on walls upside down

chuuya, playing the long game: that's not me i don't have a face

Daikokuten: a syncretic Japanese deity of fortune and wealth.

hey there guys! hope you're having a good day, and thank for you reading! we're nearing the end of the second arc, and we're finally entering the Dragon Head Conflict era! which means we're nearing cool things as the Double Black era, some initial resolution to the executive position challenge, and some more stuff that i can't wait to show you!

one thing i spent a lot of time on on this chapter was that last bit with chuuya and koda. i'm always very curious about the way chuuya seems to deal with grief in canon — a constant moving on, without ever lingering on how it makes him feel. he compartmentalizes by fixing the situation to the best of his abilities (hence, immediately joining adam to defeat verlaine before the flags' funeral was even over). to him, i feel, it's more about what can be done after a person is already done for. that's why he's trying to put koda on a "that's a dead body you're holding" mentality; he doesn't want to risk him to get trapped in a cycle chuuya himself has never let himself feel.

i've taken a bad habit of posting these chapters right before i have to do something really urgent, which means i'm gonna post this and run immediately. as always, thank you so so so much for the love on the last few chapters, and thank you so much for every kudos and every comment you'll want to give this one! i hope you have a wonderful day, stay warm!

see you <33

# LIKE

## Chapter Summary

*There was a rusty basketball hoop on one end of the abandoned gym.*

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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## *chapter xix.*

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There was a rusty basketball hoop on one end of the abandoned gym.

“You suck at this,” Chuuya informed, as he jumped bored circles around the shaking man. The seat they had tied him up on was covered in pencil scribbles; it was the only surviving furniture at the dead center of that too wide room. His name was the only information Dazai hadn’t yet managed to obtain.

“Look at this,” the boy insisted. Clothes stained in crimson, he clumsily ran across the moonlight painting the floor from the shattered windows, for the seventh time — and threw the ball.

It bounced off the square, landing almost close enough to smack his forehead.

“Great job,” Chuuya complimented, sour.

He had spent the summer slipping down the stone stairs of the dungeons, bothering Kouyou about problems she couldn't resolve and offering his own solutions — *good ones*, she would tell him. *A little too good to deserve such oxymoronic judgements* — but most sports weren't quite his thing.

On the seat, the man cried out like a child.

“Referring to you as *The Fanatic* is not particularly flattering,” Chuuya mused, scratching his head with the gun Dazai had thrown at him before venturing off. “What have you got to lose?”

“Face, probably,” the boy replied, making his way to them, proud. His chest and upper arms were a slaughtered victim; blood dripping from his nails and dirtying his bandages.

“*T-Told* — “ Coagulations of blood dripped from the man's chin, landing on his tunic in a mixture of red, drool and vomit. “Told — *everything*, told, *please* , I —“

“Yes, yes,” Dazai confirmed, hurriedly. “We have established that. Your name would be a nice conclusion to this miserable pantomime, though.”

“*Please*, please, *please please please* —“

Humming, he pulled the man's broken fingers, an unenviable copy to Madame Tanaki's efforts to crack her knuckles in the morning. The man *shrieked*; experimentally, pale hands pressed right where the bone had shattered.

“Didn't he say he's from Okinawa?” Chuuya spoke up, once the perpetual screams started grating on his nerves. His cigarette was halfway done, similarly to the endless reports from his squad he was still boredly skimming through. “If he's not *Sachiko* , he's *Fumiko*. If he's not either, it's still irrelevant,” He paused. “Aren't pantomimes the plays where no one talks?”

“Irony flies right over your tiny head once again.”

“Can you hurry up and kill him?”

The bundle of black eyes and bleeding cuts snapped his attention to him, betrayed. “You — You *said* —“

“*Masako* is a strong contender, as well,” Dazai commented. “Did you know,” he drawled, spinning once, “That Hirose Fumiko is originally from the Okinawa Prefecture?”

“She's actually not.”

“Bet you three rounds at *Motor Race* she is,” he replied, like Chuuya hadn't been avoiding him whenever work wasn't inescapable. *Bet you the skin of your teeth*, he couldn't say, because Mori would execute them both if they dared to start another fight in the middle of that mess.

“Bet you Kazuko's next rat she's *not*. ”

He licked blood off his fingers, salts on chips and little table manners. He hadn't slept in two days, Chuuya knew — neither of them had touched a crumb of food since the bread they'd stolen from a street the *KK Company* had bombed. Deaf to the prayers the prisoner kept directing to him, Dazai tapped the heel of his shoe against one of the legs of his chair, pensive.

"Now that I think about it," he concluded, stretching on the ball of his feet. "I don't think you've been quite clear about *where* we'll be able to find your syndicates' codes."

Midnight had barely ticked the metal clock at the edge of Yamashita Park when they left, abandoning the man in a puddle of his own gravity-imploded brains. Gasoline they had strategically placed all around the city was added to the puddles inside the gym; Hirotsu's lucky lighter number five was thrown.

Then they stood, watching the first flames embrace the old box.

Chuuya's cigarette was stolen from his hands, caged by withered lips he'd shattered himself after a particularly nasty disagreement. Their shoes left matching scarlet footprints on the concrete. Silent and empty roads welcomed them; the News were still cautious to define the latest underworld conflict an emergency, but Yokohama wasn't blind enough not to recognize the taste of the storm.

One or two attacks involving civilians could be justified; Chuuya knew they wouldn't know what to do with the blood readying to accompany falling leaves — *impending*; breathing down the city's neck. Doom was already there; it was simply satisfied with the alleys, for now.

"Kingstain," Dazai said, boredly.

He hadn't needed to be told, and he made sure to let him know. Raising his hand to the right, Chuuya closed a fist around a rifle's quick-sequence bullets, clenching the other one around the boy's tie — *choking him*, he hoped, as he pulled him down, away from the next round. He threw his loot in the air — kicked it to the window of the skyscraper at the end of the street.

"You can take care of the rest on your own," Dazai announced, ages later, tapping away on his phone. The side of his shoe tapped against his own. "Do your best to crash that tacky motorcycle of yours into a wall."

"Jump off a bridge and land on wet concrete," Chuuya replied, ripping the burned out cigarette from his lips. He stepped on it; left.

Cautiousness suited Yokohama in the way of autumn. The fogged up windows were a crime scene; the freedom of roaming through abandoned streets with his bike was a breath of beauty — driving up walls and down unpaved roads; *flying*, when he got bored enough — and the *all-but-gentleness* he showed to a dead man's last action of giving.

*Why the clothes from your funeral?*, Mori had asked him, somewhat too deep in his war mentality to muster up a grin. Along with the beginning of September, the heat had left his

ice skin once and for all, and he'd resolved to change his clothes again. *I sincerely hope you're not intending to die just now, Chuuya.*

*His or theirs*, as Arahabaki might have mustered up. Blood tasted all the same.

A stolen vehicle was parked near the main entrance of the Church. To its credit, it didn't bear any faults or telltales — except for the fact that only one person Chuuya knew would have picked a '67 *Chevrolet* to hot-wire in the middle of the night.

"Did you get it?" Noguchi asked, as soon as he entered his visual field. Chuuya felt no need to squat behind the car with him, having already located every single sniper the *Bishop's Staff* had placed in the heart of their territory. "Is she okay? The codes —"

"The answer's the same," he grunted, squinting at the ajar doors of the Church. None of the snipers was moving a finger. "We need to get in."

It was an astonishingly — suspicious to the point of bizzarity — *easy* feat.

The Church was as empty and dark as it had been on his first visit — men in the traditional white-and-gray tunics littered the road outside, but not one of them was standing guard in front of the doors, or between the vacant pews upon the stained-windows-painted floor. Silver masks kept their lifeless eyes on him — but never raised their hands to stop their stride to the building.

At the dead center of the altar was a wooden seat, with dried blood on its legs and shackles wrapped all around it. On the seat, in the muddy snow dress of the ghost she was, was Yuan.

"Leave," she stuttered, the moment she saw them. Trails of red and blue had turned her round face into a canva. The glint in her eyes was defiant; no tears down her cheeks. "Leave, *leave*, you can't —"

"Shut the fuck up, kid," Noguchi snapped. He was already halfway down the aisle when she screamed, again: "*I can't give them to you!*"

"Who *cares* about the codes, just let me —"

Yuan kept protesting, kicking when he got too close. Yuan kept her eyes on him.

Along to rumble down his spine, Chuuya breathed.

On the far left corner of the Church, the green dot of light from a camera blinked at him, mocking. There were no guards inside; there was no need for them. There was no need to take either of them down — they *wanted* them to see. They had regained their lost prisoner, and instead of sticking her in one of their beds again, they'd put her on display and caged her — cheap handcuffs; the kind she knew how to escape in less than a blink. No fear that they might leave that site with a prize, because —

"Noguchi," Chuuya called. "Step away from her."

The man turned a stupefied look to him, hands halfway to the chains around her wrists.  
“What?”

“Chuuya,” Her voice was a prayer. She knew he’d understood; she knew he hadn’t come to save her. “Chuuya, I’m sorry, they —“

*[“Your girl has the codes,” the prisoner said, between his shattered bones and the bandages mocking his bleeding flesh. “The Bishop’s Staff’s — and the Port Mafia’s”].*

“Noguchi,” he echoed. “Step away from her.” Somewhere behind the camera, a hand moved away from the trigger. “She has bombs strapped on.”

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***Encrypted SDUP Line:***

***Requesting Access: D0156, S. A.***

***On the matter of the “Dragon Head Conflict”***

*To the righteous Commander Santoka,*

*It would appear that, at last, **A0000** and **A5158** managed to do what our intelligence was unable to. The answer to our ‘how and where’ questions laid in the Bishop’s Staff, specifically in whom they have referred to as **Prisoner 117** — a girl from the now disbanded Sheep, who **A5158** has been secretly harboring in the last month and a half. Information on the Daikokuten and her Ability was researched tirelessly by our men; **A0000** came to the right conclusions about this whole ordeal in astonishingly little time. As my previous reports have stated, he is someone we might need to keep a closer eye on than even **A5158**. Luckily, I had a somewhat — fateful encounter, with both him and **B3234**. I will disclose more on who I have decided to refer to as, “**The Friends**”, in my next report.*

**“Uchide No Kozuki”**, the woman’s Ability, is described in our files as “the Ability to hide a secret inside a person, so that no one but them will remember what they have been told.” We have spent the last few weeks trying to understand how such an Ability

*might have helped her spread the five codes to her fortune; our conclusion is: it wasn't just her.*

*With the help of one of her closest men, an Ability User himself, she managed to locate what the Bishop's Staff's member **A0000** and **A5158** tortured called "people of interest". This man's Ability allows him to study a subject's mind and find those who make up, as said, a point of interest for them. As we know, the Daikokuten organized her game until the last moments of her life; the young shadows of the Port Mafia seem to believe this User noticed a shared person of interest between **A5158** and the Leader of the Bishop's Staff — **Prisoner 117** and took advantage of it.*

*According to **A5158**'s reports, the girl — **Yuan**; no traceable lineage or Abilities — is being held captive in the Bishop's Staff's base, strapped to several bombs ready to blow both her and any knowledge of the codes up, should the Port Mafia or any other organization so much as dare trying to free her. Thei Bishop's Staff's confidence worries me; more-so, because the Port Mafia will not react to it in kind.*

*The stalemate will be all but peaceful. I can hardly predict what battlefield they will choose to fight on, now that the codes are unavailable; I can presume they will both turn their attention to the missing codes, as of now. Takasekai have already obtained their own; their person of interest, as **A0000** reported, is no one less than their own leader.*

*[...]*

*You might have noticed my choice to refer to this upcoming war as "the **Dragon Head Conflict**". I did not do so out of any poetic sense. According to **A0000** and **A5158**, this is the mark the Daikokuten's Ability leaves on those who receive her "secrets" — a dragon-head shaped scar. One thing is for sure: war has come, and we cannot stop it. All we can do is sit back and observe.*

*My greatest worry, as of now, is **A5158**. With the help of **A0000**, I fear they might —*

*[...]*

*In hopes of better times,*

*Sakaguchi Ango.*



## 86 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

*Abilities exist, and that's that.*

No one had ever felt the need to offer reconfirmation on the structure of the world. The before was the before — a time when Chuuya had roamed through the debris and the side effects of his own being, and he had assumed everyone could fly.

*The existence of difference does not equal a debacle, Mori had explained, once, studying the hems of new clothes for Elise. Difference simply is. We live with it, and we breathe with it, and we'll die with it.*

“This is how we win,” the former doctor said. “By having what they do not.”

The oldest story in the Port Mafia ended in obvious conclusions: Abilities flourished in the syndicate because they were unquestioned, and the syndicate flourished because its enemies hadn't been smart enough to nurture the most venomous souls the world had to offer.

Nonetheless.

In an unrestrained war against stubborn men and never ending metal, Abilities were an advantage and a crimson brush — but not an end to the sentence.

“It's hard to stop, once you begin,” the Colonel offered, silver platter for dripping viscera. He joined him in the eye of the hurricane, ruined shoes sinking in the blood racing to the sewer grates at the end of the street. “Finding a reason to becomes an uninteresting feat.”

Wherever he turned was a corpse. He played pick and choose — kept his eyes on the closest of them, hanging from the roof of a car with dislocated arms and imploded eye sockets. His cellphone had been ringing non-stop ever since Chuuya had stepped in.

*More*, the other living thing in his ribcage encouraged, rarely left unsatisfied, growing spoiled in those days of caresty in all but blood. *More of it.*

“It's just easy,” Chuuya replied.

He snapped his fingers to direct Virgil and Rin to the cargo of weapons bearing the *Shadow Blade* logo. Their *person of interest* was one of their most high-level merchants, according to the voices; the plan was to shoot in the dark until they found him. Any other plan had the same premise.

“Bloodthirst?” the Colonel asked.

*What a wasted word*, he thought, and didn't say. Philosophy belonged to different times; to moments in a library of books he would pretend he wasn't interested in. *What a wasted word, when they don't know a thing of it.*

“Killing,” Chuuya corrected. He sent a quick glance to the man. “Talent ain’t a matter of eagerness for violence. People do what they’re good at.”

He hummed. “Do you believe yourself talented?”

“Did you believe yourself a good soldier?”

“Not by choice.”

“And a mafioso?”

“Oh,” The Colonel nudged a dead woman’s head with his foot, studying her lacks — judgemental before any creature in the afterlife had a chance to. “Wasting all that bloodthirst seemed like a bad deal.”

Some alleys away, where the flesh wouldn’t be smelled, police sirens shattered the silence. Yokohama and its underworld had lost all modesty once the News had begun to show off their filth to cautious civilians — but being caught red handed still went against the Port Mafia’s code.

Chuuya barked out orders to the suited silhouettes he had stunningly witnessed orbiting around him after Kouyou’s temporary departure. He didn’t wonder about the Colonel’s sudden interest. He let him observe the wounds gravity could leave on a body — let him trace the sound of his instructions; let him stand next to him when he abandoned a man’s open jaw on the curb and kicked.

“I have received reports about a User,” the Colonel spoke up. “He attacks with preciseness; because of his Ability, he prefers to haunt the aftermaths of tragedies.”

Chuuya frowned. “What’s his Ability?”

“He reopens every wound whoever he touches has ever been inflicted. Every scar, every cut, every bullet hole — all of it, all at the same time,” the Colonel murmured. Chuuya, very calmly, pretended not to pause. *The Wound Reaper from the Division*. “It’s certainly vicious. I just came back from the Port. We lost the 37th battalion because of him.”

*How did he escape?*, he wondered. Then, stilling — *Why would they let him out?*

“But the 37th wasn’t at the Port.”

“No,” the Colonel confirmed. “Which means there’s *at least two* powerful User we need to worry about. I have yet to receive warnings about others.”

His frame was endless; Chuuya recalled meeting him for the first time, neck tingling with stretch and irritation, unwilling to tilt to meet his eyes for the sake of studying his raw disapproval.

*Was that all he needed to do?*, he wondered. Had flooding the streets with blood been enough to chain Noguchi to his graces — had allowing *Tainted* to roam freely through the embers been enough to get the Executive to offer him respect?

*You're late, he didn't say. I have killed before I knew how.*

“Abilities will win this war, Nakahara,” he said, eventually, *pointedly*. “And Abilities will lose it.”

The oldest story in the Sheep went like this:

A child was powerful. Before he was that, though, he was treacherous in nature — and thus, made for distrust and tight embraces. Only few certainties made him; unfortunately, the ones the child believed and the ones his cellmates believed did not match. The child would not have ran, embrace or not embrace; the child would have won.

All of it.

*(The Flags had no stories, because there was no time for origins from something so short-lived. The oldest story in the Flags went like this: there was a boy, and he never allowed any stories to be written).*

“No need to worry,” Chuuya concluded, always a keen listener. “*People* will win you this war. I’m sure the blood will still be plenty.”

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## **85 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The oldest story went:

People started wars they could not end, and people fought until *something* — more endless than they would ever be — got bored of it all.

War came the way all did: ungentle and bright.

Whatever order might have sneaked through the weeks of the *Nine Rings' Conflict*, it refused to grace the streets of Yokohama once again. Attacks came sporadically, either right at the borders of the territory, or in distinctively public areas, uncaring of the number of citizens involved in the massacres — highways at night, interior parking lots in the afternoon, parks and lowly apartment complexes in the middle of the day; whatever place might distract a syndicate long enough to sneak through their land and search for their *people of interest*.

“Our first target is *Takasekai*,” Mori explained, to the Colonel and Ace — to Chuuya and Dazai, half behind a column, half too wired up to pretend they weren’t listening. “The *Bishop’s Staff* is holding both our and their codes hostage; we will take care of them once we’ve gained the remaining three codes.”

“Our first target is the *Shadow Blade*,” he overheard Dazai tell his *Secret Force*, seemingly uncaring of whether the shootout between the *Black Widow* and the *Hounds* would end up taking him out, too. “But let no one know.”

Consequently, Chuuya stood in front of Kouyou’s subordinates and said: “Our first target is the *KK Company*.”

Unclear as the lines of the conflict were, murmurs spoke louder than any bomb left in the generals’ cars; as open fire as that war was, none of the organizations had any intention of braving the Port Mafia alone. Smaller syndicates united temporarily to march against the *Four Moons*; the *Four Moons* wasted more bullets than even the depths of the bay had ever seen between each other. The Port Mafia stood, waited, and pointed weapons on every single one of them.

Chuuya had never felt more alive.

*It would have made Detective Murase frown*, he thought.

Perhaps he’d been waiting for it. Death was not a welcomed friend; but conflict kept him alive. Perhaps he’d been chained up too tight on his own bones, stuck with a *being* who was not allowed to scream.

*Whoever you fire against*, the voices said, *never fire against gods*.

But there was only one, and the entire city was waiting to see him bleed.

The *Four Moons* had witnessed his return with hesitant looks and clenched weapons; the startlement he’d caused by activating *Tainted* in front of their confident steps had almost healed all frustration from the weeks at the *Special Division Headquarters*. An entire wing of men had been annihilated with the ease of crooking fingers, too busy pointing their weapons to Dazai, uncaring of the boy whose Ability they hadn’t seen.

“Good job,” Mori said.

Anonymity was mostly lost; Chuuya was too recognizable. And so the voices followed; *whoever you fire against*, *never fire against him*.

*More*, Arahaki replied, simply. *More*.

*Yes*, he thought. Transactionality and divine understanding — no reason not to tie their existences together by the neck, when the race would bring enough blood for both of them. *Yes, all of it*.

And so he moved.

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## **81 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The Hospital was drowned in flames on the coldest day of the new season.

In response to it, an Infirmary was set up in the middle floor of *Building One*, and filled with wide eyed doctors and nurses whose features slowly began to fall, the more bodies crossed the doorframe.

*[In response to it, Chuuya and one of Ace's squad were tasked with rolling Kajii's bombs down the path of the Takasekai's territory, until the sky lit up in unlikely fireworks and scarlet raindrops. It brought some of their men to the Infirmary; a good first day test.*

*"A happy ending, dare I say," Mori concluded, either joking or not.]*

"I could call this a macabre show," Tsuchiya commented, her sole eye running up and down the never ending rows of stolen medical beds. Symphonies filled the silence; coughs and shrieks and the wet squelch of viscera being put aside and sewn up. "But it just smells like shit."

She'd ended up in several physical altercations in the last few days — mafiosi who refused to be helped by her; mafiosi who joined in with the fun for no particular reason. They never dared when Chuuya was around, but she did her best to steer away — unwilling to accept protection.

"If they wanna fight, I'll fight every last one of them," she told him. True to her promise, whenever the squad wasn't fighting, she wore the sterilized clothing of the medical help. "They won't receive any regret from me."

Grunting more than admiration would have been a dead giveaway — so he didn't.

Familiar faces laid everywhere he turned. Chuuya hadn't even quite realized he knew so many people in the organization; had underestimated, perhaps, just how many of those people could recognize him with a glance. Murmurs were both fearful and just a bit stunned; as if they couldn't wrap their heads around the almost daily visits he paid to the Infirmary.

Arahabaki detested the tradition. Death was an attractive concept to him, in theory — this specific brand of decay was too human for his nonexistent taste, though. Chuuya had taken to lingering longer, stubbornly.

“It makes them feel important,” Hirotsu explained, one day, after a wounded man had almost shattered his progress to offer Chuuya a bow. “That someone of your rank would come to visit them — it means they’re necessary.”

“It means they’re people with holes in their chests,” Chuuya replied, playing with bullets he had stolen from a shooting in Virgil’s direction. Kouyou would have lamented his bad manners. *Make them look at you*, she’d said, once. *Make them look just long enough to see you. Once they do — they will line up to lit up your cigarettes.*

*Little god.*

Thirst was a flamed road up his throat — hunger such an insisting bother he might even forgive the blood squeezed in his every meal. “Besides,” he said, “I prefer coming here, than to the warehouse.”

Body bags gave him no particular feelings. A deaf rumble down his spine, maybe. Disappointment. *It wouldn’t have happened if you’d been there.* It had happened all the same. Corpses were corpses; the best Chuuya could do was remember their name.

And so he did.

The Infirmary was suffocating, in smells and sounds and blood — but at least it was *alive*.

“Are the *Black Lizards* doing as I asked?”

“Obeying me?” Chuuya replied. A frankly unsettling number of cables was connected to the old man’s body; with no monocle and an unshaved face, it was hard to look him in the eyes. Risk was all that was keeping him hooked to a more private area of the Infirmary; Hirotsu didn’t appreciate the concept. “Somewhat.”

It had been easier than he’d expected it to. The old man was probably to thank; whatever he’d told his seconds in command, it had made the deadliest squadron of the Mafia more or less pliant. The *Black Lizards* were sharply organized and well used to their own tactics; all Chuuya had to do was give them direction, and they would probably obey with little complaint.

Unlike the subordinates he and Dazai had had to deal with during the *Nine Rings Conflict*, the *Black Lizards* seemed to understand the danger they were facing. In its name, they were willing to forgive personal dislikes — jealousy, distrust, and whatever other brand of bleeding humanity had painted a target on his back in the last year.

“It’s been interesting enough,” Chuuya added, curling the IV through his fingers. “You’ve trained them well. Another squadron would have fallen apart as soon as you were out of the scene.”

Hirotsu sighed. “Perhaps it is time I pick two new commanders — as the *Lizards* were always meant to have. We wouldn’t be in this mess, if I...”

A coughing fit interrupted him; Chuuya watched him shake through it, unsure of how to help — uncomfortable with the pang of franticness rattling his fingers.

Once the risk had been pushed to the side, he closed his eyes, sighing. “There’s a reason the *Black Lizards* were built as they were. Finding the right people will take much effort and much training, but it’s time I do what’s right. I have been — selfishly attached to my own grief.”

Chuuya stared at the floor.

“How,” He cleared his throat, looking into nothing. “How are you?”

Hirotsu barely suffocated his amusement. “Quite alright, Chuuya.”

And yet —

“Should we begin the journey to the *Under Port*, sir?” the woman asked, nodding towards the body bags on the floor. It was only half a wonder how the warehouse had not been attacked yet — Dazai had been cautious enough to build a wall of guards all around it, while leaking fake information on its whereabouts.

He nudged a tag from the nearest bag. Through blood stains, he read, *Tsu* — and nothing else. “They will attack the vans if we do it now.”

“I understand,” she replied, after some awkward moments of silence. “But we can’t let them rot here. The police can’t be alerted.”

Chuuya pulled the chain of his hat, removed the moment the doors had been opened for him. “The police isn’t stupid enough to get involved.”

“And when we don’t have any space left?”

He bit the inside of his cheek. “Then we start cremating them here, and sending the remains to the *Under Port*.”

Astonishment widened her eyes. It didn’t last long — somebody from the entrance screamed her name, dragging a new hoard of body bags along the filthy floor. Understanding dawned on her with slight panic; as she ran to the doors, he saw her crouch down next to one of the bags, caressing a cheek she couldn’t see.

There had been a subordinate, once. One of Pianoman’s. He had died at his feet, hit by a stray bullet none of them had been quick enough to see, right as the mission was over. A single night had been spent drinking, as Pianoman murmured and counted fake bills and ripped apart new ones — either blind to or uncaring of Chuuya’s presence.

At one point, he’d paused. *Let’s go*, Pianoman had told him, before dragging him to the house of that dead man’s family. They had sat together as his parents cried in their wrinkled hands; Pianoman had given them the bullet that had killed their son. Chuuya had watched him pray, quietly and unreligiously. The next day, without a word or a blink, a new subordinate had been put in the empty place.

*The dead already have so many bothers, his friend had told him. Why keep them caged in a world they don't belong to anymore?*

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### **78 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

He couldn't get the blood under his nails off.

It grated some hidden nerve of his, something well shielded by more pressing matters and less sensitive flesh. Suribachi had been filthy all the way to its nervous system, and Chuuya had always been dirty to the bone. Privilege had rounded his edges; these days, he cringed at the feeling.

Hyper-aware of every brush of his gloves against his fingertips, he stuck himself in the communal bathrooms and, perhaps improperly — punched the mirror until there was too much red to differentiate.

“There's no need to be rash,” Madame Tanaki told him, forceful and gentle all in one, bandaging his knuckles and fixing her revolver in the neckline of her dress. “There are many much guiltier than glass.”

*There were many he enjoyed killing much more, he didn't tell her.*

Body bags began to crowd the entrance halls too, and the one warehouse they had specifically turned into a wait-in-line for the *Under Port*. Chuuya slalomed through them with a grace even Kouyou would have praised; then he undid all of Tanaki's bandaging work against one or two foolish brats from the *KK Company*, who had thought jumping him in the middle of the day would have been a good idea.

“Their *person of interest* is an Ability User,” Virgil explained, hiding behind an unstable-looking column at the edge of the underground parking lot. “You need to get me his name, and then he's done for. Smaller groups have been tailing him for days now. We still haven't managed to see him *leave* that car. Their protection technique has just been — driving in circles, hiding in plain sight. The civilian massacre near the Precinct happened in an attempt to snipe him.”

“All this bullshit,” Chuuya summed up, perched on the ceiling like a bat, “For one son of a bitch inside a second hand Lexus?”



“Sir.”

He snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth, tasting the metallic leftovers of the bread Tanaki had slapped into his mouth. “We need him alive for that secret, don’t we?” he dared, fishing the last cigarette out.

Virgil made a face. “Yes, sir,” A pause. “You know, I don’t know if ten cigs a day is a good deal for a teenager.”

“That’s a nice life lesson. You should put it in your book,” Distractedly, he searched for the cameras throughout the parking lot — counting along to the open-and-shut rhythm of Hirotsu’s stolen lucky lighter number seven. “When are you going to tell me what it’s about, anyway? Gotta be good, to get you out of the Mafia.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” the man hissed. Whether the idea of betraying Kouyou’s trust or the fear of consequences lowered his voice to a whisper — it didn’t really matter. “Kenta’s remarks are already enough stress for a lifetime.”

“Oh, yes,” Chuuya recalled each of them with vivid clarity. Then, in a surge of spontaneity: “When are you going to put the bastard out of his misery, by the way?”

Virgil flinched so violently his rifle danced up and down his hands. Something about the genuine startlement on his features made him snort. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“He’s very *sweet*, yes, but —“

“He’s not a religious freak with world domination purposes, under the mental enslavement of a lady psycho,” Chuuya agreed. “That’s definitely a step forward.”

Virgil’s lips trembled. A feat in itself; only a few months ago, trying to imagine *hilarity* as the first reaction the man would get upon being reminded of Dante’s fleeting, scarring existence would have been delusional.

“I mean. We haven’t discussed *religious beliefs* yet,” A huff. “Which is curious, considering the man is going around boasting proposals as soon as he gets Sake down his throat.”

Something settled — in his chest, in his lungs, in his throat. Kicks and snickers, whispers and accusating eyes; names spat in the grimmest streets of the things Chuuya held tightly to his chest, not quite *ashamed*, not quite *bothered*, because who the fuck *cared* what anyone said, just — mindful of survival, in the way everyone in the Suribachi was. Too busy for that stuff. Too busy to linger. Too smart to dare.

But there were no names in that parking lot. Yokohama was a fighting ring, these days — Virgil and Kenta might even get away with doing one of their drunken slow dances in the middle of the square.

“Pretty sure he told Noguchi to go eat God’s ass just a few weeks ago,” he reassured him. “You’re probably alright. Just make sure to put my name before his in the book’s dedications.”

*Again*, what is it about?”

Shoulders against the column, Virgil said, secretly — with all the shamelessness of someone who had been given an out: “It’s about war. Well. Not exactly. It’s about this one man, but not *just him*, whose city is burned to the ground —“

Tired tires — *outrageously* stained in blood, on a second look — rolled down the descent to the garage. As one, every mafioso perched behind the rows of vehicles straightened, preparing their rifles. Chuuya tucked his cigarette behind his ear, relishing in the burning edges tickling his eyelashes, and extracted his gun.

“Ain’t that familiar,” he concluded, undeterred, striding across the ceiling towards the one car making its way inside. “Give me five.”

Whether the car had noticed him or not, it was a lucky guess. To make up for that lack, he pointed his gun to the floor and shot in quick succession, waiting for the bullets to ricochet in his waiting palm. He brought his arm back — mindful of Albatross’ chirps, complimenting his *natural talent* for pool — and glowed scarlet as he moved closer and closer to the vehicle.

He threw the projectiles, and didn’t wait to watch them destroy the windshield. The car wheels screeched, perforated, too, as the vehicle drew circles on the ground and came to a stop upon shattered glass shards. Chuuya jumped down, walking unhurried steps to the target, lips tight around the dying cigarette.

“*Please* ,” the man who had stumbled out of the backseats stuttered, holding onto the roof of the car, reaching out with a pacifying hand. “Please, please, I’m *not* —“

Chuuya sunk the last bullet between his eyes, smashing his boot against the car door — keeping the driver from taking advantage of the distraction to run. Virgil’s snap was a distant warning in his in-ear; *we need him alive*—

Through the held-in breaths of their hidden audience, he sneaked his hand inside the car window, wrapping it around the driver’s throat.

“Smart enough, I’ll give it to you,” he said, plucking the cigarette from his lips with his free hand, staring forward. “Also, the oldest trick in the book. Now your actor is dead, and you’re here. Was the pay *that* good, *Mr. Taxi Driver*?”

The Hirose Fumiko quote was for his entertainment; the gasps of understanding in his in-ears were for whatever part of him *enjoyed* being recognized as more than the brawn. Choked attempts to breathe trembled under his gloved palm; the *KK Company’s person of interest* shook his head, uselessly clawing at his grip. “*Not — not — him, not him* —“

“You’re not him?” He hummed. “Let’s check.”

He smashed his front on the steering wheel, paying little attention to the cries coming out of his mouth. Ripping the back of his suit apart was easy — as soon as he was met with the

bright lines of the dragon tattoos signaling the Daikokuten's Ability, he pushed the man back into the seat.

"You owe me a beer," Chuuya shrugged. "What's your Ability, *Mr. Taxi Driver*? Something useless, clearly, since you're not using it. I'm gonna need the name."

Protests came wet and small, insisting against the deadly embrace of his fingers around his throat, pooling down his nose with the snot and the blood from the fracture.

With a sigh, Chuuya tightened his grip, pulling the man out of the vehicle.

"A *name*," he echoed, forcing him to kneel. For good measure, he put his cigarette out on the User's forehead; without waiting for his screams to subdue, he added: "And then you get to get cozy in the Port Mafia's dungeons, with this Mackerel of mine. You'll like him. He's a fucking idiot, just like you."

Some more whining; some more denying. A distinctive movement of his jaw caught his attention; lightning quick, Chuuya's hand climbed up his throat, clenching like a vice around the man's chin. He sunk his fingers until he broke the skin of his cheek apart. There, through the blood and the drool and the devilish shrieks, he extracted the suicide pill he had been about to bite down.

"Nasty," he commented, upon the screams. "Don't tell me *that's* your Ability. You must have done billions in the pharmaceutical industry, *ah?*"

It took little more for a name to be given; barely a blink for Virgil's Ability to activate, rendering the *KK Company's person of interest* into little more than a delirious, powerless puppet. The men behind the cars were tasked with cleaning up — staring at Chuuya with *something* in his eyes.

"Bring him to the HQs," he ordered, still. "But keep your heads up. *Takasekai* is planning a main street rampage."

Their nods were hurried; excitement was clear in their careful motions, as they handled the first place of the puzzle the war had been set ablaze by. Virgil left with them, clenching a hand around his shoulder. Distantly — uncaring of subtlety or willing to risk it all, as they disappeared in the black SUVs of the Mafia — he heard them talk.

They always did talk.

"One, five," he spoke, out loud, for himself only. Watching the cars line up towards the exit, he removed his gloves. He bit at his nails, once, twice. Raised his head — stared into the closest security camera. Offered a middle finger.

With clear tempism, mocking the blood he couldn't bite off, the bomb in the *KK Company's* car trunk beeped 00:00, exploding.

## 74 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“Heard you got yourself blown up,” was the first thing Dazai told him. He didn’t even turn; the moaning mess of blood and raw skin hanging upside down in front of him was his only concern. “Mori is *delighted* with our latest *Takasekai* conquest, which I will never forgive you for.”

Chuuya scoffed.

As of late, the dungeons were busier than ever — enough to mold the uneven stairs even further. Kouyou’s absence had barely stopped the flow of her higher ranked subordinates, taking care of the ill-famed *Torture Department* all on their own — but it was rare for anyone to willingly choose to share a room with the Demon Prodigy as he showed off his most infamous talent. His corner of chains and blood stains was always utterly empty.

The man dangling from the lower roof could have been from the *Hounds*, or from the *Black Widow*, or from any other smaller syndicate — as per Kouyou’s subordinates orders, Dazai was not allowed near high-level prisoners.

Chuuya thought it a mixture of jealousy and unwillingness to spend more time with him than what was needed; a sentiment he could share, but that he hardly understood in the face of necessity.

*He scares them*, Kouyou had told him, once.

“There had to be a better way to get the evidence you wanted.” The explosion had certainly opened the secret drawer in the car truck nice and well; it had also given the squad and Virgil the scare of a lifetime. “You almost dropped the building on my fucking head.”

“A way to get it without the *KK Company* knowing we had it?” His tongue hit his palate. “Doubtful. Plus, it would have deprived me of the chance to see you *almost* blow up. Light me one up, won’t you?”

If he had thought there was nothing left to break in the hanging puppet, Chuuya was rapidly proved wrong.

Dazai found some perverted kind of amusement in abandoning the corpses that couldn’t tell him anything else in the weirdest shapes for the cleaners to find. Smashed skulls, broken knees turned the wrong way, even blood scribbles on their faces — while respect to the living seemed to drip from his every blink, the dead did not share the same luck.

*Jealousy*, he’d explained, once.

The man had no voice left to scream with. Barely a meek left his mouth when Dazai's knife caressed the length of the space between his legs. A hum fell from the Prodigy's lips — coincidentally enough to cause him a face, it was Hirose's *Mr. Taxi Driver*.

With borderline irritating precision, he cut the dirty flesh of the man's member following the rhythm, his tone unchanging even as the prisoner began to screech wordless shouts.

"Thank you for all the information," Dazai said, through the sprays of fresh blood. He still refused to wear all the pieces of his suit. Crunching down, he patted the man's cheek. "Now you can see how it feels, how about that?"

Chuuya curled an eyebrow, searching for an answer in the tears and the blood striding down the man's cheek, his mouth stuffed with his cut off organ. Most tended to leave victims in that state when they had wronged the ladies of the syndicate, or when they were particularly intent on making a fool out of their enemy.

*Or*, he considered — "Is this about the brats your Oda's been taking in?"

Scurrying around to gather his fallen coat, Dazai barely looked up to reply: "One of them was almost kidnapped by this *Hound* man, before Odasaku could swoop in and save the day. Now he has *two* of them! *Very* small. They both cry a lot. For some reason, they miss their parents." He fixed his bandages in place, going as far as to partly remove the ones on his eye to turn them. "The *Hounds* killed the latest one's during a shootout. Medical staff, maybe? But now he has Odasaku, so it's fine. I've been telling him he should consider a full time babysitter position, but for some reason he didn't find the idea tempting. Might be the snot, or the digestive problems."

After raining that train of information on him, he shut his mouth. Chuuya knew what it meant; *enough is enough*.

Of the little he was allowed to know about Oda Sakunosuke, there was even *less* Dazai was genuinely glad to share. He existed somewhere behind the most obvious layers of pretense of the boy's eyes — and then lower and *lower*, somewhere Chuuya had never even brushed.

"I get leaving them like that on enemy territory," Chuuya pointed out, nudging the man's head with the tip of his boot. "But this is just a shitty show one of ours will have to clean up."

"Maybe it'll teach them to leave me the main room, when I need it," the boy considered, because Dazai's *plans* had plans. Because he had spent the evening torturing a man who had attempted to hurt a kid, and Chuuya still smelled the blood from the Orphanage. "And maybe the cleaner who will take care of it — a *Hound* spy, by the way — will be delighted by the reunion with her husband. Thank you," he added, nodding towards the lit cigarette Chuuya had almost forgotten to be holding.

Blind to the raw contempt on his face — or simply undeterred by it — Dazai pulled his wrist closer, turning his hand so he could remove the cigarette from Chuuya's fingers with his mouth.

He paused, lips on the tab, still connected with his hands — blinked with his sole eye.  
“You’re still mad, aren’t you?”

“Maybe I’m just stressed,” Chuuya replied. From behind the walls, muffled shrieks and begs echoed off the stone. “We’re at war, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but you’re enjoying that part.”

“Aren’t you?”

Dazai kept quiet; Chuuya held the weight of his halved stare.

“Come on,” the boy said, at last, breaking their point of contact. “Let’s talk somewhere where people have nicer things in their mouths.”

The bars weren’t as packed as they’d been before the conflict. Chuuya recalled countless nights fighting for a table with the rest of his squad — neutral meeting spots were bound to be unsuccessful, though, when gangs had *killing-on-sight* orders out for each other.

Even daring to step inside was a statement of sorts; fearlessness or stupidity, sagging the air with the same insistence as cheap Sake. He allowed Dazai to pull at the chain of his hat to keep him from barking back at some low murmur about their age; when they settled on the stools of the counter, Chuuya kneeled the back of his legs to make him fall.

“The data itself is irrelevant,” Dazai explained, once they’d managed to open the laptop stolen from Hirotsu’s office. “Merchant deals, bank accounts information, some maps of the city underground. What’s important — is that this flash drive is *not* from here.”

Chuuya tapped two fingers on the small device, damaged by the *KK’s Company* car explosion. “Aren’t flash drives all the same?”

“Technically,” he replied. “But this? The restock of this type of flash drives is located in California. It was a large scale company who began to grow a bit *too* successful in the last decade; the Japanese market feared the competition, so they shut off the commercialization of these specific American goods. The *KK Company* had to have a reason to hide it. And none of the datas in it is worth that much hustle.”

“So the secret is — that the flash drive is American?” he concluded, skeptical, drowning the bite of the sandwich they’d forcefully split with the beer the waiter had left for them, eyeing them suspiciously. No one had dared asking for personal documents — then again, he was pretty sure Dazai had a vertiginous bunch of it for both of them, somewhere in his pockets.  
“Why is that relevant?”

“*Because,*” Dazai insisted, mocking, “It means someone American, with access to gang-like funds and currently in a sort of alliance with the *KK Company*, is in Yokohama — during a treasure hunt for enough money to make every relevant gang on the international scene perk up,” A flick to his forehead. “Use that dog intellect of yours. What could it *mean*?”

Chuuya stared. “You’re telling me foreign syndicates are joining the conflict?”

“*Mh-mh*,” he confirmed. “I have my eyes on two or three of them already, but *Strain* is the one we need to worry about.”

Imperceptibly — violently enough to pull at the hair on his nape — a wave of silence blinked through the bar.

Their eyes met.

“*Strain*?” Chuuya echoed, seamlessly. “As in, that one manufacturer company? We’ve dealt with them before.”

“*Before* being the keyword,” he confirmed. “No one has claimed the attack near Yamashita Park yet. My men are verifying the bullets left on the scene, but I already know what they’ll find. Westerners sticking their nose where they’re not welcomed,” A sigh. “Americans and their spies.”

He frowned at his plate. “Is that even allowed? I thought the *Daikokuten* had made this whole thing up for the benefit of Yokohama.”

“I don’t think they really care,” Dazai said. Pointedly, he raised his voice by a single note, just enough to stride against the murmurs of the late night crowd. “Americans tend to be self-absorbed, according to Boss.”

Tension rattled his bones, all the way to his fingertips. Chuuya’s leg shook against the stool. “What does it mean for us, then?”

“Cheese.”

He waited. “Stop being cocky, bastard.”

“No, I mean it. *Cheese*, is what it means,” Dazai threw his bottle back, emptying it out with a tranquillity he could not afford. “There’s an attack planned on the Muji Department. One of the stores is a front for the *Shadow Blade*’s substance market — basically, all they’ve got left. I’m assuming they’ll stop by for cheese, while they’re at it. Isn’t that an American thing?” He turned his head to the side. “Like that book series Madame Tanaki likes. What was it called? *Never To Return*. ”

Chuuya watched.

On the television hanging from the wall, the News — dreary as always — murmured some data; the shattered colors of the glass bottles reflected on the ceiling. The crowd was listening.

“Damn it,” Chuuya sighed, settling his eyes on the security camera in the far corner of the bar. His reflection mocked him, backed by Dazai’s waving fingers. *Never to return*. “I fucking liked this place.”

He smashed his bottle on the counter right as the first woman jumped to Dazai’s side, sinking the razor-sharp edge in her chest.

His stool was kicked out from under his legs — the boy slid down underneath him, as Chuuya jumped five feet in the air. As one, they attacked the upcoming wave of *Strain* members.

The rest of it was a blur: faces smashed on dirty tables, bones and windows cracking, bullets sinking in flesh and old lightbulbs, screams from hiding waiters and bar-men — who had definitely not been paid enough, for an occasion for the *Strain* to get rid of the Port Mafia's youngest ones. Dazai's sudden desire to save Hirotsu's laptop and their treacherous flash drive almost got him killed; Chuuya watched him stick a table knife up his attacker's nose, before carelessly abandoning him in his hands.

"This is why *Never To Return* is a stupid strategy," he let him know, as he tore a hole in a man's chest with the leg of a stool, driving the bloodied edge that came out into another member's skull. "You just leave all the dirty work to me!"

"I'm being useful," Dazai replied, on his tiptoes, playing around with the security camera. As a woman from *Strain* tried to sink a knife in his thigh, he sunk his shoe in her throat. "I watched you be all dramatic with the *KK Company* guy, by the way. Hacking parking lots' cameras is easy. You were absolutely pathetic."

"*Ah?*" Chuuya snapped, slamming a man out of the window. "Says the one who stuck a dick in a man's mouth. Bet you're gonna jerk off to the sight."

"*Scandalous*, hatrack," he replied, gasping. "What kind of *dreams* have you been having about me?"

By the time they marched out of the bar, info on the *Strain*'s base hidden in the card in Dazai's pocket, the moon had reached the dead center of the sky. Chuuya wiped blood off his cheeks with the flagging sleeve of the boy's coat.

"Excellent work," Dazai clasped his hands, already distracted by his console. He'd found some kind of game that played piano songs — except all the notes were a cat's *meows* in different pitches. "Terrible company. All according to protocol. See you at the Cheese Factory?"

"It's literally not a Cheese Factory," Chuuya replied, unimpressed, already halfway to his motorcycle. He changed his mind; strided back, kicked the back of his knees. "Next time you need us to kill someone who hurt your darling Oda — just fucking *tell* me. Easier than threatening them into pretending they're part of the *Strain* bunch."

Expectations came with habit; habit came with expectations. He didn't stay to watch surprise bloom on his face — mostly, because he knew it wouldn't.



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**76 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“— *urge all citizens to keep away from the Yokohama Bay Bridge, as a terroristic threat has been — Matsumoto? Matsumoto. Matsumoto, can you hear me? Can you —* “

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**73 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“*Evacuate!*” Chuuya snarled. The mine would explode the minute he blinked too tight, his hands still holding it tight. His subordinates stared at him, speechless. “Evacuate, *right now* —!”

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**71 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“I pray, sometimes,” Yuan told him.

No tension marked her voice; no trace of croaks or leftover screams. Anger had always been a sticky drape on her small frame; once it touched, it was hard to remove. Clearly, she thought the *Bishop’s Staff* didn’t deserve more than her chained body.

Consequently, Chuuya didn’t understand. “To *who?*” he asked, nose scrunching up.

Her glance was sharp, spat in his direction with something akin to the shamelessness she'd been known for in the Sheep. Cross-legged on the floor, all he could do was look up at her, and wonder if a massacre of children had been enough to wake her up from the haze the exact same disaster had put her in. "We raised you better than to judge others' faith."

*[He had tried to ask, sometime during his first visits. Hadn't been sure of how to bring up the Orphanage. All he'd received was a blank stare and detained fingers curling in the air, reaching towards nothing at all.]*

"Oh," she'd said, blinking owlishly. "Oh, yes. The Orphanage. How familiar."

*They hadn't talked about it again].*

"You didn't *raise me*," he grunted. "And you weren't here during the *Nine Rings*' shitshow. I have a thing against God."

Yuan's head tilted to the side. Her chest was littered in emeralds; green dots from invisible rifles. Underneath the moonlight streaming from stained-glass windows, she could have been one of the paintings in Kouyou's courtesan house. "I'm not praying to any god."

"By definition —"

"I don't know who I'm praying to," she interrupted him. "I spent a lot of time alone. It's just — the company is nice, sometimes. And begging the nonexistent to help me is a good motivation to help myself."

Chuuya pulled the corners of the empty food container in his lap. She had assured him they'd been feeding her. He had assured her he didn't particularly care. "So you have an imaginary friend."

She huffed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her make a similar sound. "I don't have an *imaginary friend* —"

"That's what it sounds like."

"It's not —"

"It's fine if you do. There's this kid I know, Elise, and she's basically an hallucination —"

"Maybe I *am* crazy," she said, suddenly. "Maybe I've lost my mind, or something. Toru was always talking about — *trauma*, and stuff. He thinks everyone in the organization has it. Isn't that insane?"

"Toru, ah?" Chuuya echoed. "He was born rich. Bet he even read books about that stuff. Don't worry about it."

*It's just a fever, they all used to say, don't worry. Don't call the doctor; we can't afford him or threaten him or anything else.*

They were silent for a long time.

It wasn't unusual. His visits were sporadic — sometimes quiet throughout the entire hours or minutes he could dedicate to her; sometimes filled with words. Perhaps it was Yuan's own brand of forgiveness; perhaps it was Yuan's own brand of raw, earth-shattering exhaustion, and it had nothing to do with him. *Making this about you, again?*

He sat and he waited. He had time.

"You know," she said. "I think they kind of look like you."

Chuuuya pulled at her shoelaces. Noguchi had to have brought her shoes, with the same spirit he'd spent to bring her food she didn't need. Different worlds, different priorities; same idea. "Who?"

A blink. "Whoever I pray to."

He shut his mouth.

It took her a while to talk again. "I hate it."

"I know you do."

"I don't —" Frustration crowded her face. That red hair fit the season — he couldn't quite decide if it fit her, too. "It's not fair, Chuuuya."

Eyes on the ceiling. "It's not."

"I'm sorry I landed you in this mess."

"Shut the fuck up," he replied, easily. "I'll be the judge of that. It's not your fault."

Yuan kept quiet. Then: "What happened during the *Nine Rings Conflict*?"

"Well," he said, once the astonishment had been forcefully wiped away. "For starters — and I know you'll shit yourself about it — I was literally *possessed* for most of it —"

Every word out of his mouth was sandpaper on his throat, was a balm on sunburned skin. He kept coming back to sit on the floor — to tell stories to someone who was not his own lingering mind or his graves. He kept drinking her interest like the forgiveness he did not care for, and he got drunk and drunker, and he *talked* — because Shirase was miles away and the Sheep were dead, but the two of them were not.

Her stories came later.

Not all of it was a nightmare; not all of it was a funeral. A nice woman from the slums had taken her in for a while, in exchange for stealthy thievery and companionship. She'd left because she couldn't bear her own home any longer; when she'd resurfaced in Yokohama, the first thing she had done was visit Yamashita Park.

"We didn't have parks down there," she told him, a bit dazed. "And we never wandered that far. The Arcade and the bridge — that was all. Oh — I went to the Arcade, too. Someone put

an unbeatable record in the *Go Drive* machines, you know? Whoever *Slug* and *Mackerel* are.”

Some topics were declared untouchable — by a tacit understanding of where the ice would crack more easily. Yuan kept the Port Mafia out of her mouth, conscious of the negative reactions she would receive by insulting the people Chuuya had chosen to exist alongside of. Chuuya was careful, *very* careful, to not even utter the name *Dazai Osamu* where she could hear it.

The war became a topic too soon.

“There’s been a lot of attacks,” she admitted, once he offered her the full picture of her role in the conflict. “None of them managed to enter the Church. One of them was the Ability User you mentioned — the one who can reopen all your wounds. They didn’t manage to kill him, though,” She frowned. “There’s been less attempts, lately. I suppose they must have spread news of my — situation.”

Chuuya studied the valleys of her chest, hidden bombs underneath white fabric, upon a too thin body.

The Port Mafia had an entire section of men worrying about the technical aspect of her removal; the easier solution, he knew, would have been getting rid of the snipers before they could shoot and activate the bombs. But they had no way of proving whether the bombs could explode even with a command from afar.

*They are rancorous people, Mori had explained. They will gladly destroy their own chance at gaining the prize, as long as someone who’s not them doesn’t obtain it.*

*We can’t risk it, Chuuya had decided.*

“We’ll get you out of here,” he promised her.

“And then?”

“Then,” He scratched his nape. “Whatever you want, I suppose. I offered you money, and I offered to send you back to Shirase, but —“

“No.”

“Yeah, ‘thought you’d say that,” he grunted. “Well, Noguchi is more than willing to take you in.”

Genuine astonishment parted her lips. “He — is?”

Chuuya looked at her funny. “The man fucking *licks* the ground you walk on. He’s got a little-sister complex of sorts. He’s also an airhead, a bastard, and the worst shit to come out of a jerk’s asshole — but he’s a good guy.”

“He said he’d bring me horse riding,” Yuan said, very quietly.

“Horse riding,” he echoed, a little lost. “That’s — nice?”

She fell quiet.

Right when he thought she wouldn’t open her mouth again, she dared: “It’s *weird*.”

Briefly, he wondered if she was talking about horse riding. “What is?”

“Having someone so old worry about you.”

Something like a snort arose in his chest; when he tried to spit it out, though, it came out as simple warmth, forming a cloud in the cold air.

Only then, he realized just how heavy it felt — perched on his bones like crows. Waiting.

“It’s just, the Sheep —” A flinch; minimal, but never lacking. “We were all so young. Fifteen at best. The little ones had to be taken care of, and *we* — we were the old ones. Every adult in Suribachi hated us. The police officers from Yokohama were all jerks. But now —” She sighed. “It feels *good*. I hate myself for it, but — it feels good, having someone who’s old, and who *cares*, and not having to take care of anything. Toru is a half idiot, but...”

“But he makes you feel like a kid,” Chuuya completed. Unfamiliarity was easy to recognize; he always knew when the language reaching his ears was not one he could wrap his head around.

Just for a moment, he thought of Detective Murase. Of Hirotsu, cooking dinner with a revolver in his pocket. Of Kouyou, keeping the doors of the Pomegranate closed. *Not the place for children.*

“Yeah,” She nodded, raining relief. “Yes, he *does*. Isn’t it nice? It feels so nice. Like when the kids talked about school. *School*. What a weird idea. I—” Glass covered her eyes in the way of lids on caskets; her voice broke. “If I could get it, even just a bit more, I — I think I would like it very much.”

*I don’t get it*, he wanted to tell her. *I don’t get it. I don’t want it. I would hate it. I can’t even imagine it. What are you even tired of? What right do I have to be tired? I don’t get it.*

He couldn’t say it. He was not in the habit of offering an open chest to unwashed hands; he was not in the habit of offering himself for failure. He had no need for understanding; couldn’t ask it from anyone, not when he was —

*What would she think*, he wondered, *of the body he’d held as it died, with eyes softer than his would ever be?*

“You know,” Chuuya said, instead, with something akin to desperation, something akin to blankness. Confession for a confession; guilt for guilt. Shirase was in London; the Sheep were dead. “I don’t think school would suit me.”

Yuan’s lips parted, again. She didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

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## **68 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

Koda refused to talk.

He was efficient. Men who had no idea of his connection to the attack to the *Wild Geese Orphanage* wouldn't have suspected a thing. He showed up to missions, hit every target with ease, responded to orders with decisive — if somewhat quieter — determination. Chuuya wasn't in the habit of keeping a portfolio of his squad, but had that been the case — the man would have gained top marks.

Chuuya had to slam him against the nearest surface to even convince him to look him in the eyes.

"You need to breathe," he told him, because he couldn't tell him, *you need to take a day off from the war* — they both knew. "You need to get rid of them, not yourself."

Koda nodded, only once, sharply. He went back to the rows of men and weapons; he didn't meet his eyes again. He did not talk.

"Give him time," Tsuchiya told him, as they hid behind a wagon, waiting for the *Shadow Blade* to leave the *Takasekai* building they were ravaging through. "Let him do his thing. He needs to deal with it on his own."

"His grief is gonna get him killed," he muttered.

"This isn't him grieving. It's just like you said to me," She cocked her gun. "We don't have time for that."

And they *didn't*, Chuuya knew — they spent their mornings guarding the Headquarters and their nights attacking, pushing civilians out of conflicts and gathering their fallen. Sleep was a distant reality; he couldn't recall the last time he'd seen a street filled to its usual capacity.

He *knew* there wasn't time — he knew Koda was the first friend he'd made after the Flags had died.

"Don't let him get himself killed," he ordered Virgil, because he was the only one he had actually seen Koda talk to. Noguchi had been a surprisingly useless attempt; the twins had

almost gotten shot in a fight that had broken out between them. “And keep him away from the *Secret Force* and Dazai. We can’t deal with revenge journeys.”

Not that Koda had outrightly declared who the spasms of his fingers were meant to choke — not that he had ever *dared* to utter the Demon Prodigy’s name out loud. He wasn’t high-ranked enough to do something so stupid; he wasn’t even conscious enough to do anything more than — stare at him.

*Stare* at him. Obsessively — with emptied out features and feverish eyes, with his fingers tight around his rifle; with conclusions he had gotten to all on his own.

Koda was too prepared to put a bullet in his head; Dazai was too willing to beg for it. Koda would be executed for insubordination; Dazai would laugh, and laugh, and *laugh*, the way he did, sometimes, when Chuuya had to drag him out of rivers and nearby bombs, when eerie silence didn’t seem to fit him.

When the quick-sequence explosions of a merch train from the *Shadow Blade* reduced Koda to a trembling mess — the attack he had ordered him not to join, exactly for this reason — Chuuya sat next to him.

“This isn’t going to bring your brother back to life,” he told him. “*You* dying won’t solve anything.”

Koda’s flinch shook the ground.

“Revenge isn’t going to do a thing either,” he added, because the *Special Force* had been tasked with exploding that merch train, and he *knew* the man was aware. “It will feel good. It will feel *so* fucking good, you hear me? And then it will be over. You’ll have regained *nothing*. You’ll just have one more body to bury,” He laughed, humorlessly. “Or not even that.”

The wind answered him, stained by the smog of the explosion. Face in his knees, Koda’s shoulders trembled.

Chuuya hadn’t been at the cemetery in weeks. There had just been no time. There had just been no time to climb to the cliff with Rimbaud’s stone — Verlaine had nothing, and deserved less than it.

Chuuya was made of mourning, and the obsequy had come to an end lifetimes ago.

“Think about anything but it,” he told him. “Let him rest where your mind can’t reach. You can’t do anything else.”

## 65 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

Thirteen visits in, Chuuya eventually realized he had never seen Kouyou with no lipstick on.

*I need to leave*, she might have said, had she been more than a sleeping stain of red against the snowy sheets of the Infirmary. *There's a war in my city, and I have an IV in my arm. This is absolutely presumptuous.*

*This is the second big conflict you miss*, he would have told her, consequently — because he knew she would have approved. *Ace will be on your ass about it, you know?* And because he wasn't a child, he wouldn't have been disappointed once it didn't wake her up.

The lack of lipstick was unignorable, even underneath the oxygen mask. She had thin lips, not an inch of chapped skin — the valleys of her chin were bruised, remnants of the man who had blown himself up in her face. Scarlet curls rained on her pillow, tickling the stitches on her forehead.

Sometimes, he thought he could see onyx shadows run all the way to his fingertips — cling to her flesh, rotting her further.

*[“Your subordinates keep babbling about you,” he told her, on a morning he had stomped his highest number yet of men to the curb. Munching on stolen protein bars, he leaned on the visitor seat, continuing: “One would think you died, with the way they act. They’re giving me a headache. Isn’t it time you wake your ass up?” A pause. “Ma’am.”]*

“Fine, send Kajii,” Chuuya spoke into the phone. On the other end, Noguchi’s grimace was almost tactile. “But tell him to get a *grip*. If he hurts any more civilians, we’re going to have the police on our asses. You hear me? *Tell him*. No, I don’t care if he — it’s just *lemons*, knock him out or something. And make sure Koda isn’t around. I’ll get there soon.”

The corridor of the Infirmary floor was eerily charged; he turned the corner, ready to bash the umpteenth skull of the night against a wall — and found a crime scene.

A *stolen* one, Chuuya considered, petty and relieved. Three bodies had been abandoned on the carpet, puddles of blood pooling underneath their disjointed corpses. A familiar knife was stuck in a woman in a nurse outfit’s forehead, pinning her to the wall all the way to the back of her head.

“You should probably ground *Golden Demon* or something,” Dazai was saying, obnoxiously, patting Kouyou’s wrist.

Sat as he was at the end of her bed, cross legged and staring her down between the hands caging his cheeks, he looked bored enough to overcome the blood stains he was leaving all over the sheets. “Isn’t she supposed to sense bombs? She’s even more incompetent than you



are, Ane-san. As soon as you wake up, I'll put you on calligraphy duty until you pass out again."

Chuuya tended to only ever visit when the sun was in the sky. He found it made her look less like a corpse.

The Executive had been reserved a quiet corner of the Infirmary, hidden behind double the pristine white curtains. He studied the curling — *unchanging* — lines of the heart monitor, as he threw the decapitated head from his vigilante rounds on the guest seat.

"Oh, it's Chuuya," Dazai exclaimed, vague. "Hello, Chuuya. There you are. Haven't seen you in a while. I'm rather displeased."

He kept his eyes on his stolen hat, perched on top of the boy's head. Blankly, he asked: "Are you?"

"Mori's been sending me on solo missions," was the whine out of his throat. The gun he had used to kill the *Strain* spies was nowhere to be found — one of Kouyou's IVs was intertwined with his fingers, pulling harshly enough to draw blood from the needle in her arm. "Not that he trusts me enough not to send *his* men to tail me. An annoying matter. I've been killing them all, of course."

"We're on a man shortage," Chuuya reminded him. "And those poor motherfuckers are already being punished with your presence. Control yourself."

"Maybe if you were less busy," Dazai sighed. "I bet this whole matter would be over, if you could just be a competent lap dog. You've been around so little, I couldn't even put out this week's *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser's* newsletter. We still need to get the *Takasekai* and *Shadow Blade's* codes, remember? What are you doing, running around gathering poor men's heads?"

"Sure," He nodded towards the bleeding mess on the seat, imploded-by-gravity eyes and mouth stuck in a scream. "Come take a look at this."

He abandoned the boy to study the relic, making a beeline for Kouyou's sleeping body. His gloves were dirty; he removed only one of them, grasping weakly at her pale fingers. Busying himself with her medical file, he got distracted by unaltered numbers and reports of removal of stitches — until Dazai hummed.

"A *Bishop's Staff's* tattoo on his lip," he noted, pulling at the skin. "They were sure quick to ally. I'm surprised the *Staff* would accept not to fight an *every man for himself* war, though."

"That's what I don't get," Chuuya shut the file. "Alliances make absolutely no sense for the this kind of conflict. What game are they playing?"

Dazai's sole eye squinted. "Pretty sure we might just get a repeat of the *Nine Rings'* strategy."

He frowned. "In what way?"

"How come they attacked you?"

“There’s an international bounty on my head, apparently,” Chuuya replied. “As if having the *Special Division* on my ass wasn’t enough.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Dazai brushed the matter away. “I’m sure Mori can’t *wait* to give you back to them and gain us an *Ability Permit*, as soon as this mess is over.”

A mixture of rage and *something else* tickled him. “*Excuse —*“

Blinding pain exploded down his spine, turning his vision into a white so bright he gasped.

An assortment of screeches and curses was ripped from his mouth — more out of astonishment than actual pain, his knees gave up, landing him on the floor.

“There, there,” Dazai put his hat back on his head. “Dislocated shoulders will do you no good. You already have the posture of a savage. What would Ane-san say?”

Circles and lights fought for the space in his visual field; he leaned back, teeth gritted. “Fucking *tell me*, next time, *you fucking —* piece of *shit —*“

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?”

They theorized as they made their way down the stairs, entertaining Madame Tanaki’s questions regarding the decapitated head they still had to drop off somewhere. Chuuya won a round of rock-paper-scissors, and got to drop the relic into Dazai’s arms. He ran to his waiting men; spent the night crashing over the *Shadow Blade* border, until an entire level of defense for their *person of interest’s* supposed refuge was annihilated.

When morning came, he was back at Kouyou’s bedside — lipstick in hand, fingers in hers.

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## **62 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“...*Two hundred and seventy civilians were killed in the bombing attack that took place at Ishikawachō Station. It is unclear, at this point, whether —*“

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## 60 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

While Chuuya was in charge of massacres, the general consensus was that Dazai was in charge of death — altogether.

“There’s still a competition you need to worry about,” were Mori’s smiling words, as he appointed them to this or that slaughter. “What better occasion?” Hands on their shoulders; no photographs to be taken, but something close enough. “Bring me the codes, boys.”

And so the crowd dispersed. From the sidelines, they watched them.

An assortment of seamless collaboration and full tacit understanding got them into the filthiest holes of Yokohama — down dark roads that led to rooms with the secrets holding the city up day after day.

Talking had not been necessary for a long time; they wasted their breaths on bickering that left most of their enemies dumbfounded, that shook the shoulders of men they were torturing with teenagerish glee, that intertwined with words they had picked for strategies and shorthands they couldn’t seem to stop adding — fingers on skin, blinking eyes, traced letters, bird songs, memories and broken traffic lights —

*Killing, he found, could be a somewhat uncomfortably intimate affair.*

“Does he have it?” Dazai asked, holding onto the hilt of the knife stuck in one of the *Shadow Blades*’ guards’ neck. The grip helped him keep the corpse on his feet, as Chuuya ripped his suit apart to search for a tattoo. As soon as he received a cursing scoff, he extracted the knife, abandoning the lifeless puppet to the ground. “How annoying,” he sighed, cleaning the blade on the bandages on his neck.

For good measure, Chuuya removed it from his grip — unwilling to have to chase him down the hallway to get the dazed, drunken look of suicide out of his eyes. “You seriously couldn’t find any better information than *‘in the building’*?”

“I’m *sorry*,” Lazily, the boy spun him around — throwing him towards the entering guards, alerted by their companion’s dying scream. “Next time, why don’t *you* hack into a syndicate’s security, while *I* go around kicking my feet like a ballerina?”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Advantages came in the reduced number of attackers — since neither of them was willing to work together *while* having to deal with barely decent men Mori always insisted on giving them, their missions were always a solitary affair.

Disadvantages came in a simple enough realization — they were both having fun with it.

Unsettled matters were reserved for the Arcade, always empty these days, and often shut down for its own safety — although it didn't mean much, to two mafiosi with pickpocketing tendencies. Settled matters were to be exploited at all costs — and so they broke through the *Shadow Blades* endless lines of defense, left a river of corpses in their wake, and carried a woman with a dragon tattoo to the HQs with an electric spear stuck in her abdomen.

*[No one asked for the story — except the report they got stuck in Dazai's office to write — because no one had truly expected them to fail, once the official order for them to act had come. Chuuya still had to get used to that part — the trust in them. Sometimes, even stronger than the tendency to lower their eyes.*

*He might have told them, had they asked — about bad attitudes and matching moves, striding down corridors as their shoes sunk in puddles of blood, slashing someone's neck and lowering their gravity until their eyes popped out of their sockets, and always, always, making sure at least one would survive to see them leave the room.*

*Secrecy had been an ancient deal; these days, Mori wanted Yokohama to know who would leave their windows ajar.*

*But they didn't ask — didn't put their nose in the strange pull-and-push keeping Dazai and Chuuya in each other's orbit, under the sound of insults and unwilling teams up. And so he didn't say].*

“On your right,” Dazai informed him, politely enough, eye on the scope of his rifle. He fired another shot; from the rear view mirror, Chuuya saw one of the two cars chasing them skid down the road. “Kidding. It's left.”

His upper body was half hanging outside of the car window; with every swerve down the highway Chuuya took, he had to remind himself curving too fast and splattering the Mafia's Prodigy against the concrete would be frowned upon. “Remind me why infiltrating the *Hounds* was necessary?”

“Apart from them getting too cocky with the bigger fish in the pond?” the boy screamed back, fighting the soaring wind.

Chuuya turned the corner in all the wrong ways, dragging the side of the vehicle down the wall, trying to get the following cars to accidentally pass them. Flares and sparks arose near his ear; he punched the metal railing, pushing the car several feet into the other lane with his Ability.

“*Well* — one of them found the location of my shipping container and gave Kazuko the scare of a lifetime. The poor thing refuses to leave my bed!” Dazai shook his head, sinking a bullet in the driver's shoulder. “Also, they're named after *dogs*. That's enough reason.”

A projectile hit one of their wheels, slowing them down considerably — enough to give the chance to the two cars to sandwich them. Each hit the two halves inflicted on their sides shook the whole vehicle; Chuuya pressed on the accelerator so hard his foot started to tingle.

The sound of a car window opening next to him raised every hair on his neck; in the corner of his eye, he saw the mouth of a rifle brush his own glass, too quick for him to react.

A weight dropped on his lap, pulling a *oof!* out of him — the road now hidden behind Dazai's coat-wearing shoulder. His rifle shot before the *Hound's* one could even think about it; the glass exploded on both of them, making the car swerve and release them from the tightening embrace.

“*Move!*” Chuuya raised his knees, trying to kick him away. “I can't see shit!”

“You're welcome,” Dazai muttered. “I hope the next one hits you.”

“I hope you get squashed like a bug!

“Well, *I* hope —”

A jolt went through his nape; right as Dazai made to throw himself back onto his seat, Chuuya gripped his hair and pushed him down again, yelping as he freed his hand — *just* quick enough to stop the three bullets that broke through their rear windshield from decapitating the boy.

“Why did you have to put the stolen goods in the trunk?” Chuuya lamented. “I could have crashed this fucking car on them by now! What are you even — *hey!*”

“Wait a second,” Sliding down in the non-existent space between his legs, Dazai grasped at something near the pedals. Once he managed to extract himself from the tunnel, the prize in Dazai's hand became visible: a hand grenade. “*Bingo.*”

“Great,” Chuuya turned the steering wheel all the way, catapulting them out of the highway. “Blow the motherfuckers up!”

“Not yet.”

“*Not yet?*”

“Let them come closer,” His rifle took care of the closest car with a clean shot; hiding behind his headrest, he studied the vehicle tailing them through the scope. “We need to take them out at once.”

“They're shooting at us —“

“Let them come closer,” he echoed, once again distracted. Anticipation stiffened his every muscle. “Let them come closer...”

From the rear view mirror, Chuuya saw them accelerate. Their cars were clearly faster than their own — they would catch up soon enough, and close range bullets were always harder to stop.

He groaned. “You couldn't have just *said* —“

With a curse, he kicked his own car door open, gently releasing his death-pressure on the friction. Leaning so far out of the frame of the car that the wind whipped him to a painful level, Chuuya sunk his fingers in the concrete, *digging*.

The suddenly razed road slowed down the *Hounds* cars with surprising efficiency, carving astonishment in the curses flying out of their windows. Their vehicles appeared closer and closer — right as Chuuya let go of the clawed cracks in the concrete, a wrist wrapped around his other arm, pulling him back in.

A grenade appeared in front of his mouth. Still deadly focused on their chasing dogs, Dazai ignored the unamused stare Chuuya directed his way.

“Hurry,” the boy ordered — eyes unmoving; finger on his trigger. “Would you?”

With a sigh that felt never ending, Chuuya bit down on the pin of the grenade, spitting it out right as it was thrown out of the fractured frame of the rear windshield.

The sky lit up in golden and red, sending their own car skirting forward of a dozen feet, spinning and spinning. Dazai barked out a vaguely *unstable* laughter, licking the blood from a cut on his cheek away with childish contentment. “*To hell with dogs!*” he chanted.

In the privacy of his elbow, Chuuya snorted.

Attacks to the Headquarters began in the morning.

The News blamed them on workers' protests against Mori Corporations, mixed with the rise in gang violence of the last few months. The *Moons*, all except for the *Bishop's Staff*, refused to allow them to breathe — smaller organizations joined in. Soon enough, the glass doors of the HQ were too sticky with dried blood to even be touched.

Chuuya flew through the windows, instead.

“I can just kill them all, if you want me to,” he told Mori. “Even if they send another wave — I can get rid of them.”

“Not yet,” the man replied, as he had in the last few days. He didn't understand the logic behind it — but Dazai, who was stuck in the man's office whenever he wasn't wandering around with Oda Sakunosuke and the glasses-wearing friend he'd made from the Intelligence — and whenever he wasn't busy *popping* Chuuya's bones back into place, and moving aside as he wreaked havoc down the city — seemed to. “As long as they're alive, the *Special Division* won't intervene. We can't deal with that, not until we get all the codes.”

Dazai hummed. “How do you know they haven't intervened yet?”

As one, they turned to look at him.

His smile wasn't meant for that place — for the mountains of corpses outside their doors and behind them, sagging the Infirmary and the air, piling in body bags in the warehouse they had no choice but to use as a crematory.

“Say, Boss,” he started. “And you, Chuuya, fresh out of Europe. Have you ever heard of the *White Giraffe*?”

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### **86 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“Your brother,” Yuan began. “You said he killed your family.”

Stained-glass windows and gunpowder floors; he scrubbed at it with the pads of his gloves. Complexity was made for different things — for the roof of a room that was not his, for shelves of poetry books in a language he wished didn’t come as instinctual as it did.

Complexity was the ethical choice to take; *did he? Yes. Did he? For me. Did he? I did.*

Chuuya nodded. “Yeah.”

Jealousy soaked every letter out of her mouth; thicker than blood, colder than rain. Longing, in it, too; the mindlessness of someone who was angry out of habit. He understood. Shackled to a seat with a bomb on her chest; he *understood*.

“What were they like?”

The next time he came, he brought spoils of war: an endless amount of dusty photographs, ripped from the walls of Albatross’ apartment.

Talking *about* the Flags, he found, was much different from talking *to* their graves. He had to keep his shoulders from flinching whenever Yuan inquired after something — the sound of her voice enough to startle him. He had to keep a small house in France out of his mind; had to circle her questions about Verlaine, whose name he would not say; had to stare at the familiar — *forgetting*, slowly, inevitably — faces on paper longer than he had ever been brave enough to.

It was as he talked — *Doc wanted to kill as many people as God had in the bible; Lippman’s favorite movies to make were the romantic comedies; Iceman had given him his first gun; Pianoman had been the first person to call him a friend after the Sheep; Albatross ate peanuts even if he was allergic to them* — that he realized he had never slept in Albatross’ bed.

He was haunted by every inch of the house he couldn't call his own. Every bizarre piece of furniture whose story he'd been told too many times — *let me tell you just one more time, Chuuya, in case I missed something* — and every picture he couldn't bear to look at for too long.

It was one of two, he knew — Chuuya had never stopped grieving; Chuuya had never started.

“You know,” he told her, on a night his voice had almost given up on him. And so he said it again, because he *needed* her to understand — needed *someone* to hear his sins, just once. “I’ve killed a lot of kids.”

Yuan studied him some more. More pensive than she'd ever been; mature, in the most disdainful of ways. Bizarrely, the sky did not fall.

Bizarrely, Yuan did not stop looking at him.

*He hadn't done a damn thing*, Chuuya thought. He had done all of it. Wasn't it enough?

“My friends, though,” He tapped two fingers on the pictures. *Not all the blood in this world had been spilled because of you*, Madame Tanaki had said. A shame, he believed, that Adam wasn't there to explain it. That Verlaine couldn't trace their matching scars and remind him, *I've killed for you; who else would give you that?* “My friends, I killed.”

One night, Noguchi joined them.

He watched him blink down at Albatross' face, grinning and shameless, as heart-wrenchingly printed under his eyelids as it was on his own. Yuan couldn't understand the sudden silence; Chuuya wanted to tear the ground apart until his knuckles bled — unnecessary. He hardly needed touch to destroy.

“He,” Noguchi started. “The idiot tried to cause a mass escape from the Yokohama Zoo, once.”

*When someone you love dies*, he remembered telling Yuan, endless moonlights away, endless pictures in his hands, endless ghosts in the space between his teeth, *You've got to kill yourself. Other than that, there is nothing left to do.*

*But if you do keep on living — be of service in those days you take.*

And so with ease, in the middle of a rising gravestone of a city, he grieved.



## 59 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

*“Gang violence has been a problem in this city longer than we’ve had to deal with anything else — wars, economic crisis, even widely spread epidemics. Yokohama flourishes in Ability Users, Mrs. Fukushima; is demanding a tighter control of where, exactly, these Ability Users end up such a wild request? I believe —“*

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## 57 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

There was a body on the floor of Albatross’ bedroom.

Sleep was a luxury, and opulence was short lived in the trenches. Chuuya dragged himself back to the apartment every single day, understanding that he wasn’t *quite* at the point where he could sleep unguarded anywhere in the organization.

And so he got home, and he dropped on his futon, and he slept. As the clock on the nightstand ticked 03:00, his arm snaked out before he was fully awake — glowing fist sinking in a man’s chest.

He extracted his arm; stared at his bleeding out silhouette on the bright green floor, silent. A *Takasekai* crest was tattooed on his neck.

At once, reality drowned on him.

*You can’t stay here*, someone said. It sounded like Albatross, just a bit — but he would have never said anything similar to that bizarre conclusion. His door had been open weeks before Chuuya had even *considered* stepping through the frame. Every piece of furniture he couldn’t look at, every picture he ignored, every sound of Ōmu’s mind — it was his to have, because all Albatross owned had always been.

*You can’t stay here. It’s compromised.*

Understanding settled between his bones. His mind ran; blood dirtied his socks; he came to a conclusion.

“Did you tell anyone?”

Hirotsu's eyes didn't widen a bit.

If he felt the weight of the blade on his throat any harder than the IVs brushing against his arms — he didn't show it. In the darkness and unusual quiet of the Infirmary, he simply stared at his stone cold eyes, and asked: "Tell what?"

"My apartment," The rise and fall of his chest was borderline painful; Chuuya had forgotten to put on shoes, too busy jumping from one roof to the other to notice. "It's compromised."

"Chuuya —"

"Mori gains *nothing* from telling," Chuuya insisted, between gritted teeth, pressing the knife so close a choked sound left the man's chapped lips. Were someone to enter, he would be executed on the spot. "Kouyou is in a *coma*. Noguchi was unconscious when I brought him there. Fucking *Dazai* wouldn't tell, because *I* know where *he* lives. But *you*," He leaned closer. "You weren't even meant to know what building I lived in."

"Chuuya, I didn't tell anyone."

"Bullshit," he snapped. "Someone had to tell, and we *all* know how many friends you make in a bar —"

"I didn't tell anyone."

"It was *my fucking apartment!*" Pounding settled on his nape; *he'd left Ōmu on the window seal*, he thought. No, he had been a mess of blood and feathers on the ground. "It was — Albatross' apartment, and —" He gulped; tightened his grip.

Silence spread through the walls. He was choking on it. He couldn't step in that building again; Mori had been clear on protocol regarding his closest men since the first day.

"You brought Yuan to your apartment," Hirotsu noted. "Couldn't she have talked?"

Chuuya didn't lower his eyes. "They're not asking her questions," he insisted, a bit hesitant.

"She stayed at the Orphanage," the man replied, soothing, almost; not quite scared. "They might have had an insider. She could have talked any time," He met his eyes; genuine, intent, *blank*. "Chuuya, I would have *never* told."

The knife didn't shake in his grasp, because he knew better than that. He thought back to Hirotsu's body on the floor of the Hall, the surge of *anger* he'd felt — *I didn't even think you could die*. He thought of the first days in the organization, stomping his feet, running from a man he didn't trust on principle and whose approving winks he still treasured. Feeling mocked and stupid and *angry*, because he'd never been a child, and their play pretend wouldn't change anything.

*It's nice*, Yuan had said. *Having an adult worry about you*.

Right as Chuuya physically recoiled from the notion, sounds exploded throughout the Infirmary.

The doors were thrown open; the stretcher that was pushed inside carried what looked more like a scribble of a man — dripping red, black, viscera and pus from every inch of it. Murmurs of astonishment joined the show; the nurses screamed to make bystanders *move*, as doctors put their hands on the body before he'd even been laid on a bed.

“What the hell is that?” Hirotzu wondered.

A familiar face caught his attention.

Chuuya took his knife back, making his way to Koda's silhouette, standing still near the entrance doors. The old man tailed him; he couldn't bring himself to care.

“Koda,” He snapped his fingers in front of his face, trying to call his dazed eyes on him. “Koda, what happened to him? Are you okay?”

It took him a moment to focus on their faces; blood stained his face and his hands, all the way to the rifles still tight between his fingers. “I... Yes. It was — Ability User. Opened — he opened *all* his wounds.”

He froze.

“They *still* haven't captured him?” Hirotzu snapped, holding onto his IV with white knuckles. “This is too powerful of a threat to leave wandering freely outside.”

“What happened, exactly?” Chuuya repeated.

Koda gulped. “He sneaked behind the recognition squad. Two of them died before they could even muster up a *s-scream*. Too many scars. One of them had been impaled, once. And then — Rin shot him, and he escaped. We can't *f* — we can't locate him. We've tried. We had to bring Miro here,” Distantly, his eyes blurred. “He was a victim of an explosion, a few years ago.”

Another scream crawled out of the man's lips. Red bloomed all over the doctors and the nurses' clothing, as they worked on burned flesh. His monitor beeped slower and slower; every eye in the room was on them.

Pale, Koda straightened up. “I have to go.”

“*Wait*,” Chuuya had been trying to catch him for a talk for days now. “Wait, can you just —“

“I have to go,” he repeated. His words were butterfly wings. “I have to — he was our temporary commander. I have to... take his place.”

The idea settled uncomfortably in his hands; the veil on his eyes didn't make him more confident. “Koda, maybe —“

Too late; by the time he'd realized he didn't know what to say, the soldier had already left.

Miro screamed, again and again. His heart monitor curled in too straight lines.

It took him three more minutes to die.

Chuuya's bones were wet fabric.

Perhaps the sudden awakening was to blame — perhaps the unbridled risk of pointing a blade to the commander of the *Black Lizards*' throat. He felt Hirotsu's eyes trace the bluish stains under his eyes; he settled his jaw.

“So,” he concluded, monotonously. “I need a new apartment complex.”

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### **55 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

It was him they called when Dazai got shot.

Reasons thundered inside a bottle of beer he'd stolen from under Tanaki's desk. Perhaps none of his men had the guts to go against the clear order to keep the two of them away from medical cares — perhaps they couldn't stand the sight of the Mafia's uttermost-feared bleeding out.

*Are demons supposed to do that?*, he heard them ask, as he pushed his way through the *Special Unit* guarding the alley Dazai had holed up at the end of. *If we tried to touch him, would it go through?*

Chuuya thought them rather stupid, on principle. Cowardice was hardly ever not so.

“Keep the bedtime stories for slacking off nights,” he barked out, watching their spines snap straight. “Make sure the *Blades* are gone. If I catch any of you letting anybody know he's down, you'll be the ones pissing yourself in an alley.”

They obeyed — by proxy, he assumed. There was a competition, and there was a war, and there was *Chuuya and Dazai*, with the unspoken accord that one's plans were probably the other's. Dazai didn't have seconds in command. Dazai didn't care about authority. Dazai's men were ready to leave him to die. Dazai —

“Come on,” he told him, lightly kicking his side. “Come *on*. You can't die near Chinatown, Bandages. Those *Takasekai* assholes will claim your revolting corpse, and Mori will get mad.”

A sack of too-new bones still weighted like something that had a soul, he learned. Dazai's front bled on his back — incoherent, cheerful murmurs reached his ears all the way to the nearest safe-house of theirs, too precise not to be intended, too intended not to be delirious.

He thought about dragging him to *The Alley*; they had stuck an emergency kit in the hole in the wall. But the subordinates' faces were stuck under his eyelids, and Dazai had been left in an alley to bleed out in relieved silence.

He hosted him up higher. "Whatever."

Miracles and the ripped off sleeve of his shirt, tight around his torso, were all that kept him from bleeding out before the doorstep of a safehouse. By the time Chuuya dumped him inside the bathtub and turned the water on, his eyes had rolled to the back of his head.

Protocol was old; he stuck to it — because the rain from the shower-head couldn't hide any pimples, and he had a kill order for a small group from the Hounds in less than three hours.

"How did they get you?" Chuuya asked, pointlessly, brusquely, sinking in the rapidly increasing depths of the tub.

"Let them," was Dazai's uncaring murmur — unfazed by the hands removing his scarlet stained shirt, keeping the bandages where they were. Chuuya sunk his fingers deep in the bullet hole near his heart, the knife wound on his side. "I had poison in the cut their leader prodded. He had documents I needed in his pocket."

"You could have taken them from his corpse," Chuuya made him notice.

Genuine confusion crowded his eyes. "Yes," he agreed, waiting for his point.

Protocol was old; stitching up was the most boring part of the job. Dazai refused to cooperate for the savory taste of it — he stole thread and needles; he huffed and laid in all the wrong positions; he turned the shower-head off and on on repeat, soaking them to the bone and taking great pleasure from pinching the goosebumps on Chuuya's skin.

He sank his teeth in Chuuya's shoulder — because he refused to scream, even with fingers digging through his flesh for a lost bullet; because it was funnier than biting on a towel. Because he knew the sting was barely a *beep* in Chuuya's radar — but he also knew Chuuya *would* push him, and wrestling in a bathtub was the only way to keep the eerie quiet of the safe-house away from the air of their lungs.

All according to protocol.

From the space between the toilet and the bathtub, he grabbed a half-empty bottle of whiskey, shoving it into Dazai's chest.

He scoffed. "Your ass' already feverish," he concluded, pushing sweat-dripping bangs off of his clammy forehead. Scorching skin aside, the assortment of ghostly complexion and reddened eyes would have denounced the return of Dazai's most aggravating con — his

borderline useless immune system. “You’ll be dribbling snot all over the city before you know it.”

“So will you,” the boy sniffed. “You’re naked in freezing water. I would curse you with a thousand colds, but your stupidity needs no support.”

“I don’t get sick, Mackerel,” he reminded him. “And I have boxers.”

Distaste appeared through the haze of his eye. “You truly have no shame, do you?”

“Lost all of it in the slums,” Distractedly, Chuuya searched for the edge of the dossiers he’d abandoned. Blood was trailing down the knife wound in Dazai’s side; he frowned at it, uncertain of where his stitches had gone wrong. “Not much time for pudor when you live with a dozen other children in a house with no actual places to shit.”

“I suppose shame is subjective,” Dazai leaned his cheek to the side of the bathtub, allowing the cold ceramic to bloom scarlet stains on his cheeks. “When’s the last time you jerked off?”

Chuuya sent him a deadly glance.

“You’re no fun.”

“When’s the last time *you* did, asshat?”

“Right now.”

“Shut up.”

“Maybe you should jerk off more,” Dazai considered, with the tone of someone who could not believe something less. Delirium did to his musings what winter did to decaying flesh; there was logic in every sound out of his mouth, and his eyes were frantic in their unwillingness to move. Chuuya knew he should consider himself lucky; it was a good day. He hadn’t even tried to kill himself with anything at reach. “It’d do wonders for your unpleasant personality.”

He snorted. “Bet your sick ass passes out as soon as you touch your dick.”

“That only happened once.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Chuuya slapped some gauze over the stitches. Every light in the apartment flickered, mocked by the sudden explosion appearing from behind the moulded walls; the light bulb of the bathroom creaked miserably, before giving up the fight to stay on. Car alarms filled the silence. Dazai ripped the drain stopper off.

Heavy on his bones, he thought. The *silence*. Not being at the very center of that explosion.

“I have a job to do,” he insisted, countless, protesting the pull of the boy’s blood stained hands. “Stop acting like a child, I have to —“

“In two hours and thirteen minutes,” Dazai replied, not even opening his eyes, one side of his body pressed against the floor of the bathtub. “I will wash *all* your clothes in acid. I will draw moustaches on *every single one* of Mori’s paintings and blame you. I will tell Hirotsu you *cried* when he got shot —“

“I *didn’t fucking cry*, what are you even —“

They laid down, back to back, elbowing and kicking and cursing the narrow space, soaked and raining blood down the drain. Two of their safe-houses had been compromised in the last month; Chuuya’s tired mind tried to remind him of the warehouse he’d found as a possible substitute.

Nowhere was safe. No bathtub was small enough. No one could kill them.

Lullabies were an abstract concept, the way warmth had once been, but Chuuya hummed that old melody he sometimes recalled all the same. The ear he wasn’t pressing against the ceramic caught the *tip-tap* of the broken faucet, and the cartoons channel from the TV in what had once been a living room.

Hair brushed his own. A buzz seemed to come from the ceramic. Fingers tapped his side. *Whoever closes their eyes first loses*, it said.

Chuuya turned when he did. Nose to nose, he studied the bruises under his eyes.

[“*Your problem, Chuuya,*” Kouyou had said, “*is the same as mine.*”]

“Whoever closes them first wins,” he replied.

“That seems boring,” Dazai said, nonplussed. His fingers were spasming.

He had emptied out his pockets as they crossed the threshold to the bathroom; the assortment of medicine stolen from the infirmary was a constellation. Oxy? Robaxin? The suicide pills from the *Nine Rings Conflict*?

Water drops. Ivy, in the warehouse he’d decimated before receiving the call. Dazai’s blood under his nails. *Come take him or we’ll have to leave him here. Sir.*

[“*You care too much about the unsavable*”].

“It’s not,” Chuuya concluded. “Whoever closes them first wins.”

Somehow, they slept.

He cursed Dazai all the way to his next assignment, late for it and uncomfortably filthy, enraged for the lack of time he’d had to come up with a revenge on his surprisingly still asleep body.

He took down the group; stretched his fingers in his gloves until he was sure they would break; stood guard in front of the seven body-bags of subordinates that were brought to him, hands crossed and Flags' vows on his tongue.

*The dead are to be respected*, Doc would chirp.

*The dead do not give a shit*, Iceman would reply.

"Here," Dazai ordered, the moment he returned, moonlight over stolen clothes, scissors in hand. Chuuya knew he had entertained himself by cutting up every piece of clothing he'd dared to leave in the safe-house. "Cut my hair."

*Why*, he almost asked. *No*, he almost said. *Leave me alone. I didn't even know the names of those body bags. I'm not cutting your shitty hair.*

"I'm not cutting your shitty hair."

"You've been telling me to cut it since June."

"Yeah," he said. "So get it cut."

Dazai's glance was patronizing enough to burn. "You're stupider than I thought, if you think I'll let anyone do it."

*Am I not anyone?*, he almost asked, and he didn't, because the possibilities made him nauseous — the idea that fingers tracing scars down his chest might have meant something more than fascination. Dazai was Dazai, and his fascination ended where Chuuya's skin looked the most human.

"Surprised you'd let me put something sharp near your neck," Chuuya said, instead. "I might just do myself a great favor, while I'm at it."

"Oh," He shrugged. His shirt was too big on him. Perhaps, he noted, it was simply always tucked too tightly into his pants. Pristine and expensive and *little lord*, Yuan would have called him. Extracting another pair of scissors from unbuttoned pants, the boy concluded: "I have leverage."

His legs grew more used to the porcelain of the bathtub with every slight inconvenience of life. The clothes he'd let the midnight wind dry were soaked once again, because Chuuya only knew hair was meant to be cut wet. Cut off strands surrounded them — and it was just a bit disgusting, just a bit exhausting.

Just a bit irritating, the steady gaze of Dazai's eyes, — *eyes*, even the blind one and its strangely vital nonexistent light — and the stubbornly raised hand he kept near Chuuya's shoulder, scissors blade brushing his ponytail.

Not *uncomfortable*, not exactly. There, in the way of stars; in the way of corpses, on the News channel they'd turned on from the old TV.



Dazai stared, through cell bars of wet hair and wearing an overly naked face — his clothes floated in the water. “Are you the reason why every single one of the Sheep looked like a sorrowful little orphan?”

“The Sheep were all orphans,” Chuuya replied, distractedly. “And I was *no* *hairstylist*. The brats did the damage all by themselves.”

*Snap!* “Could you truly kill me with those?” he asked, for the pleasure of wasting air on questions whose answers he knew.

“I could kill you with anything.”

“Not your Ability.”

*Snap!*

“Arahaki could kill you,” he reminded him, like they both didn’t know. Dazai studied him like he knew too much. “A boulder thrown right into your scrawny face would certainly do some damage.”

“Then you’d be killing me with a boulder.”

*Snap!* “That’s not —“

He paused.

It started somewhere between his ribs; someplace warm. Climbed up his throat with the masterful ways of desperate disuse; rattled his teeth so violently the waves of it shook every muscle of his face.

In the stillness, Chuuya snorted.

“What?” Dazai asked, suspicious.

“You look fuckin’ ridiculous.”

An offended hum abandoned his lips. Chuuya paid it no mind — he gathered more hair from the muddy strands brushing his eyelashes, pushed them all out of the way to leave his forehead naked. Hilarity wrecked his frame, coming out in choked sounds.

“It’s not that funny,” the boy noted.

“I get why you grow your hair out like a hobo.”

His eye *tic*-ed. “You’re braver than I first assumed, considering how absurdly tempted I am to use the scissors in my hand.”

“Do it, and you’ll be *Big Forehead McDazai* for the rest of your days,” Chuuya threatened. “Maybe I’ll get you a headband. You can wear it the next time you lose at *Smash Smash!*,” *Snap!* “With little dead fish on it? What do you say?”

“You’re having so much fun with so *little*, it’s almost sad.”

*Childlike* was Chuuya’s most precious filthy cloak to lay on the shoulders of the deadliest boy he knew. The lack of bandages squeezed the danger out of his features. He had blood smeared on his clothes and stunningly big eyes; for a single moment, he understood Kouyou’s tipsy admission to having tried to dress him up as a schoolboy, once, back when Mori had brought him along.

Reality crashed with effectiveness: the unexpected *snap!* that choked the silence out of the bathroom — too close to his ear.

None of their subordinates dared to speak up, once they rejoined the troops. They had to wait for Kajii to come around and snicker — asking where they had found the time to go to a barber during a war.

Now devoid of a ponytail and a whole chunk of bangs respectively, both scratched by scissors all over their faces, Chuuya and Dazai didn’t say a thing.

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### **51 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

An entire squadron from the *GSS* died in a shooting near the Headquarters. He found Rin and Kenta on the stone stairs, soaked in blood all the way to their once-silver hair, the only souls in a mile with rifles in their hands.

“It didn’t feel like anything,” Rin confessed, staring blankly ahead. “I knew most of them, but it didn’t feel like anything.”

Kenta hummed. “I think Shinso was the first to die.”

She snorted. “Predictable.”

“Predictable,” he echoed.

And then he threw up.

Chuuya couldn’t do much more than sit with them and offer them a cigarette; it didn’t feel like they were expecting anything more, though. He understood what they felt and didn’t — he’d never actually had to fight the Sheep. Perhaps they would have had more empathy.

Traitors, though — traitors, he didn't understand.

But *these* traitors were his friends. They had gladly dragged him home anytime he forgot he couldn't drink more than two glasses. Rin had taken a bullet for him. Kenta wanted to ask Virgil out and marry him the same night. So he sat, and he *tried*.

"It wasn't them we wanted to leave," Rin explained — maybe to him, maybe to the ghosts she didn't believe in. "We left a place that was rotting us from the inside. Not the people who held us through that destruction."

"Shinso *sucked* with a gun," Kenta sighed, face first in his own vomit, eyes glossy in a way he knew he would beg not to remember. "What a fucking moron he was."

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#### **49 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*"Almost a year since the death of beloved actor and philanthropist, Lippman H —"*

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#### **47 days until the end of the Dragon Head conflict.**

*Sleep is a luxury, and opulence is short-lived in the trenches,* Kouyou had told him, once her before-sunrise training routine had begun, an endless time ago. *If you fall asleep on your feet, I will ask Golden Demon to skew you.*

Mori was courteous enough to inform him that all the makeshift bedrooms of the five Buildings were occupied; Chuuya came to find it meant: *hope you're lucky enough to find an empty room when you need it.* He could have stayed at one of Kouyou's homes, probably, but

he soon discovered that never having to leave the workplace — made *work* much more efficient.

“I don’t think being here all the time is a good idea, Chuuya,” Kajii was the one to tell him, one night, as they met in the *Entrance Hall* for an infiltration. “You should spend at least a few hours somewhere that isn’t — you know. *Bloody* and *gloomy* — and your *workplace*.”

*I’m here all the time anyway*, he didn’t say. With his mind and with the repressed energy in his spine, making him scratch his skin as if could rip it and let it out. If he wasn’t allowed to *do*, he could at least sit near the starting line.

He wasn’t the only one. Finding mafiosi asleep in the hallways was all but a rare sight; the squad tended to pile as close as they could in a specific abandoned office at *Building Five*. Night and day were the same; snores filled the silence at the most various times, light sleep that would be shaken by too-close footsteps.

Having sworn off sleeping on floors for the rest of his life — Chuuya took advantage of the general tendency to avoid his gaze to secure the uncomfortable, golden lined couches littering the hallways of *Building One*.

“You’re so *stingy* with space,” Dazai whined, from the other end of the couch, sinking his muddy shoes in his side. “How does someone so imperceptibly small occupy so much *space*?”

As far as he knew, the boy’s shipping container had not been considered compromised — because Mori was Mori, and Dazai had always had different rules. Him being stuck at the HQs was a sign of the height of the conflict; whenever Chuuya passed the doors to the Boss’ office, he was guaranteed to see him leave or enter the room.

Gravity was something he understood. Whatever it was that kept pulling the two of them in the same square of air — he knew it had nothing to do with it.

Perhaps, easily enough, it was bad luck.

[“Just look for Chuuya,” he heard Elise say, to a member of the Intelligence looking for Dazai].

“Find another couch,” Chuuya muttered, some days later, as he fell on the closest surface. The winter sun was high and bright in the sky; he was still drying up from the storm that had caught the squad near the eastern border. “Sleep under a fucking desk, since you’re so *fond*.”

“I hope those foolish words you love to spit around choke you, one of these days,” was Dazai’s reply, half hanging from the armrest, eyes closed. “And desks are good for *thinking*, thank you. *Not* sleeping.”

He was too exhausted to fight. The moment his cheek connected with a thigh — good quality pants; the insufferable texture Dazai preferred in his every piece of clothing — he was back on bloodied concrete, with Arahabaki too satisfied to knock.

Dazai's head landed somewhere near his own legs; then he was out.

When the hallways were too crowded and his trust in any body apart from his own were too low — he took refuge in one of the safe houses still standing. Dazai's presence there was sporadic; his tendency was to sleep in the bathtub, for some reason. Sometimes — when no other place was empty and *silent-but-loud* enough — they stayed in Kouyou's makeshift room. Backs to her bed, working on reports and plans they — officially — weren't allowed to share with the other.

"I'm getting bored," Dazai said, one evening, head tilted back against the hospital bed. A few aisles away, one or two patients were tearing their throats apart. "No one has told me to stand straighter in *forever*. When is the Sleeping Beauty going to wake up?"

Dazai's lap overflowed in maps and reports, as he muttered in other languages and scribbled all over the chocolate-stained paper with a glittery pen that had Elise's name all over it. The exhausted line of his back paused at the dip between their shoulders, before restarting with Chuuya's own.

His fingers spasmed, involuntarily. He counted water drops on the floor, dripping from his nails, from his hair — an accident near the port. There was something in Chuuya's chest that demanded him to breathe — he wanted to curl around it, arms tight around his knees, all to make sure it wouldn't escape.

More shrieks echoed off the walls; they rattled the windows and his skeleton alike. He was rarely affected by these kinds of sounds. But every water drop was a roar, every heartbeat a storm; childishly, he wished he could put his hands on his ears and —

Kouyou's sleeping frame was a familiar picture; he didn't turn to look at her. "Her medical records are alright. Recovery is guaranteed to be smooth. She just won't wake up."

"As I said," he huffed, but there was little energy in it. Eyes were eyes; Chuuya didn't know *what* about Dazai's told him he'd spent the night in the dungeons, but it was there. "Lazy."

For that, he slapped his nape.

"You know," Chuuya licked chapped lips. "It could be worse," He closed his eyes; yawned. "At least they *die* when we hit them."

A snort. "The *Souls* were rather stubborn."

The screams subdued. Less than a breath later, the agonizing crying started.

Hirotsu came to check on them, seemingly bearing no antagonism for Chuuya. Another dozen wounded were brought in. Kouyou did not wake up. At some point, miraculously enough, Dazai's eyelids began to drop.

The sight was aberrant enough to keep Chuuya still — even when Dazai's body fell sideways between the hug of his chest and knees. Maps and reports spread on the floor. His eye was closed, only fluttering along to the calm breathing pattern of his chest.

[“*You always look mad when you sleep,*” Doc had told him, once].

Crying turned into hollering; the frequency of it popped something in the depths of his skull.

He fixed Dazai’s body so that his head would be pressed against his waist instead, crossing his arms upon his side. He laid his chin on it; caged the breathing close to his chest — relished in the *quiet*. Chuuya needed more.

Finding a free bed in the endless rooms of the Headquarters was a stroke of luck. Most rooms hosted bunk beds and non-descriptive desks — the bathrooms, at least, were untouched by the blood and organs staining every outside wall.

As it went, Chuuya was rarely awake enough to scoot the floors to find a possibly empty room. Whenever it happened, he made sure to make his presence known — a crater or two outside the door would usually do. Sharing hadn’t been his thing since the Sheep.

Again, only one person seemed to miss the memo. The insomniac one.

“Remember that time we got in a fight at that one *konbini* Tanaki sent us to, and that grandma told us to go back to school?” Dazai asked, leaning over the edge of the top bunk — low enough that it was a wonder he wasn’t falling.

Eyes to the wall, Chuuya pretended not to hear.

“Was it that time you almost gave me a concussion with a baguette?” he continued, undeterred. “Or was that when I beat your record at *Shooter 300*?”

“You *never* beat that record, you *liar* — “

Days later, as they were curled up in the further corner of an empty hallway, coats stuck to the wall with medical tape like a makeshift curtain, he said: “I’m hungry. Let’s go eat somewhere.”

“We can’t,” Chuuya reminded him, pressed against the wall. “We’ve been banned from every diner in the city.” Fights tended to break too easily wherever they went; *shadows of the Port Mafia* had a nice ring to it — but he bet whatever name the food chains of Yokohama had given them was nicer.

“Not from the *Arcade*,” Dazai insisted, throwing himself over him until he could blink at him upside down. “They give out chips. ”

“No, that too. We just pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Of course we do,” he considered — always the *clever* one.

Chuuya wanted to shake him. *Two halves don’t make a whole*, he would have spat in his mouth, until it reached his skull and got rattled around enough to *stick* — but it was pointless, because Dazai already knew all he had ever *considered*, and he only did things to show off that he knew them first. *Two halves don’t make a whole, and we’re barely a quarter.*

*Two hopeful fools won't make a man, he wouldn't say, and I won't make you any more human at all.*

On the bloodier days, the conflict seeped underneath the door, and it soaked the sheet until they were too cold to lie in. On those days, they laid maps on the floors and they plotted, begging the clock to land on the time to escape that cage they had locked themselves into.

“Only the *Bishop's Staff* left,” Dazai whispered. Smart in the way of prodigies, he had managed to take imperceptible steps everyday — and the end of the race was under the blankets of Chuuya's bed. “And the fools that keep drooling on the doorstep.”

“Isn't *shitting* a better term?” he replied, too tired to even keep his eyes open.

A huff of air hit his face.

His body wasn't sure of whether to scoot closer or move away. Dazai would have never admitted it, but Chuuya knew that — for whatever reason — he slept better like that. Knees were pressed against his own; there was a voice in the back of his mind telling him to reach *forward* — sleep quietly.

He didn't do it.

“Doesn't matter,” the Demon Prodigy concluded. Their badly cut strands of hair got tangled up. “We'll put an end to this boring farce soon enough.”

At some point, they began fighting for a room, discovering the full capacity of the murmurs draped all over them like a veil. A bed was more tempting than a couch or a safe house's mattress on the floor — but the more the war lasted, the less he could care about the idea of resting a moment more.

They returned from duo missions; they stumbled up the stairs, because Chuuya still refused to enter the elevator and Dazai still refused to stop asking after it — and when he dropped on the nearest bed, he didn't flinch at the second indent in the mattress any longer.

“Bet you a *Smash Smash* session we end it this week,” Dazai would yawn, sometimes, under the cocoon of the covers — a dome upon too small bodies for a city tearing itself apart.

For the sake of arguing, Chuuya would yawn too — *a nice quirk*, Doc had called, *how we are all thieves, in the end* — and say: “Bet you my 73th revenge method we end it tomorrow.”

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## 40 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

Hirotsu's Ability was solemn in its anger, but lethal all the same.

He appeared at the front doors of the Headquarters like a thundering god from the stories Virgil loved to blabber about — the cigarette in his hand was premature, but a promise in its nature. The crowd attacking the building paused along with the smoke he breathed out.

“He missed the action, didn't he?” Rin whistled, watching the purple strikes of his Ability tear into flesh. “Has he been informed about the *don't kill too many* order?”

“He won't care,” Chuuya replied, eyes stuck to the scene. The first he'd seen of Hirotsu Ryuro was his Ability; the last he'd see of him would probably match that fateful encounter. The King of the Sheep had respected strength more than most things — being the only person in Suribachi City with an Ability, powerful visitors from Yokohama had been the highlight of his days.

*I can teach you*, the man had told him, only once. He had done something cool with his gun; Chuuya had hated being caught. *If you want*.

Joining their command, the *Black Lizards* roared.

“Oh, Hirotsu is back?” Mori commented, at the end of the day, with borderline genuine surprise. “How wonderful. Hirotsu, how would you feel about eradicating what's left of the *KK Company*? Is your heart feeling alright?”

Upon a puddle of blood from the edges of his own coat, the man smiled. Upon the Boss' shoulder, he met Chuuya's eyes, and winked. “My heart is right where it should be, Boss.”

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## 37 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

*“Another attack, this time near the suburbs, caused an earthquake of unprecedented vitality — and of dubious naturality, seeing how the Government refuses to answer clearly to the most demanded question of the last few months: what are they going to do about the Ability Users destroying our city? It seems —”*



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### 36 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

The unsterilized blankets were moved aside with little grace. “Move your shitty backside,” Chuuya ordered, quietly, not to disrupt the ever so rare silence of the Infirmary.

Dazai’s reddened, sweaty face appeared, blinking confusedly at his climbing silhouette. “Chuuya?” he croaked, in *that way* — not one of his nicknames, though it felt like it should have been; the, *I always know when it’s you*, kind of way; the, *don’t ask me why I ask anyway*. His unfocused eyes were spinning around frantically, alerted and *insisting*, unwilling to match the sickly embrace of his whole body.

“Yes, yes, don’t piss your pants. Move.”

The bed was a nest of unhealthy warmth and sweat; the brush of those filthy blankets on naked skin, when his shirt rose with the effort of slipping in, was enough to twist his nose. Under the stunned gaze and crimson stains on Dazai’s cheeks, he settled the blankets all the way to their chins. “Heard your dumb ass got himself sick *again*. Like the fucking moron you are.”

“It’s not my fault if we’re in the rain season,” the boy protested, nasally. “Don’t tell Mori I’m here.”

“I’m not *stupid*,” he mumbled, hanging his hat by the headboard. “It’s not like —“

“Don’t tell Mori,” Dazai insisted, cutting him off sharply enough to make him blink. Something in his eye was begging to grow dark; it was too blurred to. “He said no doctors. It’s just very *loud*, everywhere. But no doctors. Don’t tell Mori.”

Chuuya stared.

“We’re just sleeping,” he said, tentatively. There was something he was missing, he knew; something as secret as the shut doors of Mori’s office, and the blown out pupil the boy sometimes sported when he left it — the frequency with which he’d had to remove a gun from his grasp these last few weeks. “It’s late. I just came back from a mass shooting near our warehouse. He should have furnished more rooms, if he didn’t want us to steal the nearest free bed.”

[*Chuuya wasn’t blind. He just wasn’t —*]

Somehow, the words settled him down.

“Stop that,” Dazai lamented, eventually. “It’s loud and aggravating. Just like you.”

“Stop what?”

Warm fingers removed his hands from his arms, pausing the scratching. “He can’t eat away your skin, anyway,” A sneeze. “Unfortunately.”

How unstoppable it was, he thought — to be known, to some extent. Arahabaki had been a secret for as long as he could remember; he didn’t know if either of them would ever truly enjoy the company.

*There’s decay everywhere, he could have told him. It’s unfair to keep him locked. There’s so much. It’s going to go to waste.*

Instead, he studied the sweaty stains of white fabric on his face, hiding the half that wasn’t sunk in his pillow. He tapped on it. A bit brusque, softened by the whisper-like shade of his tone, he asked: “Can I take these off?”

Hesitation sagged the space between their bodies.

“There are curtains,” Chuuya reminded him. *There’s only me.* “At worst, I’ll just strangle you with the pillow to hide you from sight.”

A tap on his nose. *I hope you die.*

He had to search for the metal clip, hand in his matted hair, watching Dazai’s eyelid tremble with it. He hung the bandages around the metal railings of the bed; the clip clinked, only once.

The sight of his uncovered face only heightened the sickness he radiated; a mixture of unusual youth and the ruined dress shirt he wore, no tie. Chuuya’s little finger was caught: Dazai’s own wrapped around it with ephemeral strength, pulling at the fabric of his glove until he got the message. With a huff, he removed both gloves.

“One tacky accessory less,” Dazai noted, satisfied. “Now we just need to burn your hat.”

“I’ll burn *you*. ”

“I’ll stick you in those paper grinders Hirotzu likes.”

“I’ll ask Elise to make you wear a schoolgirl dress.”

He gasped, offended. Chuuya took his face in his now naked palms, tilting it up to study a new scar between his eyebrows. His eyelids fluttered shut; he sighed, going pliant in his grasp. “Cold,” he murmured, deliriously, pressing harder against his fingers. Chuuya could understand — he was a living furnace, marking his hands with clammy, scarlet cheeks.

“You look like a dead fish,” he concluded. “Even more than usual. The *stench* is that, too.”

Touch evaded Chuuya like a subject the Sheep had had no time to teach. But it never failed to shut Dazai up — an assortment of longing and astonishment that he probably didn't think he'd noticed. He had pushed him away from a hidden mine, the last time they'd seen each other; had held onto his wrists like there was more reason than survival to it.

"Hey," he sighed, because fair was *fair*. "Tell me shit about bugs."

"I don't like bugs anymore," Dazai whined.

"I thought they were your favorites."

"No," Dazai said. He moved his head in his grasp, just barely — just enough for his thumbs to land underneath his eyes, where skin grew in the colors of the Bay. "You didn't."

Always the smart one.

He sighed. "Tell me shit about snakes, then."

"I want Kazuko," His hands slipped off his face; sinking his face in the pillow, Dazai sighed, too. "Did you see the new squadron at *Building Four*?"

A frown. "Yes."

"And?"

It took him a moment to swerve through the possible requests of that nonexistent question. Eventually, he landed on: "How would you kill the undercut bastard? The one who carries those big ass guns around."

"That's boring," Dazai sniffed; he scooted closer, staring up at him with quiet wonder. It was an agonizingly young expression. He realized, a bit belatedly, that he had never dared to be the one entering *his* bed. "How would you frame him for murder?"

He fell asleep mid conversation; Chuuya stayed where he was, because the other option was sitting next to Kouyou's bedside and watch lines that refused to change until he started to blink. He stole the warmth; kept himself from scratching his skin as much as he could; focused on the eventual cough and murmur from behind the curtains, ready to pull the blanket and hide them.

*Don't tell Mori.*

Naked fingers did not deserve to go to waste; he traced the veins underneath Dazai's blind eye with his index, feeling the slight bumps of the barely-there scars surrounding the eyelid.

Revenge method number 54, he recalled, demanded him to sit a few inches from the glowing screen of a *Smash Smash!* station, eyes forcefully separated, until he began to cry. Simple enough even the Sheep would have praised it — expected enough the Flags would have snickered, the memory of the afternoons Chuuya had been dragged to the Arcade by the local demon all too fresh in their minds.

His nape was a lake of sweat that made him retch — nonetheless, when a mumble escaped the Dazai's lips, after an accidental knot of his fingers with the hair tickling his neck — he didn't move.

"I had such a weird dream," he mumbled, at some point; and if Chuuya hadn't heard the change in his heartbeat, he might have been surprised. "Chuuya was a dog. That's the realistic part. But I think you were chasing Kajii down the street? That's realistic, also. And then Beatrice appeared, and she asked me to play her a song," He stretched in that contained space. "Dreams are intriguing."

"I wouldn't know," Chuuya said, before he could convince himself not to. "I don't dream."

A pause. "Never?"

"Never."

"You don't *remember* dreaming."

"No," He shook his head, pulling at the sheets of the mattress, looking at nothing over his shoulder. "I just don't. It's — shit from the lab. In whatever sense. Clones don't dream," He frowned. "Neither do experiments."

Genuine confusion painted his features. Perhaps it would have been hidden better, had he been more in his right mind. "But you're —" His lips shut. "That's stupid."

The instinct to start a fight rattled his spine. "I know it's fucking *stupid*, thank you very much."

"No, I mean —" Frustration shut him up again. "Whatever. *Whatever*, I —"

Murmurs appeared behind the curtains.

Chuuya reacted quicker than even he had expected; his fist closed in a death grip around the back of Dazai's skull, pulling him under the covers he threw over their heads. His other hand landed somewhere around his blind eye, an unlikely eyepatch — automatically, the way they'd learned slipping through vents and sewers, their bodies curved around each other, turning them into a mere bump underneath white sheets.

*Don't let Mori —*

The sound of the curtains being pulled aside made them stiffen; two nurses said something about a sleeping patient.

Their steps pressed Dazai's fingers harder against his mouth; he kept the urge to bite them off to himself, eyes tightly shut, hearing nothing but his heartbeat and the one against him.

Years later, the nurses yawned, pulling the curtains back as they moved on to the next section.

Since illness was a hushed curse upon Dazai's body, he didn't erupt in a coughing fit as soon as they dropped back straight on the bed. His chest hit the mattress with an imperceptible,

*frustrated* groan — he landed nose first on Chuuya’s shoulder, and Chuuya kept his eyes on the ceiling, counting reasons to push him and his snotty face aside. Relief sunk them deeper and *deeper* down the bed — an awkward intake of air, between a kid getting scolded and a soldier being executed.

*It doesn’t fit*, he thought, nonsensically. Led lights on the ceiling and blood under his nails; he’d have to be up soon enough. *I don’t know where to put it.*

Dazai’s stomach rumbled. He longed for a console, some video game he might lose his mind over. Another grenade pin between his teeth. For Kouyou to wake up. For the war to be over; for the war to never end. For Mori not to exchange him with something more useful than he’d managed to make himself, as soon as the streets were no longer black and red.

*This youth — I don’t know where to put it.*

“Dreaming,” he murmured. “What does dreaming feel like?”

The words were bit into his shoulder. “Like what you feel when you genuinely believe you’ll become an Executive.”

Chuuya sunk his nails on his nape; traced the tattoo he couldn’t see, underneath bandages and bandages.

“Like a story,” Dazai said, eventually, more than an hour later. His cheek was on the pillow; they faced each other even like that, and he could have pressed himself against the metal railing and *stepped away* — and he didn’t. “Sometimes good, sometimes bad. Most times it makes no sense. Like growing numb under Elise’s squeaks about her dolls’ latest conversation.”

Chuuya didn’t speak.

“Hey,” He perked up. “Do you want me to tell you a story?”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Here’s the story,” Ignoring him, as it went, Dazai cleared his throat. Resigned to his fate — to the gravity pulling his eyelids closed, pulling them too close on a spacious bed; the gravity that gravity was *not* — he bit his tongue and he listened. “I met this cat, once. He carried a cane everywhere.”

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### 38 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“I don’t want it,” Noguchi admitted, fixing Yuan’s sleeping head on the back of her seat.

He kept quiet.

“The Executive seat. I don’t want it.”

“I know you don’t,” Chuuya said.

They dragged body bags across the floor, and the man spilled the matter all over the floor again — next to blood he was losing from the bullet wound they’d bandaged to the best of their abilities. “I think you’d be good at it, though.”

Chuuya zipped the bag closed; the sound as familiar as his heart flow in his ears. “At what?”

“Being an Executive.”

He wasn’t quick enough to hide his surprise.

“You — save people,” Noguchi continued. His cheek brushed the ground; all he could see was the edge of his tattoo. “Whenever you can, however you can. The men talk about it. They’re not used to commanders throwing themselves into the battle before they are ordered to. They admire that you’d take a bullet for the lowest ranked of them.”

He kept his eyes on the fabric. “Saving is a secondary issue in criminal organizations.”

“Said criminal organizations wouldn’t *exist*, if someone didn’t bother saving those who make it.”

Heat flicked his fingers, spreading up and down his gloves. Chuuya was done with unworthy victims. Chuuya was pent up to the tip of his bones. He couldn’t get *tired*.

“You save people,” Noguchi concluded. The guilt in his tone could have eaten him alive.

“Mafia or not Mafia. That’s what an Executive should do, I think.”

*Be grateful, Chuuya.*

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### 34 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

Q was holding Mori's hand.

"Give me a moment," the man said, abandoning the child on the armrest of his seat. He spoke into his phone — seemingly blind to the speechless drape embracing the Executive tables.

Ace and the Colonel exchanged a heavy look, on opposite sides of Q's distracted humming. Taking advantage of the distraction, Chuuya pulled Dazai behind the nearest column, hiding them from the Executives' questions. "Did you *know* about this?" he hissed. "Has he gone senile or something?"

"Well, Q needs to be *used*, at some point," the boy replied. "It's in the word. Ability *User*."

He stared. "Last time we let them out, they attempted to murder the entire lobby of *Building Three* in cold blood."

"They also helped us, in Rengoku."

"Because we were controlling them," he insisted. "Who has time to babysit a psychopath during a war? I'm already dealing with you."

Genuine surprise marked his next words. "And here I thought you'd gotten attached to the brat. They have a little hat and everything."

"It's *not* —" Frustration sagged through his teeth. Lowering his voice, he snapped: "I lost an entire squadron to *Takasekai* yesterday, *all* because Koda wasn't fully in his brain. Q is *not stable*. They need training, and to metabolize *why* Mori stuck them in a high security cage. We can't deal with this, too."

Thoughts traveled behind several invisible layers on Dazai's sole visible eye, too quick to follow. Abruptly — regretfully enough to jolt him into stillness — Chuuya got the feeling of having made a mistake.

"Forgive the interruption," Mori offered a tense smile to the table, settling back on his seat. Leaning one gloved hand on Q's shoulder, he continued: "I suppose I should ask whether there are any questions."

His tone wasn't particularly inviting. Nonetheless, Ace was uncharacteristically bold enough to clear his throat. "Boss, are you — absolutely *sure*, this is the best course of action?"

"The Port Mafia's major strength has always been its Ability Users," the Colonel intervened, surprisingly. Chuuya, who had thought they were all on the same wave of length, snapped his head to him. "While perhaps — *uncertain*, at times, Q's Ability is powerful. Enough to get us through the last defenses for the codes. Maybe," He intertwined his hands. "Maybe, even to retrieve our codes from the *Bishop's Staff*."

Mori smiled; mockery lined it like fake silver. "Couldn't have said it better, Colonel."

“But will they collaborate?” Ace insisted.

Q tilted their head to the side, realizing all the attention had moved to them. The overgrown pullover they wore hid hands and arms he knew to be scarred — he wondered, sometimes, whether taking the blades off wouldn’t have solved many of their problems.

With wide, entertained eyes, they teased: “Q wants the doll back.”

Chuuya knew. He’d heard them talk about it relentlessly, during every visit he’d forced himself through in the name of — *something*. Misplaced empathy; Arahabaki’s unusually delicate claws tearing his chest apart whenever he dared to visualize a child stuck in a metal cage, surrounded by soldiers and needles. *It doesn’t hurt*.

He had grown up around children with eyes just like theirs. Lesson learned; he didn’t trust them one bit.

“—to guard them,” Mori was explaining, still. “Dazai is the best option, of course. But I need him. Someone will have to dedicate themselves to the task with more frequency, until we get a hold of at *least* another code.”

“What about Koda Katsumi?”

For a single moment, Chuuya failed to connect the voice filling the waiting silence with the body next to his. Once he did, he stiffened, fingers curling into the column — he would have wiped the betrayed look off his face with his nails, had he been able to.

“From Chuuya’s squad?” Mori asked, blinking curiously at the boy, now standing at the other end of the table. “Why him in particular?”

Dazai didn’t waste a second. “He’s to indirectly blame for the annihilation of Squadron 45, down the Bankoku Bridge,” he reported, ignoring the widening cracks Chuuya’s fingers were leaving in the marble, underneath his feet — into the temple he was piercing with his eyes. “His brother was one of the victims from the *Wild Geese Orphanage* massacre. He has been difficult to control. Several attempts on my life were put in place — which I can only thank him for, of course. I believe a break from his duties might help.”

All was static.

*He could have heard a pin drop*, Chuuya thought. He could have slit Dazai’s throat open with it.

“Is that so?” Mori’s toneless remark raised every hair in his body. “Nothing of the sorts was reported.”

“Koda is under control, sir,” Chuuya spoke up, taking a step forward. Anger shook his frame only harder than it poisoned his letters; he felt Dazai’s eyes on him, and he *wanted* to — “Grief has made him less precise, but he is still one of my most competent men. The accident at Bankoku Bridge — I was the one to send him with the group. I reported as much; I take the blame for it.”



Chin on his hands, the Boss hummed, pensive. Q was waving at him. They had never looked so excited.

“The kid will need guards,” the ex-doctor noted, a bit distractedly. He nodded. “Alright. Koda will direct the group. Colonel, he’ll report to you, and you will let me know how he intends to proceed. He is excused from any other occupation — work with Chuuya’s squad included,” His seat didn’t screech when he stood up; he was reminded, somewhat pointlessly, of just how much *taller* he sometimes looked. “Q is to be *never* left alone. Understood?”

The Colonel bowed his head.

“This is a second chance. Should he somehow be — *lacking*, in his duties,” Mori added, eyes settled on Dazai’s undeterred gaze. “He will be punished for all the trouble he has caused. Permanently.”

He froze.

“As for you, Chuuya.”

*Pin drop*, he thought. *Pin drop* —

“Your loyalty is admirable,” the Boss concluded, once the silence was no longer to his taste. “But you *will* be asked to put it aside, for the well-being of the organization. I trust you will be able to. Clear?”

Because it was expected, Chuuya kneeled to the ground, hat in hand and —

“This isn’t going to solve anything!” Madame Tanaki snapped, pushing Dazai away from his clawed grasp, pulling at his severed strands to get him away from his silhouette on the floor. “Chuuya, stop it — stop it *right now* —!”

“He needs to keep my friends’ names out of his *fucking mouth*!” he snarled, fighting against her grip, munching on his words along to the blood pooling from his split lip. The *Entrance Hall* had been emptied out the moment the two of them appeared, bruised and screaming and pushing each other down the stairs; Chuuya hadn’t seen any of it. His eyes were *stuck*. “I’m not fucking *letting him* put his dirty tongue where it *doesn’t fucking belong* again —“

“Look at you,” Dazai mocked, toneless and blank, dragging his bandaged wrist up the blooming blood of his eyebrow. “So much for being *loyal to the organization*. Causing problems as soon as one of your *beloved* children pulls at your gown —“

“I was *dealing with him*!”

“You,” Bark and no bite — teeth indents in the quiet of his eyes, “— were letting him fail his missions.”

“You got his *brother killed* —“

His laughter was a spit. “I’d do it again.”

“*Dazai!*” Madame Tanaki thundered. “This isn’t the *time* to fight with each other —“

Chuuya didn’t hear anything of it. He escaped her grasp with some well placed kicks he would regret later, and paid no mind to her rage — all he saw was red, was Arahabaki’s laughter down his skin, *scraping, scratching*; was Doc’s upper body on the floor and Lipmman’s hand on the edge of Verlaine’s truck, and *all of it was his plan*, the clammy skin under his fists, as he kept him down and punched, punched, *punched* —

“I’m killing you,” he promised, fingers locked around the collar of his shirt, foreheads so close they were brushing, bleeding on him and smelling his blood. *What does dreaming feel like?* “I’m *killing* you, this is a *promise* —“

Drool and red on his teeth, all Dazai did was stare up at him — impassible. Bored. Untouched by it. *This is my carcass and you cannot hurt it.*

“You liar,” he said.

Before Chuuya could strike again, arms wrapped around his middle, bodily pulling him away from his target — too strong to be Madame Tanaki, too quiet, as he dragged him out of the glass doors and threw him on the sidewalk, until the sound of her worries and Dazai’s *nothingness* were muffled and distant. He panted, fingers sinking in the concrete, smashing and creaking and destroying, and —

“On your feet,” the Colonel ordered, blocking the doors. “Ability Users don’t belong to the ground.”

“What the fuck do you want?” he growled.

“For you not to kill one of our aces out of some misplaced sense of loyalty,” was his answer, simple. Chuuya climbed to his feet, purely to feel less like had to look up at him; his posture was that of a soldier, and he could not stand the sight — had grown sick of it, after years he didn’t even remember. “We don’t have time for children.”

“*He —!*“

“Nakahara,” Firmly, he stared him down. “Remember yourself.”

He breathed.

Sunk his nails in his palms; breathed again.

“Come on. Take a cigarette. We need to talk.”

It took several miles to calm down enough not to dig holes in the street with every step he took. His mind was stuck in a loop; he couldn’t stand the vision of bandages and blood and the *blankness* on his face any longer, but it did not stop him.

*I told you*, Arahabaki crooned. *I told you, I told you, I told you all the time.*

“Should Koda be executed,” the Colonel spoke, once the port had appeared at the edge of their vision — once Chuuya’s cigarette had grown to be the brightest light in the night, instead of his shaking frame. “It would not be your fault, or your merit. Only his. You do *not* have the right to steal from lesser men.”

Acutely — for no real reason, and every in the world — he wished Kouyou was standing next to him instead.

“He’s more of a man than the bastard will ever be,” he replied, teeth gritted. “Maybe even more than you. *Sir.*”

The Colonel hummed. “Were we in the army, that remark would have gotten you court martialed.”

“How lucky we aren’t.”

“I forget it, sometimes,” He came to a halt. Hands crossed at the small of his back, he leaned across the railing facing the bay, studying him. “Here’s a question, Nakahara.”

Chuuya kept his eyes on the currents.

“If the need arose,” he asked, “would you use *Corruption*?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Obviously.”

“I heard it was killing you,” A long look at his hidden forearms told him just how *well* he’d heard about it. “Boss seemed to think it was messing with your body *and* your head. Dazai believes you’ve strained yourself, and might now be — more *sensitive*, to new attempts. That’s why you had to stop.”

“I don’t care what he thinks. I know what I’m capable of,” *Arahabaki wouldn’t risk me*, he didn’t say. *He cannot afford it. He will, one day. Not yet.*

“You would do it,” the Colonel echoed. “Even at the cost of your life.”

“Yes,” Chuuya snapped, defensive. “Yokohama has given me more than anyone. Yes, I would.”

His half-burned cigarette was thrown over the railing. “Wrong answer.”

“What?”

“You should have said, *yes, I will*,” the man corrected him, swiftly. The moon reflected in the bay — a drop of fresh blood from his lip pooled down, ruining the circles of air in the water. “*And I will not die from it.*”

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**33 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*“...certainly predict a rise in victims before the month's end — bringing us to an astonishing number of three hundred casualties in the last few weeks. We have reasons to believe the height of the conflict has not yet been reached; as always, all citizen are asked to remain home and —“*

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**31 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*“...victims numbers rise to —“*

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**29 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*“...evacuate the area immediately —“*

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**28 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*“...seem at least one of the gangs might be attempting to leave civilians out of the conflict —“*

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**26 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

*“...European and American located —“*

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**24 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“Chuuya *nii-san*,” Q grinned. A man had impaled himself in a deranged rage; he’d rained so much blood on their waiting, small frame, every inch of them was crimson and onyx, all down the drain of the streets of Yokohama. “This is *so* much more fun than those army generals.”

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## 23 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“Chuuya,” Mori said. “Power is not to be contained.”

Since he had first heard his name, Chuuya had thought about killing Mori Ougai exactly four times.

The first had been more inconsequential than the others — hatred for a whispered name in the slums. He hadn’t even had a face; only a thick stench of blood and stealing hands. With every new day in the syndicate, all of it began to taste inconsequential — measly thoughts of slaughter; sticky but unwanted. Chuuya’s thoughts were always shaded crimson at the edges. Mori sat on a throne of bones all the same, and Chuuya had kneeled all the same.

Underneath the shattered colors of the glass-stained windows, he kept his eyes on the ground — as it suited a man faced with the one weapon he did not have the authority to move from his neck. “I know, Boss.”

“Q is certainly a threat,” he continued, fingers still scamming through his latest report. A massacre had occurred near the *Takasekai* border, all to stop an attempt to retrieve the codes they had stolen. By *accident*, Q had killed seven of their men — three of which were part of their guard. “But power is *not*,” he repeated, gently, “To be contained.”

“Power is not to be hidden behind a wall, to gape at — to fear even when away from it. *This* is the way we think. *This* is what keeps us alive. And I know you understand,” Mori put a hand on his shoulder. Chuuya was hanging from every word out of his lips; *here’s what you never were*. “Because you have never contained your power. You have always been smart. The Sheep underestimated it; the Flags understood it. Using Q is necessary. *This* is the way we do things.”

Chuuya nodded, just once.

“Any other mentality belongs to the other side,” His fingers slipped; tapped his pulse, on his neck, pressing harder when he stiffened under it. “To people who can rightfully claim their blood has never seen a pigment of black. *Why* do you think the *Special Division* was so desperate to get their claws on you?”

The first thing he had learned in Suribachi City was the most important of them all. Subtle and sharp, upon gentle eyes of the man who he had given his life to. Chuuya knew how to understand threats.

“I have proved my loyalty many times, Boss,” he said, simply. “I will continue to do so.”

“Not loyalty,” Mori corrected. “It bleeds out of you in copious amounts. I should be blind not to see it. But I need you to trust my decisions. And to obey them.”

Shattered colors on the floor — Q's giggles when he had extracted them from the blood of a subordinate whose name he had known. Koda's blank gaze, and his hand tight around their smaller own.

“As you wish, Boss,” Chuuya concluded.

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## **22 days until the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The moment his hand touched his chest, Chuuya recalled everything he had ever been told about him — all they had talked about.

*[“They’re calling him ‘The Wound Reaper’,” Kajii reported, one day, as they watched a body crumble and shriek near the entrance to the Infirmary.*

*“Fuckin’ pathetic,” Chuuya muttered, as he had whenever Agent Minami mentioned it. “Where even is he? I haven’t bumped into him once. Even that shitty Dazai has no idea of where to find him.”*

*The next scream out of a woman’s mouth startled the entire room.*

*“Isn’t that an unfair advantage?” Kajii said, eventually. “Look at me. I’m immune to lemon shaped bombs. That’s a normal Ability. But something like this? How is it fair?”*

*Chuuya could have told him stories that would have scarred him for a while. He had no desire to. “As long as there’s someone weak enough to be defeated, people who can defeat will exist.”*

*A curious look. “Where did you hear that?”*

*A rural house in western France, he thought. Blood on the walls. “I read it in a diary.”*

*“Some of our men are to be kept as far from this Reaper as possible,” Ace ordered, during the next meeting he spied on. “They survived unimaginable horrors. One touch from this man could turn their body into a minefield.”*

*Hirotsu’s eyes were a weight down his frame, tracing craters Chuuya lacked and rotten skin he hadn’t seen anywhere but in his reflection in eons. With a blank tone that knew which borders were not to be violated, he said: “Leave him to us, Chuuya. Just him, alright?”].*

Something rose and golden had appeared at the edge of his vision; the User didn't see him, he knew, but he settled his eyes on his running silhouette — up and down the buildings, sword in hand — and thought, *nice of you to visit your cellmate.*

Thought: *when I kill you.*

“There,” the *Wound Reaper* murmured — with Chuuya's arm sunken to the elbow inside his chest. “Two bothers less to the world.”

Chuuya did not feel pain. His body could not understand the concept — could not create comparison between unhealed skin and battered one, for the distinction did not exist.

Every crater reopened; every stitch disappeared. Every memory of suffering he had got stuck in his ribs, sticky and clawing and dirty and endless — it bloomed. Chuuya did not feel pain; the warmth of the Ability offered the truth on a silver platter: he had never felt anything but.

When he fell to his knees, he did so without a sound.

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*[It was close to midnight, when unmistakable knuckles knocked on the man's door.*

*He made his way to it, dragging naked feet up on moquette. Although Yokohama had had better times to survive without over-exaggerated protection measures, only one lock separated him from the source of his curiosity.*

*Relative curiosity. He knew there existed less surprising things than him visiting at unpredictable times. He never broke in; just knocked.*

*His silhouette was a known sight, framed by the rusted edges of his too-small apartment door — the overgrown coat he was never without, brushing the muddy ground as if reaching to dig for blood it was sure to find. He had looked just like that, the day he'd found him in a blackening crimson bed of death. He had never looked any different.*

*Today, he was the one carrying a corpse.*

*“Odasaku,” Dazai greeted, politely. If the bleeding mess of bones and harsh breaths and violent scarlet on his shoulders was affecting his world in any shape, no proof of it besmeared his face. “Hi. I'm truly sorry to bother you, but would you mind helping out with an annoying little matter of mine?”*



*“You know,” he added, like a second thought. “I’m pretty sure he will die, otherwise.”*

*For the second time in six months, Oda Sakunosuke laid a doomed sixteen years old on his couch, and he sighed.]*

## Chapter End Notes

hirotsu, rational: chuuya maybe don’t go near the guy who reopens every wound someone ever received.

chuuya, a living needle-holder, arm deep through his chest: listen but it did work

“when someone you love dies, you’ve got to kill yourself” / “be of service”: from one of (irl) nakahara chuuya’s poems.

strain: international syndicate named on the bsd wikia, took part to the dragon head conflict.

“never to return”: (irl) nakahara chuuya’s poem.

the story virgil is writing: a reference to the aeneid, of course.

hey there! can i just say R.I.P. omū you were so cool? have fun in parrot even. you were the realest one. also!!! subtle ango introduction! he’s finally in the narrative. everybody wave to the local traitor. i know my man is tired.

fun fact for this chapter — this fic was initially meant to be a much shorter, much less complicated fic about the dragon head conflict. so technically what you’ve been seeing last chapter, this chapter, and next one, was all this fic was ever gonna be. then my brain started thinking “yeah but what happened before that? and after?” and here i am, revising 600k+ words. yay!

thank you guys so much for the nice words, the kudos, and the support. seriously, i re read your comments everyday. i’m so glad some of you like this enough to comment on every chapter, and i hope you’ll continue to do so! i hope to live up to expectations. thank you so so much, and see you next chapter! (technically the last part of this, interlude excluded. very excited for that, cause then we enter 17 skk era!)

keep warm and see you soon! <3

p.s. odasaku chuuya interaction? in my skk masterfic? its more likely than you'd think

# FIG

## Chapter Summary

*On the twelfth of December of the current year — eighty-eight days since its beginning; among the longest conflicts in Yokohama history — the Dragon Head Conflict came to an end. The victim count is currently being analyzed by Section 57B, and will be reported by the evening, to be inserted in this — hopefully closed — file.*

## Chapter Notes

fyi: this chapter has numerous references (and text passages) from dead apple, the novel (including the microscope trick the movie itself did not portray). keep that in mind, and feel free to ask if something's confusing for you.

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xx.*

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*Case number: 7886990*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

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*On the twelfth of December of the current year — **eighty-eight days** since its beginning — the **Dragon Head Conflict** came to an end. The victim count is currently being analyzed by Section **57B**, and will be reported by the evening, to be inserted in this — hopefully closed — file.*

*Five hundred billion yen richer and now lacking several members, the Port Mafia came out victorious.*

*While self-destruction was a major factor in the end of this Conflict, two other merits are to be signaled: the presence of Ability User **Shibuwasa Tasuhiko** — codename: **White Giraffe** — and the annihilation of the **Five Moons**. Apart from the numerous smaller organizations whose demise was brushed but not settled — the Hounds, the Black Widow, the Temple, and more — the **Dragon Head Conflict** emptied Yokohama of every major syndicate outside of the Port Mafia.*

*The KK Company was the first to fall; Shadow Blade followed; the death of the Takasekai's leader by the end of American syndicate "Strain" (check file **67B0089**) was the last drop in an overflowing vase. By the time the Three Moons were defeated, their codes laid in the hands of the Port Mafia; the Bishop's Staff held the Mafia's and its own.*

***Hirabayashi Mitsuru**'s competition is officially over. The prize, as far as our men report, is currently being divided across the Port Mafia's international banks.*

*The destruction of the last Moon and of **Shibusawa Tatsuhiko** can be faulted to the hands of **Dazai Osamu** and **Nakahara Chuuya**. Hereby, we begin an attentive reconstruction of the events that led to [...]*

[Continue reading] [?]

### ??? days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

The moment his veins caught fire and tore his eyelids apart, he began to scream.

It was torn from his throat with relentless, abrupt violence — he felt nothing and heard nothing and was nothing; only the white noises making blood seep from his ears and land in his mouth from his vicious attempts to tear himself off any tactile surface, any pressing hand, any distant voice — he shrieked and screamed, legs kicking until the torn skin began to tear like fabric, spraying blood and scarred flesh like the scream out of his bleeding lip —

“ — him still — ”

“ — trying, can't you — ”

“ — is not — bleed out — ”

“ — mushroom hallucinations? ”

“ — steal — morphine — ”

“ — enough time — ”

In the beginning, there had been a circular light, and the flies buzzing around it.

He hadn't realized he remembered it. It pressed against his eyelids like a hammer, pressed harder and harder, *harder and harder*, cracking his skull as if it existed to render him a puzzle. A light on the ceiling, blurry through liquid and over a glass tank — flies buzzing and swarming and never dying, never dying, *never allowed to* —

He screamed until his throat was dry — he moved his body up and down, crashing it against the hard surface under his spine, *bones*, he thought, *bones to break and body to dry*, and kicking and punching and spitting and *screaming*, out of his mind with something so distant he couldn't —

Lab-gloved hands appeared between the webs of blood and spit keeping his eyelids together, holding tools.

“No,” The voice didn't even sound like his own. Panic had never been welcome in his bones — terror had been gulped down with gritted teeth; grief had been torn out of his veins. This was too different — it wrecked his chest and climbed out like a *thing* of flesh and despair. He was seven. He was five. He was dead. He would rather be dead than — “No, no, *no, no, no* — ”

He kicked and he shook — he landed on the ground so harshly his entire body was rattled, and he crawled back, palms reaching for the slick ground — blood and others.

Hands cupped his cheeks.

Something in him — something somehow more primordial than the memories scratching at the bloodiest parts of his brain — expected silence. It didn't come — all that came was a single eye, staring into his own — cheeks scratched in shapes he knew were his nails; a dangling band-aid from a rounded cheek. A single eye, staring.

“ — to stop,” a voice said, over the muddy waters of his own subconscious. He was in a tank. He was on the floor. He was just five, he had *promised*, and the man kept saying — “Time to stop,” the voice repeated, again and again, as if knowing he wouldn't get it on a first try, “It's time to stop.”

“No,” he croaked, shaking his head, breath short, N's taunts and Verlaine's promises — the spear through his chest lighting up his whole body for the world to see — to pick apart, to *accuse* — he begged, *begged* — “No, no, *no*, they'll know, *they'll know* — “

“They won't.”

“They'll know — they'll *know* — “

The hands became talons.

They sunk into the sides of his head with nails — keeping him still so *mercilessly* that he heard his blood pump against his eyeballs. Skin and bandages and a wet fringe, and a single eye — the color of the tiles of the *Old World*; the color of a gentler sort of absence. It was colder than stone; with no space for doubt, it held him still.

“I'll kill them,” Dazai promised. He was too close — their foreheads almost touched with every spasm of his own body. His sole eye was wide; was unmoving. “I'll kill them if they know.”

*Sincerity*, someone had once said to him — *sincerity is only honest when it has known blood*. And then this: *if you trust, let it be in death*.

He stared, chest slowing. The hands had a heartbeat of their own; it seemed much more familiar to the thing inside his veins. *It was good*, he thought, delirious and floaty, head dangling back and forth inside a hoax, a stubborn grasp, *it was good being touched*. The Sheep had always been scared he would sink them in the earth. It was good being looked in the eyes. It was good not being feared.

He searched and searched until the whole world was the color of the *Old World's* tiles — searched until his lips parted, dry and chapped, and no scream came out.

The eye grew blank. “Do it.”

One of the talons left his cheek so quick it dragged blood out — it was slammed on his mouth with no hesitation, pressing hard enough to break his jaw, breaking the inside of his lip against his teeth. A gloved hand sunk into his chest, soaked in something so *blistering* it was cold.

He shrieked so loud his back arched with it.

The hand didn't yield, no matter teeth and screams — it crashed against his face with enough might to crack the floor under his head. Pain was a firework field all over his body, kicking his legs and drying his lungs. After some distant point that was no less ablaze than the others, he gave up on understanding *which* part was being slaughtered — what the boiling liquid being pooled on his wounds was. There was nothing but the ache, and his pounding head, and a thumb swiping up and down the side of his jaw — kinder.

“*Shh,*” someone said. There was a chin on his forehead; sharp and absorbed and hiding him. Fingers pulled soaked hair from his sweat matted cheeks; the hand stayed where it was even when his screams became nothing but whines, quiet and dying, attempting to tilt into sobs — falling before they could.

*Never,* he thought, *Never again.* A crying seaside brat. A man's hand. *Want to find your mom?* A man's hand — the blisters the glass of the tank made on his palms, pressed to wave at him.

He whispered something — attempted to. The hand was too suffocating; the light upon the ceiling was getting blurrier, swarmed by flies. All of them dead. All of him scooped out — left on the ground, next to the flesh someone had cut up to fit and forgot to take the sewing stitches out of.

“*Shh,*” the voice promised. The freezing tip of a nose brushed the end of his cheek; he thought it might have wiped a tear. Lips touched his ear, a mere touch where the hand shattered. The flies, spinning and flying and dying. “You'll kill them. *Shh.*”

When his eyes and his head dropped, there was sand under his feet.

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## **21 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The first thing he smelled was rubbing alcohol; the first thing he saw — stubble on a pointy chin.

*Oh,* he thought, floaty. *Doc must have knocked me out for checkups again.*

Dirty beige walls and a humid-stained ceiling peeked through the blurred patches in his eyes. His body was floating, held tight between fingers-stiffening cold air and a mattress that was all but soft. Pain had been locked in a soundproof bird cage — the echoes of it were a never ending cramp up and down his spine.

A wooden seat was stitched to the side of the bed; the intricate bundle of black and white seated on it stretched all the way to his pained lap — curled on himself, truly, small enough to fit in that space; a mop of dirty hair and play-pretend sleep. He wanted to push him off. He wanted his ears to stop ringing.

“Oh,” *Rubbing-Alcohol-And-Stubble* said, blinking at his struggles. “The mushrooms actually worked.”

His tongue was asbestos. *What?*, he didn’t manage to say, before the void swallowed him whole again.

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## **20 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The moment his eyes opened, Chuuya was on his feet, cracking the moquette open.

The man was tall — tall enough to crank his neck, endless in his slim frame and general pointiness. Rusted copper in strands towered upon a remarkably *normal* face, with undeterred eyes and a carefulness someone actually *normal* wouldn’t have worn.

There were no weapons in sight — none except for the line of his shoulders. Chuuya recognized a threat with the ease of the changing season.

“You woke up,” the man said, eventually, once a quick glance had been directed to the destroyed lines of his floor. “That’s good. The *Wound Reaper’s* Ability is — devious. He told me you killed him?” An approving nod; starkly *quick*, as if he couldn’t be more aware of how little Chuuya would care about that judgement. “That’s for the better.”

“Who the *fuck* are you?” Chuuya snapped, only glowing brighter with every word.

The texture of the bandages on his skin was driving him insane; the cold seeping through his newly made stitches seemed to drip from the walls of that old apartment, corroded at the edges and too *small* for that man’s presence. A jolt went through his legs — his knees wobbled, rattled by the aftermath of an electric shock.

Teeth gritted, he raised his hands, watching furniture begin to float menacingly around the man’s unmoving silhouette.



“Maybe you should sit down,” he said, eyes settled on the stitches he could feel reopening. He didn’t step forward; didn’t try to touch him. “Loss of control over your Ability wouldn’t be —“

“I’m not *asking again*,” Chuuya snarled. All shook: his skeleton and the house, and *something* in the man’s eyes — as if already seeing the end of something he hadn’t even begun. “Who —“

One paper wall away, the front door slipped open.

“Odasaku, I brought *mochi*!”

The cheerfulness of his tone crashed violently against the gun Dazai pointed at him, unmerciful and unhesitant. Not a grin lit up his pale face; his grip around the plastic bag in his free hand was relaxed. With earth-shattering finality, he put himself in front of Oda Sakunosuke.

“Chuuya,” he said, calmly. The tone he used with the *Secret Squad*; the eyes he wore when he was genuinely not lying. “Sit down. Now.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not with him,” Dazai’s finger slipped on the trigger, infinitely easy. He wondered, with a scientific curiosity of sorts, if a bullet shot by his nullifying hands would amount to anything. Had they never tasted that theory? They had pointed guns at each other with worrying frequency. “*Never* with him, Chuuya. Yes?”

He stared.

*I can’t kill you*, Dazai didn’t say. *You can’t kill me. Here’s the ground rules, nonetheless.*

Jaw aching, Chuuya lowered his hands, drowning the bedroom in darkness again. The moment the boy threw his gun on the mattress, he was on him.

*Thump!*, against the wall — vaguely wet fabric tight between his fingers, posing next to a bandaged Adam’s apple — Dazai’s eyelids, close enough to brush against his own. In the corner of his vision, Oda Sakunosuke didn’t move an inch.

“Don’t you *ever*,” he warned, barely a whisper, “*Ever*, threaten me again. I’ll kill you.”

A curled eyebrow. “Is that worse than threatening your friends, or are we on even ground?”

He pushed him against the wall again. On powerless ground, they both knew, Chuuya would always come out victorious.

“You left me unconscious with the nearest busybody you found,” he noted. An assortment of discomfort and rage and regret crowded inside him — things he didn’t *want* a stranger to see; things he couldn’t *let* a stranger smell; viscera that were only his to bleed out.

“You’re welcome,” Dazai sing-sang, teasing and sharp. “He saved your life. Where are your manners? With all the *ouchies* you got yourself in the last few years, you’re lucky not to be buried with those five graves you like so much —“

Anger blinded him. There was nowhere to turn; no other road to take. It was a game, like everything else. The blinding lights of the Arcade; a smirk that never was, because he was *always* pulling right where Chuuya *couldn't* —

Mellowed than he might have months before, he informed him: “Mori is going to tear us to pieces, and he’ll start with you.”

Glee disappeared from his face. All that was left was familiar; deaf to it, Chuuya tightened his grip — thought of the man Dazai refused to talk too much about, and yet had knocked at the door of, when the boy he wanted dead had walked too close to the edge.

“Great,” Dazai said, with a smile that sucked him dry. “Can’t wait, partner.”

Disgust overcame him with such viciousness he was left stunned.

*Why save me?*, he couldn’t spit out. *Why save me, why not save yourself, why not care?* What was the point of understanding the importance of stitching skin back together — of understanding how deeply death touched others, of insulting every grave he’d carved with his knees in the dirt in his face, of knowing the opposite of existence was something to be *shaken* by, if *he* didn’t even care when —

*I’m not like that. I’ll never —*

Chuuya let go of him, watching him drop to the ground between coughs. Only then did Oda step forward, offering him a hand to stand.

“Well, then,” he concluded, endless silent times later. He had no accent and no tone; when he cleaned dust off Dazai’s shoulder, though, he was a puzzle piece. “We should fix those stitches, before you stain the floor with blood again. It already took me some time to clean up.”

The sheer quantity of his wounds managed to leave him, too, speechless.

Nights upon nights with Arahabaki; the torture from the lab; the fight against Verlaine; the scratches and bullet wounds he’d gotten himself in Suribachi, before learning the art of untouchability — all of it had reopened in one go. Chuuya tried to recall a single moment of it, and came up empty.

He set his jaw, staring at the ground.

Oda Sakunosuke moved like a man whose first word might have mentioned a close friend’s demise. There were weapons all over his apartment; less than a man with no Ability would carry, though. When he introduced himself, unnecessarily, he didn’t appear bothered by Chuuya’s refusal to shake his hand.

*Did he see them?*, he wondered. The scars and the pain stricken features, the blood and the lines of codes. Chuuya had lost all pudor in the slums — but regained all strength of comparison when faced with a copy of himself.

He thought, uselessly, that he'd never be able to visit a doctor again.

The man didn't talk as he fixed him up again for the second time; but he answered every question Dazai threw his way, as if there wasn't a thing he didn't consider worthy of analyzing. He didn't flinch when the boy moved furniture and knick-knacks around his apartment; didn't ask him to stop when he climbed on the table and stared right into the lightbulb, until his eye began to water.

"One of the legs is unstable," he warned him, simply.

"Yes, Odasaku. Hey, do you think that thing outside is a sniper or a crow?"

"That's a traffic light, I believe."

Around that enigmatically *plain* man, Dazai was a dead flower someone had deemed pointless enough to paint. Laughter and endless curiosity; he stepped in and out of Oda's space like a cat searching for sunlight in the winter; he looked up and down at him like a wide-eyed child who had never quite been taught that words could make songs.

Chuuya felt surges of ire even just looking at him. Chuuya couldn't stop staring.

The moment he left the room, *mochi* between his lips and every source of water in the bathroom opened, he bit: "What game are you playing at?"

Oda's perplexity seemed genuine — but nothing about that man could be called that. "*Little Doctor*, I suppose?"

"With the bastard."

"Dazai tells me his parents were married."

"You're not funny," he snapped. *Parents*. "What does an insignificant postman gain from hanging around with the Demon Prodigy? From *humoring him*? Are you trying to make him obsess over you? Because I can assure you — he is."

A hum left his lips — he tightened a bandage around Chuuya's elbow, where he'd torn his skin apart at nine years old, on the edge of a building in Suribachi City. "He's my friend."

"Your friend."

"Is that hard to believe?"

"That someone would willingly associate themselves with that mental case?" He scoffed. "Yeah. He's an asshole. You look like a weirdo, not a dick."

A pause. "Is he not your friend?"

“No,” Chuuya made a face.

“I’m not taking advantage of him. Although, it’s nice of you to worry for your...”

The pause was heavy.

“Rival,” he landed on, eventually, painfully. “Pain in the ass? Mummified son of a bitch?”

Oda blinked. “He’s *your mummified son of a bitch?*”

“He’s not *my* anything. And I’m not worrying —“

“Dazai calls you *partner*,” he mused. There was a certain lack of impatience in him; as if he could have sat in front of that bed and tended to his wounds until the end of times, untouched by the explosions and shootings he could hear come from behind the windows, in the night. “He also called you *his gravity boy*, once, but I’m assuming you won’t react positively to the notion of me knowing much about you.”

“But there’s no need to worry,” he added, before Chuuya could open his mouth. “All I’m interested in is the ones I can save.”

Startled, he froze.

“*Odasaku!*” Dazai whined, from the other room. “Your late pets woke up! Tell them to shut up!”

Muffled and distant, came a familiar sound — children crying.

Oda sighed, standing up. “If you’ll give me a moment.”

Eons might have passed between the first humidity stain he counted and Dazai’s appearance in the far corner of the room. He spent them in a haze, caught between a sharp answer he hadn’t been given time to wield and the unwanted weight of implications. *Perhaps*, he thought, *it was the headache from Arahabaki’s attempts at smashing his skull.*

“He’s being nice,” the boy asked. It didn’t quite sound like a question. Sat on the floor, he still sported bruises around the nose Chuuya had punched. “He doesn’t even trust you. Although, I suppose he doesn’t trust anyone.”

“Why does he have so many weapons around, if he doesn’t intend to use them?”

A shrug. “What makes you think he won’t?”

“Those hands haven’t pulled a trigger in years, at least,” Chuuya huffed. “Mock me about shit I *don’t* know. How did you end up idolizing a guy who won’t kill?”

*The ones I can save.*

“It’s truly a bother, isn’t it?” Dazai sighed, chin in hand, obnoxious and insincere and *not your business*. “He could have helped us blow up some more citizens. You know, a quarter of

your squad was killed by the *Reaper*, before you impaled him,” A snort. “Maybe you can ask Q to join, instead.”

He studied him, over shushed crying and the echoes of conflict; pulled the gloves no one had removed from his fingers. He felt the weight, for once, of every scar that kept reopening, Ability or no Ability. “It’s fucking annoying when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend you don’t give a shit.”

A hint of glass, behind secular curtains; not even the inside, but at *least* a reflection. It was gone before he could smear his dirty fingers all over it. “I don’t.”

Chuuya stood up; gathered his clothes. “I don’t believe you.”

When Oda came to open his front door, a kid was napping on his shoulder, peaceful and too tiny. He didn’t try to stop him — he did, for some reason, offer him a sugar packet. “In case your head feels light,” he said. “Chuuya.”

He hadn’t said his name yet. Chuuya found he would have taken it back, had there been a way.

*This is the man he refused to let you know a thing about*, he concluded. *This is the man he rips the curtains off for*.

“Thank you,” he managed to say. There wasn’t enough suspicion to wipe out a favor — not a life-saving one. “He shouldn’t have brought me here — but he did. And you had no reason to help out, but you did. I apologize if —” Chuuya cleared his throat. There was no vocalization of what it meant to meet Dazai’s gaze. “Thank you.”

Oda blinked. “You’re welcome.”

He seemed perplexed.

“If you don’t trust me, why did you let me in the house where your kids are?” Chuuya asked. He thought back to bedtime stories; to the fate that had followed every kid he’d ever dared to walk next to. Had *they* seen him sleep? Had *they* seen him bleed?

*A shame misfortune follows her so earnestly*, he recalled Beatrice saying, distantly.

Oda shrugged. It reminded him, strangely, of Dazai. It should have been the opposite, he thought — should have been the so-called demon acting like a child, stealing life tricks off a man who he had yet to see fear him. Chuuya didn’t understand a thing about adults.

“Dazai trusts you,” the man answered, easily — and *oh*, Chuuya realized, and it was earth-shattering in its absolute irrelevance, and it was the most obvious thing this world had to offer, astonishing and *there*. *Oh*, he realized, *he’s like the Flags*. “Forgive the reasoning. But I do think that’s enough.”

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### **19 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

Kouyou was a golden flame, and the first time he embraced her, she was covered in blood.

“Not mine,” she said, even if there was no need. She was warmth personified — she smelled of ash and the artificial lakes of her home; so devastatingly *alive* it was breathtaking. Her hand cupped the back of his head; Chuuya sunk his nose in her shoulder and *inhaled*. “One word — *fun*. I couldn’t let you guys have all the fun, could I?”

*Alive*, he thought, and not even Arahabaki could long for her blood right now. *Alive, alive, she touched me and she is alive.*

He was quick to tear himself apart from her — bowed, as it fit his superior, and cleared his throat. “Good to have you back, Ane-san.”

“Good to be back, little god,” Kouyou replied. Behind her back, *Golden Demon* kept slaloming through the rows of *Takasekai*’s men, unforgiving and free and *hungry*. “But we should get to the Headquarters as soon as possible.”

Chuuya perked up. “Did something happen while I was gone?”

“No,” She raised her chin. “But I do know how to rescue your Yuan.”

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### **18 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“The plan for the end of conflict,” Dazai said, legs dangling from the edges of his office’s couch, “Can be easily left to Mori. We’ve been doing so *much* in the past months, have we not? You and I have more pressing matters to worry about. Look at this.”

Chuuya settled his eyes on the photograph of a corpse.

*Don’t worry*, he remembered saying, a thousand eons before. *People will win you this war.*

“The Colonel’s dead?”

The words tasted like rust — like talking shit, in the way that would have made the man scoff and straighten his posture. He had been endless and powerful; he had told Chuuya those like them couldn’t be stopped by something as human-flavored as war.

He took a step back. “Who — Who killed him?”

A blink. “The *White Giraffe* did.”

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***[Report back to — 18 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.]***

— *not what you should be saying,*” Dazai brushed the matter away with a smile, the picture in his hand nothing more than a piece of evidence, the storm of viscera and soldier uniform inside it a far away ghost. “For us Executive candidates, it’s: ‘another Executive seat has opened’.” A too-smart gaze; lidded eye and the shameless lack of care he had sworn upon in his best friend’s home. “Right?”

I don’t believe you, *he thought, in the way of misunderstandings, in the way of children, in the way of a boy who was angry, in the way of the envious.* I don’t believe —

“*I’m human too, you know?*”

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*[Report back to — 18 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.]*

— “No one would believe that shit,” Chuuya spat out, knuckles aching.

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**16 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“The *White Giraffe* has declared war against all organizations involved in the conflict,” Mori announced, boredly. His only Executives left exchanged a gaze. “Get rid of him, yes?”

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**14 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“— *conflict has somehow managed to grow. We urge all citizens to —*”

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## 146 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“Nakahara,” The Colonel stared forward; something about his pallor was an omen. Chuuya wanted to leave. “Did Albatross die in peace, as far as you know?”

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## 13 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“I’m sorry,” Koda said, distractedly, eyes on the floor. “I know I’m disappointing you.”

The squad was a circle of limbs and bruises on the floor of the hallway, sleeping the latest attack to the *Shadow Blade* borders off soundly. Tsuchiya’s head was in Noguchi’s lap — since she’d lost her eyepatch during a close-range fight, Kenta’s hand was dutifully hiding the missing piece. The sight of his free fingers hooked in Virgil’s jacket almost made him grin — the criss-cross of scars on Rin’s face almost paused that motion.

Chuuya recalled, vividly enough for his head to hurt, the clash and crash of their razor-sharp edges against the similar. They had fought his constricting hands until they bled; then they’d given up. Chuuya had felt a little less lonely.

*It wasn’t about filling a missing space*, he thought. It was about breaking his knuckles until his hands could create another hole in the wall — another family picture to hang.

“You’re not, Koda,” Chuuya replied. He turned to look at him — his arm was in a cast. “I don’t know if Uchiyama would want you to kill yourself over a ghost, though.”

His flinch sent him a few steps back.

“But if it’s me you don’t want to disappoint,” he continued, swiftly, settling his eyes back on the sleeping bundle. “If it’s *us* — would you mind not dying, Koda?”

Glossy eyes moved up and down his face, too quick to follow; a choked sound left his throat — something like thunder and like tears. His lips parted. “I—”

The entire city trembled.

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### **13 days before the end of the Dragon's Head Conflict.**

*“— to report the collapse of the main building of the Mori Corporations' five towers last night, with impactful consequences on the surrounding plaza and neighborhoods — Firefighters and policemen are currently still working at the scene, trying to — Survivors are few and in between, with an astonishing number of victims and still unfound. We encourage volunteers to —”*

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### **9 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

The *Bishop's Staff's* sniper was praying.

Chuuya stepped over the mauled corpse left by *Golden Demon*, viscera squeaking under his polished shoes. His eyes stayed settled on the man's crawling body. Voices and endings echoed across the collapsed walls of the Church — the cohesive attack had cost men and relevant territory; but the kidnapped women and Yuan's stutters in the face of the Port Mafia's rescuers would satisfy Mori's hunger enough.

Fanatic blood would satisfy his own.

“God isn't real,” he informed the sniper, holding his trembling skull between gloved hands. “But don't worry. I'm close enough.”

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**5 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.**

“My squad,” He frowned. “Ane-san, where’s my squad?”

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**4 days before the end of the Dragon’s Head Conflict.**

“We are *even* missing people from our Executive and associate-to-Executive ranks — Vice-Executives and guards,” Mori sighed, eyes running from Hirotsu’s frame to Chuuya’s own. “Including Dazai.”

*Who cares*, his mind retoriated. Hard-earned loyalty was to be left on less offensive altars. Hard-earned care was to be left to those who wouldn’t waste what they had been given freely. Chuuya had been sleeping alone. Hard-earned trust was to be given to those who —

“He bought a new microscope,” Hirotsu shrugged.

*Oh.*

— those who gave it *back*, once it had been bled dry.

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### 3 days before the end of the Dragon Head Conflict.

“Your friends all killed themselves,” the White Giraffe sighed, throwing another gem in the fire. “I had nothing to obtain from them. Meaningless and worthless...” He laid his chin on his hand. On the floor, Noguchi’s fishbone tattoo glistened, hit by the reflection of a sapphire. “Boring humans are boring even at death.”

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— — ?????? [Error?00?]

[More, *Arahabaki murmured, and he was all he had left.* More, little god.]

*[—bringing him was a mistake. It was a mistake! I tried to tell you—“*

*“Agent Sakagu—“*

*“He was never going to work with—]*

*À mon chéri Arthur,*

*[scribbled with a different pen][Oh, so you finally accept to call me by my name?]*

*I cannot say I am used to your absence [I thought I always slept long enough for you to rot?]. Although you always seem to be writing in that diary of yours, I must wonder if it ever feels as improper as these letters feel to me [That's the point of a diary, Paul. I will explain more when I'm back]. Joint missions are much more amusing, anyway [They are, my friend. But I believe we have different reasons].*

*As you have suggested, I took a walk down that park you had seemed so enthusiastic about [I do not seem enthusiastic about parks, Paul. I simply believe it would do you good to find enjoyment in the everyday world] — the one with the ducks, and with the old ladies wearing that cotton you're so envious of [Lies upon lies]. Beautiful trees and mesmerizing lakes, yes; but fate wanted me to interrupt a funeral. [Fate, or your own curiosity?]*

*It was a small event. No one we had... disposed of; I made sure to verify that [Not every ounce of blood has been spilled because of you, Paul. You need to stop assuming so]. Only a man, unremarkable and very much boring, but by the enticing name of Gaspard [Why do you like that name so much? You always mention it]. Most of the chairs had been left empty — but, then again who will sit at our funerals, Arthur? Who, if not you and I, in the very remote possibility one of us survives to what might one day kill the other? And what could that be? Not an enemy, surely. Is old age an enemy? Is that something humans fear? Are we to presume my body will know death, as it very rarely knows blood? [Death is a very human concept. I assume you will fall victim to it, one day]*

*When I sat, I found myself particularly curious about the eulogy a young man offered. I do not know what Gaspard had been to him; I am even slightly confused about whether his words were meant to be a farewell or a curse [Most funerals follow this structure] . Here, let me recite them for you. (You can picture it. You are a smart man; picture me in front of you, talking). [I will picture you. I'm rather used to it. Do not judge me for it]*

*Though nobody would call me brave*

*And I have neither king nor country,*

*I went to war to find a grave.*

*Death did not want me, either.*

*Was I born too early or too late?*

*What am I doing in this world?*

*I tell you all, I am desperate—*

*Say a prayer for poor Gaspard.*

***[This is tacky. Do not make me read it again.]***

*Are poems traditional parting gifts? Funerals among us Transcendents always seemed much more severe. If that would be to your liking, I will find the strength to write you a poem, the day of your inevitable demise. **[I think I would like a poem very much, Paul.]***

*But this particular parting gift seemed rather self-centered to me. Did you get the same feeling? If not for that demand for a prayer, I would have thought this man was about to steal one of my guns and shoot himself in the head — there, in front of his already grieving family. I wonder if he would have succeeded. Death does not want him, after all. **[Is that not a metaphor? Perhaps he is being self centered again. Death does not despise anyone. Injustice is offered equally to everyone]***

*I keep thinking about his words, though.*

*I do not know if I was born too soon or too late. I suppose, being created, I was created exactly when I was meant to. **[Born. You were born]** Errors come from man-made creations, and from wombs; I am not quite that **[Source does not determinate result. We have talked about this, have we not?]** . I do not know what I am doing in this world. Fighting. Searching for someone like me. Trying to listen to your words; to trust them. **[That's good enough, I think. Most people do the same]***

*I did not go to war to find a grave. I will welcome it, should it come. But not before my answers.*

*Death leaves me fairly untouched. Leaves are bound to fall; snow is bound to melt; and do we not call spring and summer beautiful? **[We do]** Is that something human beings are supposed to feel? I have a feeling it's not. Perhaps the thing in my veins is too focused on his immortality, to care about decay. **[Paul, you need to stop assuming human beings are good people]***

*I do not know grief. I have yet to find someone who would deserve it. People die everyday; war and famine and accidents and even old age. Does the act of dying itself demand respect? For pain? Were I to find a way to put an end to my own life — who would mourn?*

*You, Arthur. You have always been better. **[Not better. Never better]***

*I do not worry about such things, though. Just as that selfish man on the stand, I know death does not want me. [I will stay unwanted with you, then. If you'll have me].*

*I'll sit here and watch the world die first, I suppose. [We shall]*

*À toi pour toujours (si la mort ne veut vraiment pas de moi),*

*Paul Verlaine.*

*[À toi pour toujours (toujours),*

*Arthur.]*

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**[ONE WEEK AFTER  
THE *DRAGON HEAD CONFLICT*]**

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“So, Chuuya,” the Social Worker said — tight smile and eyes settled on the hands Kouyou had yet to remove from his shoulders. “How do you like working at *Mori Corporations*?”



There existed, as he'd been recently informed, a thing called '*emancipation as a means of joining the workforce*', which he was assumed to have taken advantage of. Suribachi City had lacked such notions. Chuuya had existed simply because he did — not even the occasional cops would have dared ask *those* kinds of questions.

*Social Services*, though. Those he was familiar with.

“It’s cool,” Chuuya answered.

The two men — perfectly bright and fairly interested — waited. There wasn’t a crack on their faces; undeterred, they attempted to find his eyes, dragging them off the shining edge of the desk. If he could have sat further away, he would have had.

A beat. “Anything else?”

There was a knick knack of sorts upon the desk — a silver slide with an automatic system of little spheres tumbling down. Chuuya had yet to look away — its motions were nearly hypnotic. The sharp sound of each ball was slowly, inevitably dragging him to insanity. His fingers spasmed against the armrests.

Curtly, he offered: “Pay’s good.”

Fingers on the endless piles of papers they had pulled up the moment Kouyou had welcomed them in, the men exchanged a glance.

Chuuya could see his face on most of the documents; it was more than the Workers had ever managed to obtain back in the settlement. He’d implemented a clear policy among his people — *if you see the blue shirts, kick them in the dick and run the other way*. He hadn’t been willing to lose any of them to the dangers of the underworld — even less willing to let a supposedly good-intentioned adult steal them off.

“And what about your guardian?” Worker One started again, just as enthusiastic as before. “As, ah — *official* as your relationship might be, given your independence, what do you say? Is she nice?”

*Tell me she’s not*, his eyes begged. He could imagine what reputation the Port Mafia had to have with such systems — unspoken secrets in all minds and no one’s tongue. He couldn’t decide whether managing to take Chuuya from them would have been a win for their morals or their hunger.

Just a tad defensive, Chuuya replied: “Yeah. Ane-san’s the coolest.”

Lithe fingers tightened around his shoulders, quick and affectionate.

The two men cooed. “That’s wonderful,” Two said. “I’m *ecstatic*. That means —“

“I know what that means.”

A strident sound; maybe his teeth. “That’s great. Does she take care of you? Makes sure you continue your studies?”

“I told you she’s great,” Chuuya insisted. The silver balls went up and down. “Want me to write you an ode, here and now?”

Uncomfortable laughter filled the room.

“Say, why did you choose the jewelry store?” Number 1 wondered, after a murmuring pause. “Mister Mori told us you were offered many possibilities among his — ah, *possessions*.”

“I like jewelry.”

“Do you? You’re not wearing any.”

“The pay is not *that* good.”

“Oh,” Two perked up. “Have you encountered any salary injustices?”

A sharp sound left Kouyou’s lips. Calling it exasperation would have been too nice.

Chuuya let his chair swallow him. *Tin, tin*, the spheres said — he sunk a bit deeper with each hit. “Calm down, jackass. They treat me just fine. I don’t even know the point of this tea time.”

“The *point*, dear, is evaluation,” Worker Two insisted, visibly scrunching up his nose at the insult. “Where would we be if we left our children unaccounted for? Emancipation gives you *autonomy*. It doesn’t grant you abandonment.”

Something cold pressed against his nape — one of Kouyou’s rings, sending shivers down his skin right as his feet moved to unwillingly crack the ground. He clenched his jaw to the point of pounding; clung to the ache to push the anger where it wouldn’t blow the meeting off.

“I don’t feel abandoned,” he managed to bite out, at last. “Thank you for the concern.”

“You’re welcome,” One replied. “You know, it would do you good to keep your language in check.”

“I talk how I talk.”

“Did you know that six in ten youngsters whose files describe them as *irreverent* are said to not pick a university career?” The man shook his head. “These are complicated times for successful lives. High-ups are looking for polite, polished young men. It’d be a shame to ruin what Mori Corps could give you.”

*Tin, tin*. The spheres slid down.

“Chuuya is a terribly bright young man,” Kouyou intervened, the longer his aggressive quietness lasted. “His future might be affected by many things, but his — *choice of words* isn’t among them. He’s one of the most promising pupils Mori has ever taken in.”

*I don’t know if that much swearing is good for a teen*, Virgil had said, once.

Bile drowned his mouth.

Some more mutter, some more borderline pitiful stares. The two workers put their heads close, searching through their papers for whatever would make that meeting last even longer. Chuuya knew they couldn't do anything; knew the Mafia would intervene before they could report anything suspicious that would get an asset taken away so pathetically. Nonetheless —

*Nonetheless*, standing there, watching them discuss his existence —

“— a little worried about his socialization skills,” One murmured. *Tin, tin, tin*. “The list of his daily interactions is rather unhelpful. Almost *no one* is in his age range. Friendship is a fundamental step in full maturation.”

“Growing up in that dumpster can't have helped,” Two agreed. “Wouldn't it be better to make some — *ah*, some checks? Just to be sure everything works *right*, up there. I mean, his —” *Tin, tin, tin tin tin tin* — “Not to mention the attitude. Are we absolutely sure he can take care of —”

The world blurred at the edges.

There had been white sounds stuck in his ears for almost two weeks; he had grown used to the metallic screech. He only knew he had thrown the knick-knack across the room when he saw one of the silver spheres roll all the way to his shoes.

Silence fell.

Kouyou's hands were nowhere to be found — endlessly marble-like, she looked at him with nothing under her eyelids. The absolute shock dripping from the men's faces was diesel for his flames. It took the pain in his legs — a constant by now; gentle flames stuck at the junctures whenever he couldn't afford it — to realize he was standing.

“Chuuya?” Worker One dared, staring.

His body was a few seconds too early — sound came later. Chuuya didn't remember rising; couldn't pinpoint what his intention had been.

Nonsensically, he thought: *they should have sent Matsuda, if they wanted results*.

He stuck his hands in his pockets; cleared his throat. “We're done here.”

*Rooms at Building Three were too big*, he thought, among every other contracting idea crowding his skull. It took too long to get to the door. The acoustics were terrible — just enough to hear the stuttering, offended squeaks coming from the men; to hear Kouyou's pointless reassurances and disgusted remarks.

“ — can't just — ”

“We have *reports* to — ”

“— a better time,” Kouyou insisted, with the balanced murmurs she used to quieten down angry clients at the *Pomegranate*. One of the silver spheres had landed under his foot, Chuuya rolled it under his sole, back and forth — crushed it for the sake of it. Breathed from his nose. Did his best to recall what he was meant to be feeling. “I told you — almost everyone in the city is dealing with a personal loss. He’s just sixteen. Asking for some *understanding* shouldn’t be —“

The doorknob glittered golden under his palms. He counted specks of dust; watched them stick to his gloves like they weren’t physical.

Mori’s eyes were purple from up close.

*Like the sky behind the factories at night*, he had once heard Lippman describe it as — woefully poetic; elegant in all pretense. The crinkles around them made them a tad too friendly; like he might have just used his scalpel to dig them himself, for the sake of gain. *All for gain*, the doctor had said. He couldn’t recall when.

He couldn’t recall when he had opened the door.

“Apologies for my lateness,” Mori smiled. The trio at the desk had fallen quiet, eyes on him; all his attention was on Chuuya. “I did promise you I’d be here — construction has slowed down the traffic immensely. Chuuya, did I miss much?”

*Had you promised?* He couldn’t recall.

He straightened. “Just getting started, sir.”

The Boss’ presence was terrifyingly efficient in fastening the procedures the Social Workers had to go through. A nauseating mixture of respect and horror — decisively not shown in Kouyou’s presence — soaked their eyes. Clearly, it aggravated her just as much as it did him.

Chuuya got to sit in his chair, staring at the ground he wasn’t allowed to destroy — because renovations costed money, and because it wouldn’t make sense, and because he wasn’t a child. From the floor, rolling pathetically away from its slide, the remains of the sphere stuck to his sole sang: *tin tin*.

“Dazai won’t be joining us, today, no,” Mori was shaking his head, apologetically. The name had his fingers digging into the leather of the armrest. “You know how sick he gets. It’s seasonal, really. You can have your interview next week.”

The slam of the wooden doors against the wall would have been nearly comical — had it not been for the gun in Dazai’s hand.

“*Jeffrey and Tom!*” he exclaimed, tumbling in with his sole eye wide enough to appear to be pulsing, disheveled and so euphoric. “It’s been so long, *oh fairy godmothers!*”

To call what he did from the door to the desk a dance would have been too kind — there was a skip to his step that couldn’t be natural, and a lack of finesse to the splits and cartwheels he

did — *attempted* — in the meantime that was glaringly obnoxious. The gun didn't help his balance; the moment the Social Workers' eyes locked on it, they jumped to their feet.

"Is *that* a —" One thundered.

"Toy, toy, *toy*," Dazai huffed, pirouetting all the way to Mori's seat — leaning his crossed arms over its top, as the man did nothing but smile into nothingness. "This is a weapon factory, Lucius and Marcus. Do you think we have no prototypes?"

Hesitantly — only lowering into his seat once his colleague stopped gaping at the quick way the boy was spinning the gun trigger over his index — Worker Two sighed a: "Dazai, you know our names are —"

He burst out laughing.

His legs did their best to climb over the back of the seat — once he managed to be completely off the floor, hanging like a monkey, he sing-sang: "I was feeling a *bi-i-it* down, like Mori said. But when I heard Matt and Adrian were coming, I *dragged* myself by the elbows and the knees!"

"How enthusiastic," One said, vaguely.

"I *know*," Dazai dropped his head back. His voice got a rough note because of the strain. "I stopped by the sidewalk to try to hang myself, but this one university student dragged me down the light pole. He dropped me in a puddle! *Look*, I'm all dirty!"

A line of red divided his deadly pale, *sweaty* face in two — the spot where blood had stopped circulating. The closer he got, the more absurd his eye looked as it frantically studied the room — pupil blown so wide, he could have been one of Elise's stylized scribbles. Deaf to the two men's protests that *one joke about America did not give him the right to mock them whenever they met*, he took his place next to a stiffened Kouyou — all beads of sweat and harbored breathing.

*Tin, tin* — Chuuya frowned.

"I'm good, I'm good, you know I'm *always* good," he insisted, leaning over the desk, chin in his hands. "Truly, you might as well stop wasting your time! Mori likes me *too much*. You'll never find me dissatisfied! I get a roof *and* treats. Not even the Emperor's dog is happier than me!"

Quick enough to snap his neck — for the first time since they had dragged themselves out of the building that had buried his squad's bodies — Dazai's eyes settled on him.

"On the matter of happy pets — have you met our latest one?" Conspiratorial, he wiggled his eyebrow. "Look at him. Hat and all! Between us, isn't he absolutely *enthralled*?"

"Dazai," Kouyou — careful to only pull him by the coat — forced him to sit down onto the chair again. Someone else might have failed to decipher the inch of worry in her eyes;

Chuuya only failed to understand her decisiveness to ignore it. “Some demeanor, if you don’t mind?”

“You’re so boring, Ane-san,” he sighed. He was blinking incredibly fast. “If you intended to push your etiquette on me the moment you woke up, you could have just stayed sleeping! Sleeping Beauty and all. Beautiful and useless. Sorry,” He bowed to her. “My lady. Ma’am. *E-x-e-c-u-t-i-v-e*. Ought to respect you! Ought to respect your pet, too. *Enthralling*. Not like you. You’ve never even allowed me to ask *Demon Golden* if she could kill painlessly.”

There was a knife in each of his boots, Chuuya reminded himself, out of nowhere. There was at least *one* gun in that room, and Dazai was scratching the space between his eyebrows with it. His Ability wouldn’t work on Dazai — but he had other means to stop him.

“We were just talking with Chuuya,” Worker One confirmed, clearly used enough to whatever was happening to simply move on. Mori’s smile was sculpted on his face; he stared at the two men too *insistently*. “He’s a lively young man. You must be happy to have someone your age around, yes, dear?”

His next laughter might have just been a scream; Chuuya cringed away, right as everyone but Mori flinched. “Rick, you were always a funny one. He’s not even my age in *dog years*. Don’t be silly. *My dog*. By the way. He’s just Chuuya. Well — sometimes. Only sometimes!”

More laughter — when Dazai abandoned his hands on the edge of the desk, his fingers were shaking so violently the band-aids Elise had given him became invisible. Something in the back of Chuuya’s skull asked him to be enraged. He’d been insulted; more importantly, he’d been looking for an excuse to fight.

Chuuya clenched his fists. “What the fuck is *that* supposed to —“

A white blister pack peeked from Dazai’s pocket. Then another; then another. With an unhurried, gentle motion — only the tip of one finger — Mori pushed them back inside.

His voice disappeared.

“— great friends,” the Boss was saying, one hand on Dazai’s shoulders. How he’d managed to keep him still enough to put it there, he couldn’t understand; his entire body was vibrating under his grasp, hyperactive and cheerful, feet tapping and fingers reaching and lips blowing raspberries in the air. “You’ve told me many times that Dazai might receive some — *positive influence*, from being around people his age. Chuuya was truly a godsend. His intellect and strength saved us from many sticky situations.”

He laughed; all polite, all *head of Mori Corporations*, nothing of the man who’d walked past his destroyed building and barely blinked at the smashed corpses stuck between the cracks. “To be fair, calling their relationship a *good influence* for either of them might be — slightly untrue.”

The Workers leaned forward. He could see their hunger sink its claws in the mahogany. “How come? Unhealthy environments might not —“

“They are both stubborn, proud boys,” Mori reassured them. “They’re young. It’s normal. Conflict is an important step in development — *competition*, even more so, is fundamental. Luckily, Chuuya and Dazai are mature enough to realize this.”

Worker Two snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth, judgemental. “Maturity — an interesting concept. Your boys’ resourcefulness, their cleverness — all positive things. But they’re children, nonetheless.”

Kouyou’s smile slipped off her face.

Chuuya watched his own land on his lap; he stared at it, its uncomfortably shades of pointless anger. A default reflection, perhaps — technical defect. The non—understood was to be raged at. *If he grew taller*, he mused, on the shapes of Doc’s syllables, swearing anger would do him good — *would they stop calling him a child?*

More laughter erupted underneath Mori’s slightly disapproving grasp.

“Oh, *no*, no,” Dazai intervened, shaking his head vigorously. “It’s all fine. All fine. No need to worry. Children, not children — Terminology is the cage of man. Either I will kill Chuuya, or he will kill me. It’s inevitable! Like Christmas. It’s almost Christmas, isn’t it? We made a blood pact about it, anyway.” He turned around to wink at him. Chuuya could have sunk his fingers in the waters of his sole eye and never touched the floor. “You don’t have to worry about us at all.”

Chuuya stared back.

His eyes blurred. “Well, hopefully I’ll get myself first. That’s more important than any blood pact. You know how disappointing it’d be, if I —” Blindly, his hands reached forward, gun and all — hovering too close to the collector pens abandoned on the wood. “You know how — *ha* — How damn disappointing —“

Before he could even think about moving, Mori’s fingers were slammed on the desk — right where the pens laid, his gloved hand great enough to hide them from sight completely. Eye snapping open, dry and more focused than it had dared to be before then, Dazai — *flinched*.

Chuuya had to be losing his mind.

Their stare off was quiet; seemingly blank. A hint of petulance pulled the boy’s mouth down; even seated, Mori seemed endlessly tall.

Worker One cleared his throat. “If we may get back to living accommodations —“

Dazai raised his gun and fired into the space between the Social Workers’ heads.

What followed was a blur — the two men yelped high enough to break glass, as they jumped out of their seats with a mixture of fear and anger that didn’t seem to know who to push forward. A hint of amusement colored Mori’s face; by the time Dazai had started humming some Hirose’s song and brought the gun to his temple — Chuuya’s own hand bumped against the doctor’s, as they both pushed it out of his grasp.

“You — in the hands of a —“ Two was stuttering, horrified. “You said — *You* —“

In a show of coordination, Kouyou slashed his head off with the blade hidden in her umbrella right as Mori threw his scalpel into One’s chest.

The *thud!* of their bodies landing on the carpets was nothing new. Chuuya only realized he had flinched when he felt Dazai’s gaze — pupil still blown; and yet now doubtlessly bored — swallowing him whole.

“Wonderful,” Mori sighed. “They’re sure to send someone else by next month, now.”

Just as mildly displeased, Kouyou hummed. He tried to stand; his body stayed unmoving.

At once, Dazai deflated.

“Whatever,” he huffed, throwing himself onto the desk, back up. His face had wiped itself clean. *All that energy from before had to go somewhere*, he thought. All the shake in his hands. All the pens no one had hidden. No human could turn himself off. No human *could* — “Mori, send Chibi and Ane-san out. We ought to fill Tom and Jeffrey’s reports — I don’t want them to hear me talk about how puberty is treating me. *Shoo-oh!*”

“How I *hate* faking Governmental papers,” Mori sighed, like nothing had happened.

Kouyou had to drag him out of the room; Chuuya hadn’t even realized his own hesitation, until his neck began to hurt from the effort to call Dazai’s lost attention to himself.

*No one would believe that shit.*

*You are*, he thought. It was nauseating; the layer of vomit Chuuya had felt stuck in his throat since the smell of bodies crushed under a building. He had yet to throw up. The knot in his chest was an assortment of too many things — the rage he’d put in that punch and the stubbornness with which he’d driven his bike to him and the smell of blood from his squad’s corpses and the green lights of a life he didn’t remember. *You are and I’m not and how can you waste it like that?*

Kouyou shut the door behind them.

His fists unclenched.

“Why did he have that many pills from the Infirmary emergency stash on him?” Chuuya hissed. “Are you kidding me? Boss has to know. He can’t know — he’s going to kill him if —“

She straightened up, brushing invisible dust off her kimono. The imperceptible worry she’d shown inside the room was nowhere to be found; with all the demeanor she’d demanded from Dazai, she began her march down the stairs. “No need to worry. In exceptional cases, Dazai is allowed to.”

“*Allowed to?*” Disbelieving, he widened his strides to catch up. “He was going to kill himself with a fucking pen.”



“Mori knows how to stop him.”

“The guy is suicidal two thirds of the week. Maybe put a lock on the cabinets?”

“We already have them,” she replied. “And as you might need to be reminded — as Dazai *knows* — addiction isn’t allowed in the Port Mafia.”

He stared. “And what, assisted suicide is?”

“Don’t be silly,” She glanced his way with something like genuine confusion. “It’s not what you’re envisioning, Chuuya. You think the demon child would ever allow himself to die like that?”

“But —“

“Chuuya,” she admonished. A familiar tone — the symphony of *yes, a shipping container*. The world-ending orchestra of Dazai-related matters that they were all politely demanded to keep their noses out of. “Mori certainly knows better. If he lets him break into his cabinets once or twice, mix up medications in an effort to commit a suicide he will stop him from — perhaps that’s one of the reasons why the demon child hasn’t killed himself with a pen *yet*. ”

From the floor upon theirs came laughter. Mori’s; the corpses’; fake all the same. They would be disposed of soon enough.

Chuuya couldn’t pick that battle.

But —

“I met Oda.”

Surprise slowed her down to a stop. “Oda Sakunosuke?”

He wasn’t sure of why the words had left his mouth. Yokohama was caged between devastation and the need to build something over it. Dazai Osamu was one problem too many to deal with. *The only problem he had left*, he considered.

“He’s a weirdo,” Chuuya added, eventually. “Lives in a shithole. Actually *enjoys* Dazai’s presence. Looks like he could kill me in a blink, but refuses to. It’s — ” He shrugged, uneasy. “It’s *weird*. ”

“Dazai having a best friend?” Kouyou sneaked a glance towards the door. The Boss was the Boss. Dazai was Dazai. They could only look. “I understand the skepticism.”

Memories tickled his nape. “What did you mean that time?” he asked. “You said Oda Sakunosuke wasn’t the man you thought Dazai would pick as a best friend. Because of the killing thing?”

“Not exactly,” Her complicated look switched some colors up, turned some pieces around — then, it struck him, quieter than the deadliest arachnoid, brighter than thunder. “I assumed — *feared* — that he’d pick you.”

Wind that was not there hissed through the floor-to-ceiling windows. It tickled his nape, raising old, familiar goosebumps. Something fierce and *scorching* hot climbed up him, using his ribcage as holds, using his lungs as cuscinions — something he knew, because one could only look at the same mirror and feel the same thing so many times.

He wanted to wipe that idea off her mind. He didn't know how. He didn't know where he'd gone wrong.

"I could never," he said.

Kouyou studied the busy crowd of the *Entrance Hall*; men discussing the fallen tower, men discussing the fallen. She offered a gentle smile to Madame Tanaki's vigorous waving. "I cannot say it isn't a relief, in some ways. Although, I suppose, Dazai..." Whatever she was thinking, she shook it away with a distracted motion. "Doesn't matter. One might wonder what it *is* that you are."

The doors of the office were long gone. He stared at the end of the hallway like he could knock on them, still — stare at Dazai's gun, on the ground.

"His partner, I assume," he offered.

Her next glance was the peak of astonishment — he paid it no mind, making his way to Madame Tanaki, ready and willing to let her chatter distract him from the mess that interview had been. Kouyou followed, eventually; he couldn't quite shake her insistent gaze off of him. Couldn't quite take what he'd said back.

*Grieving*, he thought.

*Grieving*, he tasted — how could he sit on the ground and do it again?

"Nakahara Chuuya?"

Round glasses and dossiers in hands; it took him a blink and a curled eyebrow to recognize the man appearing behind them. Sakaguchi Ango, member of the Intelligence, nodded in greeting.

"Forgive the interruption," he said. "Boss would like to talk to you."

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The moment Agent Minami sat down, she had a knife pressed to her jugular.

“You sit still and you listen,” Chuuya said, evenly, leaning his free hand on the armrest of her office chair. The skyline was a grey curtain behind the floor-to-ceiling windows, swollen with snow that refused to fall; it drowned the room in smoke-like light. In that haze, her choked breath seemed to *stick*. “If you call anyone,” he continued, “I will gut you like a pig. If you refuse to talk, I will gut you like a pig. If you do anything that even *slightly* pisses me off, I will gut you like a pig. We both know I don’t need weapons for that.”

Silence trembled between his fingers. She gulped, pressing her throat closer to the knife; her shoulders stood straight, still.

A nod. “Alright.”

Chuuya tightened his hold — just enough to draw a line of blood. When he let go of her, she coughed wetly. He circled the desk and dropped on one of the guest chairs in front of it.

Muffled, frantic conversations echoed from behind the door — the *Special Division* HQs had been dealing with the aftermath of the Conflict with just as many sleepless nights as the Port Mafia. Some of the deeper lines of tension down the Agent’s frame had nothing to do with his arrival.

“Are you here to execute me?” Minami asked, eventually.

Dossiers and photographs occupied the length of her desk, highlighted and scribbled. *His file*, he thought, *was probably among those*. If he had believed to be on the tongue of the underworld *before*, he’d been soundly proven wrong. If his bounty had been high before —

“That would be fun,” Chuuya answered, crossing his ankles on the edge of the table. “I’d start with some waterboarding.”

Through controlled breaths, she waited.

“Dealing with the mess?” he wondered, nodding towards the papers. “The jewelry shop had to close for a while. We’re dealing with reconstructions. Conflicts like these are bullshit for sales.”

Confusion was a crease on her forehead — torturously slow, she straightened in her seat, clearing her throat. “Are you looking for a raise?”

“It’d help with the mechanic bills,” He shrugged. “The war almost blew my motorcycle up. Luckily, I know a guy.”

“A friend?”

Undeterred, Chuuya stared at her. “The father of a dead one.”

Her lips closed. She lowered her eyes to the papers.

“You know, we lost men, too. *Good* men,” she made sure to specify, vaguely defensive. “We did not bring the war. We were merely aware of its inevitable march.”

“My men died,” he replied. Each word was a bump against the glass — he was too far away to hear impact. He hadn’t *stopped* in days. “You people would have never classified them as *good*. Is their death somehow less worthy?”

“I’m not saying —“

“I don’t know,” His eyes searched the ceiling; not a single humid stain. Smell of money; smell of *power*; only the kind most people gladly accepted to be bent over by. “I don’t know if it is. I don’t think so. All I know is that your beloved information could have saved them. Or maybe not,” Pull of gravity, weight of necessity. “It’s all bullshit. They’re dead anyway.”

Although he did not look for understanding, he could not ignore the familiarity of her gaze. Still tense, still waiting, she softened at the edges — just enough to show days old mourning.

Chuuya wanted none of it.

“I’m here for a favor,” he said, eventually. “One you will do me.”

Caution soaked her tone. “Will I?”

“You owe me a favor.”

A curled eyebrow. “*Owe you?* ”

“I got rid of Shibusawa after you brought him here,” She stiffened so instantly her seat screeched. “Not to mention the *Wound Reaper*. You fucked up, and I crushed the root of the problem under a skyscraper. I’d say you and your Agency owe me enough.”

Agent Minami raised her chin. “What makes you think we brought Shibusawa to Yokohama?”

“The fact that you don’t care about this city one bit,” Chuuya traced dirt lines on the wooden desk, cleaning his boots in lazy circles. “But you won’t admit shit to me, and I’m not here to waste time. If you want this to be more *personal*, then — we obliterated the *Bishop’s Staff*. I’m sure that must have painted a smile on your face, at least.”

Her mind traveled miles inside that small room, curving and intertwining possibilities, until she came to the only conclusion possible. Leaning back against her seat, she conceded:

“What do you want?” Mock stuck to her letters. “Your freedom?”

He tilted his head to the side. “My Boss will give me that, if he sees it fit.”

“He hasn’t broken our deal yet,” Minami scoffed. “Do you believe you’re worth *that* much?”

“That’s not for me to decide,” Chuuya replied. “But if I end up being worth an *Ability Permit* — you can be sure I’ll be damn efficient at what I do. Do *not* forget that.”

The same caution she'd worn with a knife to her neck returned; she tightened her lips, and waited.

He removed his feet from the desk, extracting a thin file from behind his jacket and throwing it onto the desk. "I won't waste time introducing her. As one of the *Dragon Heads*, I don't even want to imagine the information you have on her. But Yuan doesn't have anything but her role — no personal documents, no home, no money, no anything. The *Bishop's Staff* promised her all of that," He tapped on the wood. "You, better than anyone, must know why she's still in this situation."

Minami's eyes ran up and down her photograph, fingers tracing her lines. "You want me to *legalize* her, in short?"

"Yeah," Chuuya said, pausing. "No. I want you to bring her to the light."

Hesitation tightened her grip around the folder. "Talk."

It was midday by the time he escaped the building — from the same exit he'd strided out of months ago, covered in blood that wasn't his and reeling from weeks of necessary trial. No one jumped from the shadows to attack him. No one told stories in an alley.

No one came; Chuuya left.

Yuan found him near *Building One*, sleeves up and busying himself with the removal of the rubble and remains of the main tower. An assortment of Ability Users — the muttering men and women crawling past him, offering him a respectful nod and an occasional bow — would make the reconstruction quick and easy enough; reports assured full function of the base by the time January came around.

But bigger rocks were still bigger rocks. And he had an Ability made just for being useful.

"Hey," Yuan said.

Her voice was still damaged from the fumes she'd inhaled after he and Kouyou had set the Church on fire. She'd cut her hair to her chin, just unruly enough that charred strands and tips had probably been to blame. It made her look older. It was still red.

Against the greyish sky, she was a vibrantly green stain: his leather jacket to blame. Seeing it around her shoulders was a complicated thing; he took it for what it was.

He laid a piece of concrete on the other side of the square, nodding. "Hey."

Chuuya sat on the nearest block of metal. She followed. The foot of space between their thighs was no longer an uncomfortable sight — all he did was accept it. Dead bodies had to fit somewhere.

"Did you talk with the woman?" Yuan asked, as they studied the bustle of people in the plaza. Journalists were valiantly informing cameras of the current state of works. Almost no inch of the city had been left untouched by the war; *Mori Corporations* was more than *glad* to offer its funds for reconstruction.

He pulled the cuffs of his shirt. “Yeah. She agreed.”

Her breath caught.

An Ability User dug a hole through a tunnel of debris, cursing the sky. At the edges of the road, police cars stared at the mess.

“So what,” A shaky laughter left her throat; something as rawly enraged as her first words to him after a year. “What, I — I stay with the pigs and get trained to slam your ass in Ability Users’ jail? Get a medal and do paperwork? You want me to just pretend I’m like *them*?”

“You can do that, if you want,” Chuuya said, calmly. “But Agent Minami enrolled you in the local High School, for now.”

Yuan fell quiet, eyes widening.

Kicking rocks aside, he added: “She says you could go live with her, if you wanted. She’s got a whole penthouse — rich piece of shit. She has a brother your age, too, and — Well. She knows whatever the fuck was going on with the *Bishop’s Staff*,” The other girls were mostly being handled by Kouyou; *work*, he knew, *was work*. “If it makes you uncomfortable, she can get you emancipated and find you a room. But she’s paying for your school career — and for the acceleration courses you’ll need to be admitted. And for whatever you’ll want to do after.”

“But,” she stuttered. “*But* — “

“She owes me a favor,” he reassured her. “All you have to do is collaborate. She’ll get money from the State for the *great sacrifice* of handling you, anyway. The rich get richer, and whatever. She’s an adult. She can help you.”

Her flinch knocked on some hollow part of his skeleton. Opening the door would mean facing the problem. He had yet to do much more than stand next to Yuan’s sobbing frame, as he delivered news and a missing corpse to her hopeful hands.

Nothing to be said. Nothing to be done.

“Chuuya,” Her voice was a murmur of wind. “Chuuya, what right do I have to this?”

He was getting tired of recalling faces he’d stuck in a shoebox — along with his bracelet, his jacket, and the knife that had torn him apart. But he’d opened it himself; had wrapped it around her shoulders and accepted to take care of a problem he couldn’t help but consider his own.

“The others wouldn’t blame you,” he lied.

Yokohama was being assembled again in front of his eyes — he thought about running up and down the roofs of Suribachi City, following orders and trying to ignore the ghosts through the streets. He felt nothing at all. “They were petty assholes, most of the time — but they’d be happy for you. Taking away good things from your own hands won’t bring anyone back.”

“But *why* are they dead?” The line broke. Glassy eyes stared stubbornly forward, fists tightening around the edges of her sleeves. “I don’t get it. I’ve tried to, but — why do I get good things, and they don’t even get a grave? Why are they dead, and I’m here?”

*And wasn’t that the point*, he thought.

Nothing to say; nothing to do.

“Shit if I know,” Chuuya concluded. “All I know is you won’t get an answer, no matter how hard you ask. You live with it, the way you live with everything else. As selfish as it might be —” He shrugged. “Isn’t it easier to just take it?”

Yuan’s eyes searched. He let them. Pretended not to see when she wiped a tear. Still and silent, her features firmer than they had ever been before, she offered: “Shirase was right about you.”

He paused.

“He said you’ve grown,” she clarified. Some kind of wonder overtook her; she studied the forest fabric of her first new property. “You’ve always been more grown-up than any of us. But you’ve grown,” A flicker. “No matter what we tried to do to stop you.”

Buildings and debris, mafiosi and journalists. It would take a while to wipe all the blood off the road. It would take a while for the ink-like streaks to completely disappear from the tips of his fingers — the spiral-like scars would never. But dust was never optimal; and he wasn’t quite ready to kill what was still alive. He thought about the box with what he had left of the Sheep — he dreamed of setting it on fire; keeping the ashes in a lock.

“I think he’d like it,” Yuan offered. “If you called him, I mean.”

He stared at the ground. “No.”

“Chuuya —”

“You know,” he cut her off. “I’ve killed a lot of kids.” He studied his gloves, and when the air broke his ribs — he breathed out. “I don’t know if Sheep are among them.”

Somewhere beneath the dust; beneath a cliff with a traitor’s grave and his first family’s demise; somewhere where not even gods could find redemption — Chuuya closed his eyes. He gathered the blood and the poison pooling down his side, and found he would never be able to tear his shoes off the rocks.

*You owe them that, at least*, he concluded. His death would serve no purpose. He’d haunt the house and be haunted in return. *Only that*.

Slowly — the time it took the world to exist — Yuan nodded.

“Me neither,” she whispered, lost. Her head landed somewhere on his shoulder; the texture of his old jacket against his skin did not start a fire.

*This is Yuan*, he thought, and perhaps never again. Perhaps they had nothing left to say to each other. *Be nice to her*.

“Me neither, Chuuya.”

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The cemetery had never been as crowded.

Frequent visitor as he was, Chuuya had never felt the vaguely distracting pull of *questions*, watching the floor of mourning men and women kneel in front of the endless new graves. Each picture was a bit younger than the one before; each sobbing face, he wondered if he'd been the one to kill the beloved they were wasting their tears on.

It was the lack of guilt that bothered him.

Unable to muster up tears, he vowed to send a thanking flower basket to the open sky upon his head, soaking him and the hurriedly escaping crowds to the bone.

The squad got no graves.

The graveyard was soon empty, abandoning his crossed legs to the muddy grass and the fake stones lacking the Flags' names. Chuuya could hear thunder. *Kanjis* and numbers alternated in front of his eyes, curling and intertwining and stubbornly fighting the blur of the storm.

*Don't hurt yourself*, Madame Tanaki had said, marching to her own ghost. *They wouldn't want that*.

*Well*, Chuuya had wanted to say. He'd kicked and punched and *destroyed* the cars they'd abandoned at the street racing circuit until his body was numb. He'd spoken less than he had in years. He had no one to take out his bottomless *unfairness* on. There was no Verlaine around anymore. *Fuck you, guys*.

Not even Noguchi uttered a scoff at that.

He thought —

The first Physics book he'd stolen from under Kouyou's nose — long before she'd begun to put them on his desk instead — had been a tedious, never ending, *beautiful* study on black holes. He had been curious enough to stay awake all night.



*A black hole acts like an ideal black body*, the book had explained, thankfully just humble enough not to use terms he would have to look up, haunted by his own pride. *A black hole cannot reflect any light. They are impossible to be observed directly, partly because of their temperature. A region of space from which nothing can escape.*

“Flowers,” the old woman near the gates called, near his cart. It gathered her some nasty glances. “Come get flowers!”

Too still to pay attention to the buckets of ice raining on him, Chuuya fiddled with his shoelaces. Koda would have batted his hand away. Koda would have told him to shut up, even if he hadn’t said a thing.

*Sorry*, he wanted to say. His lips wouldn’t move. His coat — Pianoman’s coat — was slipping down from his shoulders. *I’m sorry*.

Steps appeared from a distance; Arahabaki had been much quieter and then much louder — Chuuya had gained heightened senses in exchange, and an aggravating tendency to scratch his skin to raw blood. He felt each slap of the soles on the wet ground — felt it grow heavier and closer, until it stopped right in front of his hunched back.

A dome appeared upon his head, drying a column of existence right where he was seated. The *tip-tap* of raindrops on the black umbrella dug holes in some malleable part of his skull.

“Chuuya said no,” Dazai spoke up, at the end of the world. Barely louder than the rain; genuine in his *confusion*. Even the structure was meant to be perplexed; *here’s the facts; why don’t I get them?* “Why did you say no?”

He didn’t answer.

It took the boy a while to speak again. “It’s tragically low, even for you. I don’t like winning by default.”

Distant thunder; mud sneaking in his boots. Five graves. Eleven. A hundred. *An Executive*, Noguchi had told him, *should save people. That’s what I think*. Chuuya hadn’t found a new apartment yet. No place seemed big and small enough.

The chance to fight was right there.

Stand on his feet, push Dazai away until his pants were all filthy, scream in his face. *You don’t get to decide*, he would have snarled, *you don’t get to be mad*. *You’ve never mourned a single person in your life. You’re going to die as alone and quietly as you wish, and no one will mourn you either. You’re gonna choke on that suicide book of yours and stick a bullet in your head and laugh as you waste all I’ll never have, and the Executive seat will be free again.*

*How’s that for a victory?*, he thought.

Chuuya just needed a few breaths. He was a fast learner. He’d leave that graveyard and let it haunt the places no one else could see; he just needed a few breaths. He had never needed

anything else.

“I’ll beat you some other time,” Chuuya concluded. “Any and all others.”

“That’s not —“

“Dazai,” His voice sounded disconnected to his own ears. He couldn’t tear his eyes away. He couldn’t stop thinking about black holes. “Leave.”

It thundered and it rained. Chuuya watched the chain on his hat dangle quietly in the corner of his eye, dripping rain from before an unwanted roof had come. Discomfort soaked Dazai’s final words; their lining was inevitably *honest*, unable to come to any other result, no matter his calculations.

*Partner*, he’d told Kouyou. *What else?*

“You told me to wait for you.”

A smashed microscope on the floor; the surge of understanding; the motorcycle he’d left in Noguchi’s father’s hands, still keeping his son a secret. *Wait for me*. Perhaps Hirotsu had told him.

*Your friends are dead*, Shibusawa had said, easily.

*I’m sorry*, Koda had sighed. *Just don’t die*, he’d replied. As if it was that easy. *Just don’t die. Just don’t die. Not you too.*

*[Verlaine hadn’t needed to say a thing. He’d just opened his car truck, and —]*

It thundered and it rained. *Do you think you know rage?*, Kouyou had asked. Shielded by an umbrella and a bandaged fool, Chuuya didn’t move — for a few breaths only. So little, they wouldn’t change a thing.

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*[“You’re Glasses Guy,” Chuuya noted, as the Intelligence member led him to Mori’s temporary office. “Dazai’s buddy number two.”]*

*“We drink together, sometimes,” he replied, hurriedly, staring pointedly forward. “My name is Sakaguchi Ango. I don’t think we’ve met before.”*

*“Have we?”*

*The rigid set of his shoulders told him he’d recognized the genuine question — Chuuya couldn’t shake the feeling of familiarity off his bones. Perhaps the library. Perhaps the archive. Perhaps —*

*“I think I would remember meeting the boy perched on every tongue of the underground,” he replied, pushing his glasses up his nose. The echo dissolved; he was left with nothing but empty hands, and the grim reminder of belated fame. “One of the two, anyway. Follow me. Boss is waiting.”*

*Mori’s temporary office was a less grand, less lived-in version of the well known and feared attic of Building One. Floor-to-ceiling windows and golden-lined velvet couches stood unchanged; but the never ending shelves of books — an assortment of medical texts, literature, and children coloring books — were nowhere to be found.*

*Unframed by that somewhat intimidating background, the Boss looked less like a statue bestowed with convenient — whether fair or unfair — judgment; more like a man who ruled the city in all the ways that mattered, still working his shoulders under the new weight.*

*Five hundred billion yens and no other Moon around any longer were doubtlessly a heavier crown. Mori’s glee was evident. His satiated eyes even more.*

*“Thank you, Sakaguchi,” he nodded, as the archivist bowed. “Leave us alone.”*

*Elise laid on her stomach on top of his desk, humming as she dangled her legs, focused on some probably relevant report she was dragging her crayons all over. Over the gentle, young lines of her silhouette, were the Boss’ intertwined hands, and the unwavering gaze he laid on him.*

*Chuuya stayed bowed, hat in his hands. He waited.*

*“Then,” the man started. His smile was teasing. It stopped at the edge of his lips, unfinished carvings; his gaze was focused. “Did you enjoy Social Services Day?”*

*He made a face. “Necessary business, sir.”*

*A huff of laughter. “Stand up, Chuuya. You did good. I apologize for the theatrics of it all.”*

*Mori patted Elise’s head, shaking his own, vaguely exasperated. “Coming to power taught me that most illegitimate activities only survive by playing clean in the fields’ they can afford to. I doubt the Government will ever bring the police to our doorsteps, but they might very well incriminate me for abuse and exploitation of minors,” His grin was pure camaraderie; Elise giggled. “That wouldn’t be ideal, would it?”*

*“No, sir.”*

*“Being infantilized can’t have been fun. Not for the most talked-about Ability User in Yokohama,” he noted. “Kouyou tells me they made some — insensitive comments.”*

*“Governmental officials have mouths to shit and asses to sit,” Chuuya quoted, tonelessly. At the man’s face, he cleared his throat. “It’s fine. Suribachi way of saying.”*

*“Rintarou said I cannot use those words,” Elise mumbled, dragging a violent red line down her drawing. “He says it’s not ladylike. That’s not fair at all,” She glanced critically at him. “Chuuya. Move closer to the light.”*

*“I especially wish to apologize for Dazai’s behavior.”*

*His head snapped up.*

*Mori’s entire self was apologetic. From the vaguely embarrassed tilt of his mouth, to his brushing-off motions; a parent, in the simplest way, paying for his son’s attempts to put the family name through the mud. He wondered, for the first time, if he had something like Kouyou’s fingers tapping her under-chin. Silent but necessary; unjust — for two people who only looked like children, but obeyed all the same.*

*“He’s been under a lot of stress, lately,” he justified. “His mind was certainly pivotal in this conflict. And right when the war ends, he loses that beloved pet of his. He didn’t look much bothered by the loss, truly — but I know him. He was always very attached to his creatures.”*

*It took Chuuya too long to understand. “Kazuko is dead?”*

*“Unfortunately,” Mori sighed. “She escaped Dazai’s home while he was busy, and some retreating troops from Takasekai cut her body up. Purely sadistic, as far as I managed to understand. Dazai didn’t care much, but he was fixated on avenging the thing, no matter his own wounds,” Elise muttered something about stupidity; the ex-doctor smiled. “I had to calm him down, before he did something drastic. Forgive me, if you felt uninformed. I assumed, close as the two of you are, that he might have explained that he liked to experiment by mixing medicines. He has a particular fixation on muscle relaxants.”*

*His brain had been dumped in a cold lake; endless hours spent subjecting himself to a boa constrictor’s praises, endless bite marks on his calves, the unsettling joyfulness the boy seemed to show whenever that unconventional pet of his was mentioned — Chuuya couldn’t understand.*

*Dazai didn’t care much.*

*“And that’s alright?” he asked, uncertain.*

*Mori tilted his head to the side. “I told you a long time ago, did I not? Dazai is not stable.”*

*He thought of his body floating in the river; the distant light his eyes would get, sometimes, when he was pulled out. The frustration of it. “And just letting him try and try again to die is supposed to solve the problem?”*

*“If it keeps him alive, Chuuya,” the man replied, firm, oxymoronic — something else; something he wasn’t allowed to look in the eyes, “Anything is worth a try.”*

*He didn’t look alive, he didn’t say. He was breathing. Is that enough for all of you?*

*“But enough about him,” Mori leaned back on his seat, looking up at him with his sincerest smile yet. “Say, Chuuya. Are you ready to gain access to our investigations about your past?”*

*Sudden and unwanted, he remembered France.*

*Charleville-Mézières; the dusty furniture and ancient ceiling of a home he had haunted in the way of ghosts, too sagged with godlikeness not to make the floor creak — too nauseous with guilt, blood-food, and the poisons Mori had given him, to sleep soundly in the pushed-together beds. He had been sent to France to evaluate his abilities in the syndicate’s foreign deals; he had been sent to France because the high-floors needed more time to decide where their more-powerful-than-predicted tassel would fit.*

*He had come back, and he had sunk his head in the stream for an ounce of power in the city he wanted to be in — because if he didn’t care for answers any longer, he might as well care for a seat in the highest floors of Yokohama. If he couldn’t even buy furniture for his own apartment, he might as well vindicate a boy eating cockroaches and vomit, and drown in more than he would ever need. Because if he wasn’t real, he might as well be useful.*

*More, Arahbaki insisted, and he’d misunderstood him everyday of his life, had he not?*

*More.*

*“I don’t want it,” his lips carved in the air. Something around his rib cage shifted; tightened and released — and he was breathing, for the first time since he’d kneeled on another’s office floor, and sworn his life away again. “The Executive position. I don’t want it.”*

*Mori’s bewilderment was genuine enough to startle Elise, too; the sound of crayons on paper was cut short. “You don’t — want it?”*

*He searched for words. Actions were the one language no unstable family had ever needed to teach him; he’d known killing was a clear alphabet before he’d known what the sun was. Words were gloves on his hands, goosebumps on the decayed skin of his arms; Chuuya wished he could have read out whatever code had supposedly made him and have everyone understand.*

*“I don’t want to be given power,” he said, eventually, slow and careful, weighing each sound on the tip of his tongue, “I don’t want to be given power, only because I’m powerful.”*

*A flash passed on the Boss’ face — without a blink, Elise disappeared.*

*“I want to deserve it,” he added, frowning at the floor. Perhaps it wasn’t always rage, that violent shake in his veins — perhaps it was unmalicious stubbornness; perhaps it didn’t want him as dead as he had long believed. “We agreed I was — unfit to rule, when I first joined the Port Mafia. I have my faults for the Sheep’s end. But I never took the crown for myself. I had just been too powerful for anyone else to dare take it away.”*

*“I fought for Yokohama. I fought for the organization, and for my friends, and for myself. My strength shouldn’t steal someone’s spot,” Chuuya set his jaw. “An Executive should save*

*people. I did many things, during this war — but I did not save. Being a soldier is easy enough. Being a leader is — something else. Something I haven't learned yet."*

*Mori studied him. He couldn't decipher his face; he dropped his head down, huffing another laugh — as if he had expected nothing less; perhaps infinitely more.*

*"Chuuya," the ex-doctor declared. "You will be given more power, whether you want it or not."*

*He waited, shoulders straight.*

*"Neither you or Dazai seem to understand the mark the two of you left, during this conflict," he continued. "I understand. You have both been busy. But I have ears everywhere this city dares to grow, and I know what they are saying," His seat did not screech when he stood; he moved to the front of the desk, pensive and hungry. "You have, quite literally, captivated Yokohama."*

*"There is not one, one, criminal — professional assassins and petty thieves alike — or organization, who isn't whispering about you," Pride overflowed from his lips; Chuuya could see it drip on the floor, red and black, black, black. "They warn their men. They tell stories about the god who annihilated an entire organization in one go, and the prodigy who seemed to have predicted this entire conflict from its first day. The shadows of the Port Mafia; never seen, never unsuccessful."*

*Chuuya couldn't speak.*

*"I visited the Infirmary, at the beginning of the week," Mori said. "I had dozens of men demand you were rewarded for your efforts. Demand to be put under your command. You are as much of a myth as your origins are, and men want to touch the inhuman. It's the way the underground has always worked. You want to deserve power? That is certainly noble. But you already have it, Chuuya. And I cannot take it away, even without a title."*

*His body was ablaze. Pride, he thought. Terror. Vindication; the feeling of holding the city he'd bled for in his palm, and knowing few would be strong enough to dare —*

*"I had a title, in the Sheep," Chuuya replied. "You called it undeserved, sir. Perhaps I can't stop them all from talking — But I can learn. I can grow. I can —" He cleared his throat. "Shut less coffins, the next time danger comes."*

*The man leaned against his desk, nodding. "Very well, then," he concluded. His expression softened, imperceptibly. "For whatever it might matter, Chuuya. You lost the competition."*

*He stilled.*

*His next smile was barely there; he reminded him, for some reason, of Virgil's quiet seriousness — explaining academic concepts he had never learned in the slums. "There is one thing that separates you from every other man in this organization," the Boss explained. "Not your Ability. Not Arahbaki. Not your story. It's your loyalty." He reached forward; laid*

*a hand on his shoulder. “Unwavering and undefeated. You would tear your limbs to enclose Yokohama in a safety net, if you could. You’re loyal to the ground that raised you.”*

*“You were loyal to the Sheep, who were lucky enough to deserve it,” he went on. “So did the Flags, who you defeated your own brother for. You’re loyal to Kouyou, for taking you as one of her own. You were loyal to your squad, for standing next to you, even as most men of the syndicate refused to look you in the eyes. You’re loyal to Kajii, who you brought here. To Hirotsu, to Madame Tanaki — even to Q, at times. To me. You’re as devoted to Dazai as he is to you.”*

*Devoted, he thought. What a terrible word. Wasn’t he supposed to be the divine one? Wasn’t this supposed to be temporary?*

*“I’m not —” he tried to interrupt.*

*“Do not fight me on this. Loyalty is inestimable,” Mori swore. “But only when it is given to something greater than people, as well. You lost many faithful friends. Should every person in this organization who you deem worthy of this loyalty of yours die — what would you do? What choice would you make?”*

*The hand on his shoulder slipped down; unmistakable, it pressed between his collarbones — where his tattoo rested. “Is the Port Mafia what you would die for, or are its people?”*

*Chuuya found he didn’t know.*

*Outside the windows, the sun disappeared underneath the waves, drowning the room in crimson and gold.*

*The Boss sighed. He fixed his coat around his shoulders; offered him a much less intense expression. “We’ll discuss more on this matter, anyway. The new year is coming. New responsibilities will come with it,” The man put his hat on top of his head; déjà vu almost suffocated him. “For now, you should rest. And, maybe — have someone at the Infirmary check if those Corruption wounds of yours are healing correctly.”*

*His jaw brushed the floor. “But —”*

*“Rescinded privileges are — no longer rescinded,” Mori winked. “You boys did a good job. You are more than welcome — required, actually — to come to me, should this unplanned usage of Corruption cause you any sort of side effects. We had vowed to let you rest a little longer, but — Well. The war is over.”*

*He bowed. There wasn’t much else to do.*

*“And Chuuya?” Mori called, once he had reached the door.*

*He turned to look at him. His head was tilted to the side, pensive.*

*“No need to worry. You will not be punished for the medical consultation you received after the Reaper’s attack. It wasn’t your choice, after all,” A chuckle; Elise, he noticed, had reappeared. She waved her finished drawing at him; himself, covered in bleeding Corruption*

*marks. “Dazai has already been — disciplined, for bringing you to that Oda Sakunosuke of his. No need to worry,”*

*It hadn’t been his intention, Chuuya thought. Something about it sounded wrong. Something about it sounded unfair. Kazuko, he thought, nonsensically. What about —*

*A closing nod. Mori’s scarf brushed the dusty floor; Building Two could have used a sweep. “I beg you to forgive him, once again,” he sighed. “That boy truly forgets himself, sometimes.”]*

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Festivities came with little care for a city still struggling to climb to its feet.

It was a mixture of discomfort and delight. Between dazzling lights hastily thrown over every crack and wreck, and the Christmas decorations turning each road in a blinding ray of moonlight — most would have been hard-pressed to find every hospital in Yokohama was still filled to the brim. Choirs muffled the sound of underpaid workers; the smell of sweets and cotton was borderline nauseating.

Chuuya had always liked the end of the year.

“The Sheep knew when to leave me alone,” he narrated, bending to pick up a fallen frame from the floor. Albatross’ apartment had been left a mess after the intrusion — glass shards and ripped curtains and dangling posters. He had taken Ōmu off the floor already; had thrown his ashes in Albatross’ favorite vehicle dumping site. “But I would still wait for them to be asleep to leave.”

He would circle their perimeter like a starved beast — sure there would be no fools brave enough or brave ones foolish enough to *dare*, but unable to risk it all. “I’d find the tallest mountain of shit and rubbles in Suribachi, even if it was filled with so much snow I would freeze my ass off — and I would sit and watch the Christmas lights.”

“Not that there were any in Suribachi,” He kicked the side of a couch, pushing it back to its original place — floated broken cutlery off the counter with a touch. The lights had overfilled Yokohama with borderline tackiness — too pretty to grimace at. An unreachable skyline; a tasteless joke at the expense of a kid who could fly — just not quite that far.

“Some of the older kids tried to get me to believe in Santa,” Chuuya scoffed. Lippman’s eyes stared back, grinning. “I didn’t even have the face to tell them I had no idea of who he was.”



One of the windows creaked, pushed open by the winter wind. He nudged some glass with his sock; sat down a few inches off the floor, crossing his legs. Tsuchiya's eyepatch was wrapped around his wrist; he pulled at it, lithe.

Last December, the Flags had dragged him to some precocious Christmas Festival. They had refused to stop waddling around until their feet were numb and he couldn't see straight. They'd all made him a gift — except Lippman, who had finally dropped the *Nakahara*, after months of his snarls.

*We're doing this again*, Albatross had warned him, dragging him home on unstable feet, *So get ready. As soon as New Year comes around!* Koda had begged them to join him and his brother to go witness the fireworks on Mount Omaru. *Chuuya can finally experience being tall*, Kenta had sighed.

Then they'd been dead.

A knock came on the ajar door.

"Merry Christmas," Hirotsu said, peeking in. His scarf had been substituted by a green one; he offered no judgemental gaze to the chaos of the room — instead, he studied the space between the ground and his legs. "That is quite the nice trick."

"You should see me when it rains," Chuuya replied, rolling glass under his index. "You've got some face showing up here."

"Me or you?"

He let the shard fall. Hugged his shoulders in; tilted his head to study the picture stuck to the kitchenette. Soft steps grew sharper; the sound of ruins being crunched under Hirotsu's foot, as he picked up his abandoned broom for no real aim. The warmth of his body settled behind his back — never touching; but present. He reminded Chuuya of the makeshift canopies in Suribachi City.

"Chuuya," the Commander said, gentle in that gruff way of his. "He won't let you stay here."

One of the shards had dug a small hole on the middle finger of his glove; he poked it.

"Chuuya."

"I'm not staying," he lied. "I know. Tanaki gave me a pamphlet of free apartments in our territory. She wants me to get a penthouse."

She had been there with him, locked in the bathrooms of *Building One*, with nothing but a pair of scissors and a lighter in her hands. She had let him pick the strand he wanted to burn; Chuuya had smelled the ash in his hair for hours. *Why do you think we do this?*, he had asked her.

Her shrug had been vacant. The strand of hair in the back of her skull hadn't regrown yet; the tips still looked tortorously black, in the light. *Isn't doing nothing worse?*

His scoff must have been louder than he had predicted; because a small wave of amusement curled at the man's feet. "Seems a bit much for your taste."

"Yeah, well," Chuuya shrugged. She had been rather enthusiastic about it; had pressed her side against his under her desk with the papers in hands, like there was nothing to fear. *Not afraid I'll explode?*, he had wanted to ask. But almost nobody had time to fear him, these days — they were too busy mourning those he had killed. It was only him who could hear the incessant *beep*. "Maybe I need better taste."

The man's pause lasted a bit too long. He cleared his voice; it sounded awkward.

"You know," he started. His tone had him blinking. "Kajii tells me the *Old World* has some truly nice drinks to its name."

Chuuya stared.

"I'm just saying — should you ever need a drinking buddy, I would greatly —"

"Gramps," he cut him off, speechless. "Put yourself out of your misery."

The Commander's shoulders sagged with relief. "Very well."

He frowned at the ground. "I know," he muttered, very low.

"I beg your —"

"I said *I know*," Chuuya said, a bit too fast. The man's eye was still a bit scarred, behind the monocle — all of him was a tad too thin. Chuuya had never even seen him sleep, before the accident. He met his gaze with defiance; with acceptance. "I know, Hirotsu. Of course I do."

The man was the one to stare.

He snapped his gaze back to the floor; stood up, and threw the spare broom into his arms. "Get that look off your face and help me clean up."

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Christmas was spent at Kouyou's mansion, twirling wine in one of her tall glasses and losing his voice in a screaming match against Kajii.

“Won’t Miranda miss you?” he asked Hirotsu.

Yuan had sighed about Christmas being a *romantic* holiday every year since they’d met; this one in particular, he had watched her banter with Agent Minami in front of the woman’s apartment, hands full of *mochi* and her face slowly, *slowly*, melting. He hadn’t said anything. Shirase hadn’t called. Adam had sent another pop-up postcard.

*My information tells me some religions believe this festivity to be the birth of a creator*, he’d written. *Do you know what androids call their creator? Da-ta.*

“She can survive a few hours,” the man replied, easily. “She is very independent.”

They played *Igo* until the choirs outside got too tired to sing, and Kajii drunkenly offered him one of his lemon bombs as a present. Madame Tanaki kept him on the phone for more than an hour. Kouyou kissed his forehead before he could leave; he felt himself blush to the tips of his ears, and dropped some too-obvious scoffs about it.

Chuuya was too drunk to even *think*. It wasn’t until he landed on the guest bed Kouyou had reserved for him, that he found himself wondering what demons did for the holidays.

“Hey,” he muttered, when Kajii threw his door open to scream his good nights. “Where do you bury snakes?”

Very confusedly, he told him he did not know.

Works at *Building One* were still on — the journalists in the area lowered in number day after day, though. TV News slowly began to change their first segments; protests in front of the *Special Division* HQs came to an end with eerie ease. Few people bothered being courageous under shining Christmas trees. Yokohama wasn’t gentle enough not to threaten itself into normality.

He thought he should have been more surprised about how quickly the city seemed to forget the months of hell; Mori shrugged, when he admitted it to him.

“What else should they do?” he questioned.

Given the circumstances, it was decided the annual New Year’s Eve party would be hosted in *Building Two* instead. The event was meant to fix a common problem throughout the organization: the solitude most of its members experienced on such a *family-like* festivity. A bit too nice for a criminal organization — a show of trust and welcome, from the Boss most had hated, at first.

Wrapped in the maroon kimono Kouyou had thrown his way before he could escape, Chuuya stared at the hastily hung pictures on the hallway, pretending the laughter from behind the ballroom doors did not shake the ground.

*He’s grieving*, he had heard both Kouyou and Tanaki insist, again and again, to every voice wondering about his unusual quietness. *The holidays are complicated.*

The pictures had been saved, he assumed — or Mori owed multiple copies. Severe and slightly malicious faces, straight shoulders — the *something* in their eyes that told the thing in his veins they knew blood intimately.

The Colonel's face was solemn. It hadn't been visible in the picture of his corpse.

The nearest of them, almost eye level, was all cracked glass and slightly blurred outlines — ruined by the shivers. The golden plaque on the frame read: *Randou*.

At the bottom — a waiting frame.

"There you are," Dazai exclaimed, appearing from the end of the hallway. "I thought I had smelled dog and *kadomatsu* up the stairs."

Two rows of suited men followed him; he didn't recognize anyone from the *Secret Force*.

"You can go," he told them, as he skipped to him. His kimono looked offensively expensive, and Chuuya didn't doubt it was — in shades of cobalt and grey, it gave him and his bandages a ghostly appearance; right out of Rin's horror stories. "Do you need to check the air I breathe? How will I ever commit a peaceful suicide, with you ninjas *stalking* me?"

"Boss' orders, Executive Dazai," the woman at the front replied, undeterred. She bowed. "You will find us inside." A respectful nod was directed to Chuuya's own way. "Vice-Executive Nakahara."

He thought about correcting her. He wouldn't know with *what*, though.

Dazai's sigh was endless. The moment the unwanted crowd disappeared, all childish obnoxiousness slid down his face like melted wax; the thing left under it made Chuuya more uncomfortable than he was willing to admit.

Not *honesty*. Never that. But —

"I *thought* I'd smelled dead fish and bullshit," Chuuya replied, tonelessly. "But now that you're here, the self-satisfaction has muffled everything else."

Dazai hummed. His pupils had abandoned their overtaking quest, sometime during those last few weeks of December; but color had yet to return to his cheeks. He sneaked a glance at the photographs; seemed to change his mind about commenting. "No hat," he noticed, instead. "Did you hit your head hard enough to heal?"

"Ane-san said it would clash," he replied. "Fuck you."

"Did you burn a strand yet?"

Defensiveness stiffened his shoulders. "It's none of your business."

"You're one for customs," Dazai said, as if he hadn't heard a thing. "Personally, I never got this one in particular. How are you meant to decide who's worth the flame, anyway? The Port

Mafia was deprived of *many* men. You might be out of hair too soon, have you thought about that?”

His teeth clenched so tightly he almost bit his tongue off. “I’m not responsible for every corpse on this earth.”

“Only you who doesn’t know it.”

“‘You makin’ shoes out of Kazuko, or just using her body as a low-cost hanging rope?’”

Muffled laughter appeared from behind the doors; a cheer and a toast, as some kind of classical music managed to make even the walls tremble. They stared at each other. Neither one of their kimonos was unfit — tailored to the skeleton. Nothing more useless than the knives hidden underneath the robes.

Wordlessly, Dazai offered his hands, palms up.

*I’ll kill him*, he recalled. *Once there is no need for a cage. I’ll kill him.*

Arahabaki did not answer, because he could not answer — because he wouldn’t care to, anyway. *Sorry*, he couldn’t say — he wouldn’t say it either. Kazuko was no matter at all, according to Mori. *Sorry, I know she was something. Sorry, I never understood what.*

He removed his gloves with his teeth, and laid his hands on his waiting palms. “Ain’t you gonna get a second tattoo or something, anyway?” he asked, planting his feet on the ground not to turn that small concession to gravity — *not* gravity — into something greater. “Executives’ inks are different.”

“A detail is added, yes,” Dazai studied the bluish paths up his knuckles, searching for black roads he did not find. “Nothing much. Nothing that could kill me, unfortunately,” Usual glee — the underline of *whatever* had been rotting him inside for so long, he couldn’t remember when it had started. “On that matter. You still owe me —“

His head pounded. “If this is about that *now I can boss you around* shit —“

“Chibi, where’s your heart?”

“ — I will gladly remind the nose I made bleed just a week ago of why you’re not allowed to be a piece of *fuck* about this —“

The doors slipped open. Rose-pink and red appeared from the slot; Kouyou’s eyes fell on their joint hands, cutting off the words visibly perched on top of her lips.

They jumped back as if burned.

“Ane-san,” Chuuya snapped.

“Boys,” she offered. One of her eyebrows was dead set on brushing her hairline — hiding a strange expression behind a fan as decorated as she was, she nodded. She hadn’t brought a jacket; he made a mental note to steal one for her. “You’re awaited. Come in.”

Fresh pine branches, bamboo decorations, straw ropes, and *kagami mochi*; the explosion of colors and trinkets in the ballroom pressed against his eyes like fireworks. Maroon curtains hid fogged up windows — the chandeliers were shinier than they'd ever been, raining golden light on the long tables filled with food dividing the room in two.

A small classical band was playing, in the far corner of the room, easily ignored by the crowd of gut-wrenchingly richly dressed people — mafiosi, associates, investors, and families; dripping in diamonds and gems and the softest fabrics for the most elaborate traditional clothing.

At the dead center of the central table, pierced by a spear of sorts, standing tall enough for every guest to see as it bleed recently-dried blood on the cloth — was the Boss of the *Bishop's Staff's* head.

“How tacky,” Dazai commented, not bothering with lowering his voice. “Hatrack, remind me not to eat any dessert.”

“So they did kill him, eventually,” Chuuya replied, observing the brutally torn apart caves where his eyeballs had once been. Not one of the silent waiters gave more than a glance; some of the younger members ogled it with smirking scoffs, like children with a stuck fly. “Thought Kouyou might just drag it out longer.”

“Even her sadism knows bounds. How surprising,” the boy replied, but it soon blurred off somewhere, sometime — as every head in the ballroom realized *who* was standing there.

Silence did not fall.

It would have been distasteful. The swarm of sounds lowered to a pitiful volume, dragged down by the falling smiles of the guest's faces — but only for a blink, before it climbed to its most *normal* semblance. *Decay and torture on the table*, he considered, *and fear settles on the brats in festive kimonos?*

Decapitated heads could not kill, was the immediate reminder. And *they* had spent the last few months proving just how willing they were to. Their eyes told him they knew.

He stuck his hands in his *obi*, pretending it would count as pockets. “Boring,” he huffed.

Then, he stalked towards the refreshments.

Stuck between preening and rolling his eyes when people parted and flinched and offered his bows, he felt Dazai's presence like a shadow. “Are you not close enough to a god to appreciate worship?” he asked, stealing his Champagne glass from his hand the moment it was in it. *Executive Dazai* echoed from the widening circle around them.

Chuuya took his glass back after a sip. “Are you?”

Celebration moved forward — music and drinks and talks of victory, as the streets outside the window shone with belated Christmas lights; the head stayed in the eye of the storm. At one point, Ace fed it grapes.

Every mouth in the room laughed.

“Bet they wouldn’t, if we did that,” Dazai said.

They bet some more — somehow, Chuuya ended up being the one to do it. Predictably enough, wide eyes and steps back welcomed his fingers on the lifeless flesh. *They will line up to light your cigarette*, Kouyou had said. As the crowd offered charmed, terrified approval for his every move, he thought he understood.

Hirotsu had officially begun a search for two co-commanders for the Black Lizards; he made sure to offer a place to Chuuya, addressing him as *Vice-Executive* with the clear expectation of a refusal. Madame Tanaki was dealing with the aftermath of her divorce; she was thinking of getting herself a dog, or perhaps a firearm of sorts — whatever would guard her new mansion better.

Kajii was muttering under his breath; something about these parties being too similar to his parents’ events. Kouyou, when she floated their way, admitted to be wasting most of her days away on relocating the *Bishop’s Staff’s* women and their children. Mori would want either; she would give them to him.

As an endless violin piece came to an end, small arms wrapped around his legs.

“*Nii-san*,” Q said.

The smell of blood was so thick it made his head swarm. Their kimono hung off their shoulders, sweeping the ground with its greyish hems. The hat was still in place — their hand tight around the edge of Elise’s unchangeable red dress.

“I did not see you.”

He knew they didn’t mean *now*.

“Lise!” Dazai exclaimed, reappearing from whatever horror story he had been cheerfully offering to the nearest teeth-trembling pair. He dug some envelopes from the back of his kimono, crouching in front of her. “How repulsive you look. Did Mori buy you another dress, after you murdered the boss of the *Bishop’s Staff*?”

She *humpf*-ed. “Two of them, actually. You still owe me for throwing up on my dolls.”

“Oh, that,” He shook his head. “Kill me, and I’ll make it up for you.”

Some more dances began; some more toasts. Some Black Lizards began peeling away pieces of skin from the face of the room’s sacrificial lamb. Perhaps it was necessary; perhaps it was too *much*, asking a crowd of men who lived off blood to stand in a room and play pretend for all those hours without *something* to rage over.

*You know*, he had heard two men whisper, dead eyed and white-smiling. *I almost miss the conflict*.

Chuuya let them fade in the corner of his eye; Q was still staring up at him.

“Sorry, kid,” he said, at last. A grave, a face; *why wasn’t Koda with you; what were the last words he said; why did you kill our own men and then cried about Hell?* “I’ve been busy. I hear Mori might give you a new room, though. Very soon.”

The idea made him uncomfortable — hypocritical to the bone.

Because he didn’t *want it* — the violence, the blood — he told himself. And Q didn’t either — someone who cried about their own sins so deeply *couldn’t*. But they enjoyed it as it happened; left the sorrow for the aftermath and the corpses.

*Don’t we?*, Arahabaki scratched.

“Are you scared?”

He was startled. “Excuse me?”

“Are you *scared?*” Q insisted, gripping his clothes. It didn’t appear as if the possibility tormented them. “Your friend was. I’m sorry he’s like the corpses. It wasn’t me,” Their lips trembled; for a moment, their intensity seemed too wide for the room. “It *wasn’t* me. I promise. *Promise.*”

“Don’t talk about him,” Chuuya ordered, abrupt and *rude* enough to make them recoil.

“Don’t —“

“And Q, you too!”

Bandaged fingers appeared; Dazai kneeled in front of them, shoving another envelope in their pale hands, and closing them around it.

“Here’s your present,” he explained. “*New Year is a child’s paradise* — that’s what Odasaku said. *We* don’t get gifts. But you do! Isn’t that great? I apologize for the lack of viscera and men on the border of insanity,” His smile took a sharper turn. “We all know how much you like those.”

“Hey,” Elise whined. “These are *empty!*”

It didn’t take Q long to notice the same; Dazai gleefully let the two children lament the deception as he snickered, before holding out a hand to Chuuya. He blinked.

“*What?*” he protested. “I’m not your wallet.”

“Didn’t you grow up around poor, sad, little orphans?” the other hissed. “Where’s your soul? Where’s the goodness of heart those mafiosi keep talking about? Or are you *that* irrelevant your pay can’t afford some New Year’s presents?”

“You,” Chuuya breathed. “You bandaged *bitch*, you don’t have the money *either* —“

He stood up, quick enough to startle both children. “You lost the last *Motor Race* round.”

He stared.



He slapped some yen on his palm.

“Come on, stop crying,” Dazai chanted, patting the kids’ heads, offering them the money. “It was just a prank! It made everything funnier, right? I wouldn’t have left you without money on New Year. What am I, a monster?”

Elise kicked her feet. “*Yes!*”

“Vile,” he muttered, crossing his arms to his chest. “I *knew* Chuuya had the money, obviously,” With a poisonous glance his way, as *cruel* as every remark about his burned hair, he added: “We’re *partners*, haven’t you heard?”

Chuuya opened his mouth, unsure of what to say. Gloved fingers laid on his shoulders; Mori’s voice shook his chest, rumbling against his spine with a little too much joy. “I believe everyone in the underworld of Yokohama has, by now, Dazai. I hear they even gave you two a name.”

Every motion of his face stilled.

“What a town of gossipers,” he lamented, less than a note of piano later. *Mistake* was written all over his frame, bright and frantic, insulting its own master. “First the bedtime stories, now the workplace relationship speculations? This city’s obsession with two children could be considered *scandalous*, in another world,” Dazai tilted his head to the side; he smiled. “Right, Mori?”

The grip on his shoulders did not tighten, did not widen. Mori chuckled. “It’s not *children* it’s obsessing over. Yokohama appreciates those who are willing to destroy it in the name of its protection, I assume.”

“Certainly,” the boy agreed.

Every dance, every toast, every laughter — there came the epicenter. There came the man who might put another head on the table, if someone got the choreography wrong. He was standing proud and satiated with the best dancing monkeys of the evening — Chuuya knew the gazes he felt had nothing to do with Arahabaki.

“Yokohama could stand some fucking *minding its business*,” Chuuya muttered.

The threads of tension between the doctor and the boy shattered.

Another chuckle. Something sharp pressed against his clavicles; his eyes settled on the old-style camera hanging from the man’s neck.

“Oh, this,” Mori said. Elise was pulling at the purple fabric of his kimono, whining about some gift. “Our new Executive will need a picture for the wall. Tradition wants the Boss to take care of the formalities. Perhaps we can worry about it once this little party is over?”

Dazai stared at the camera. “I suppose.”

“Wonderful. May I have your attention?” Mori raised his *Sake* glass and his voice, calling every eye in the room to himself. Music fell quiet; he smiled amiably at his guests, eyes not pausing when they traced the head on the table. “I propose a toast,” he called, “For our new Executive. A wish of prosperity, and of good work. Raise your cups, would you?”

A hundred shiny glasses shone underneath the chandeliers, liquid brimming in the same shade as blood, upon the carefully blank faces of every high-name in the syndicate. Belatedly, Chuuya realized they were standing at the dead center of the room, surrounded by no one and nothing.

The head was still on the table. Someone had scribbled a *kanji* on his face, with something that might have been spit or might have been champagne.

*Retaliation; always.*

“Too kind,” Dazai said, eyes of steel.

Mori’s smile softened.

“And to his partner!”

A murmur went through the crowd. Head snapping up, Chuuya frowned, searching the faces for the parted lips to blame — the only thing that welcomed him were the raising voices. The waves at the port; the faraway lighting — it grew slow and untouched, syllable after syllable, until it was too loud to be understood and too attached to the glasses to be taken back.

It took him eons to shape the words.

*“To Double Black!”*

*“To Double Black!”*

Applause and cheers rained down on them — and he was seated on the muddy grass of a cemetery, he was stumbling at the very end of a crater to be burned alive, he was flying on the wing of an airplane with a man to kill and the world under his feet. He had *wanted* this.

For a speck of a second — he looked into Mori’s eyes before the doctor could look at him.

“*Soukoku?*” echoed the only other voice in miles, just quiet enough to beat the roar of the crowd. “What a tacky name.”

Clapping hands and artificial smiles and terrified eyes. *Why did he look like that?* He nodded. “Bet they’ll forget about it in a week.”

“No,” Dazai replied. “I don’t think so.”

A flash went off.

He cursed under his breath, scrubbing his eyes. When his vision managed to overcome the blurriness, he saw Mori’s humming smile — perfectly normal; perfectly undisturbed at the

interruption; *why had he looked like that?* — as he waved a photograph around to make it develop fully. When he met their disconnected gazes, he winked.

“One or two pictures will not make much of a difference,” he said. “Dazai can keep you company on the wall, until you earn your own Executive seat. Right, Chuuya?”

He looked at the piece of paper and longed, agonizingly and nonsensically and with a ferocity he could barely explain to himself, to tear it into pieces. Someone threw a grape onto the head. Celebration went on, and the guests gulped the blood — Port Mafia black, always and anyway, only because it was *theirs* — in their mouths.

He enjoyed fame until the flattery took the cadence of Virgil’s comedic novellas.

He thought Lippman would have criticized the fireworks he could see lit up the sky behind the windows. He thought about asking where the secret Executive was spending his New Year. He thought about questioning who had come up with a name like *Double Black*; whether it was someone they had torn apart or ignored. He thought about Verlaine — wondered if he’d put Dazai among his killing list, were he to come to drag Chuuya away from his home now.

*That partner of yours*, Noguchi had spat out, once. Koda had been plotting to kill him. He would have failed.

*“To Double Black!”* some drunken voice insisted, belatedly.

Chuuya hadn’t stumbled on his feet since he was eight years old. He walked out of the room without a tremor in his calves; without breathing.

Before his lungs could maim him for it, he was inside the elevator.

There was nothing to think about — there was no hypnotizing, endless hum; no silver at the corner of his vision; not a sign of Dante’s voice. He had either been born into a cage or locked into it — it had been glass and it had been darkness and it had been *all*. He spread his palms on the glass doors as they closed, crystallized ice muffled by his gloves and sinking inside his veins all the same. His reflection was the same as it had ever been — was him but *wasn’t*; was bleeding and was grinning and was sporting an ember eye set on fire. He wondered if at least one member of the squad had been alive to see him rage — if their last movement had been to flinch. If they had tried to call him.

He sat on the floor.

Spine against the wall — whether the rattling feeling came from his bones, or from the metallic wires pulling the elevator up. The lights outside spun and twirled, as far as they had been from the mountains of trash of Suribachi City.

He didn’t move when the doors opened. He knew the sound of the heels pausing on the glass — the smell of her perfume; the way she fit against him when she dropped next to him.

Tanaki didn't speak as they climbed the sky. He sunk his nails into his calves. There was no liquid to drown into — there were no blinking numbers to follow with his eyes, counting and counting until he fell asleep or simply didn't *remember*. No accusing mirrors; no lab coats who might have put his parts together or torn them apart.

*Impostor*, Dante's voice swore. *Impostor*.

Chuuya stared forward. Sunk his nails in his calves. Waited. He had destroyed that tank; he had killed the only other who knew how it felt. He had burned a crater into existence to let himself breathe in the open air. Kouyou called him *little god*. Yuan had said his name was pretty. They had called him *Vice-Executive*. They had called him *Double Black*.

*Fuck you*, he mouthed, taunting, between gritted teeth.

"You know," Tanaki said, very low, "I used to blame myself for it."

Cement had dried between Chuuya's teeth; it hurt his jaw to let out: "For what?"

"Wanting to be needed."

He spied her way, chin half hidden behind his crossed arms. The curve of his legs was starting to ache. Chuuya wasn't made for small spaces. "I don't think that's fair."

"The Port Mafia gave everything to me," Tanaki insisted, eyes set on who knew where. The emerald shades of her kimono made the *x* scar on her face look silver, instead of aging. "A home. My people. My safety. At first it seemed reasonable — I merely wanted to foot the bill. It's why I returned so soon after..." Her fingers reached for nothing; the spasm reminded him of his own hands, forever cursed by an electrified spear. "Then I discovered — there was selfishness in it."

Chuuya didn't know how she had ended up there. She made it sound like she had been saved; *then again*, he considered, *few mafiosi ever talked about the syndicate in any other way*. Salvation was only shaped differently.

"It isn't *selfish*," he scoffed. "It would be wasteful, otherwise — having something to give."

"The things we lose," she insisted. "People. Values. All of them — there is no erasing them. No amount of good work — no amount of, *next time, I won't let it happen. Next time, it will be different*," Tanaki's eyes traced the Ferris Wheel, its lights moving from red to green to golden. "This is a home, despite the blood. It deserves better than to be used as an attempt to erase our guilt."

He frowned. "I don't understand."

"I'm saying they can call you a god all they want, Chuuya," the woman told him, leaning her face close enough for him to study the white roots of her hair. "You don't owe this place any divinity. Bleeding yourself out for this organization — It won't give you back what you've lost. It will only make you feel like you aren't doing enough to."

There was probably a more suited answer than staring. Chuuya couldn't find it — he couldn't focus on the staggering beat of his heart enough to say that the elevator didn't horrify some deeper part of him, still.

He couldn't understand how one could be given a hand and not die for it.

“I want you to believe this place — your Flags, your squad —” If she noticed his flinch, she didn't let it interrupt her; refusing to look away from him, Tanaki's eyes and voice grew fervent, “I want you to *see* this — they didn't die so that you could bleed out in their name. They died so that you could live.”

He knew his words would be cruel before he could even taste them. “They died for nothing,” Chuuya said. He didn't remember how she had screamed when he had hit her — he remembered how she had breathed when she had been robbed, though. Remembered the *pointlessness*.

“But their deaths are *something*,” Tanaki replied, undeterred.

The floor was transparent — the gallery of darkness and cables under them was deeper than Suribachi, and three times more unknown. If they were to fall, it would hurt. But Chuuya could fly. He had never worried for anyone but the ones who couldn't. “We are mere tassels for this syndicate. I know. We allow it to place corpses in our hands, and to steal our past from our fingers —” He sucked in a breath, eyes widening in alarm. “But it's more than most get. Chuuya, in the end — all people like us are, is something someone will mourn. Not everyone is so lucky.”

*Would you die for the Mafia?*, Mori had asked, smiling, like he knew, *or for its people?*

“So?” he asked, voice hoarser than wanted.

Tanaki shrugged. The flames in her gaze softened endlessly — the talons that had been reaching for nothing at all settled on his knee; tapping one, two, three times. “So step inside the elevator all you want — but don't stay here.”

His reflection tilted his head when he did. The blood was lost amongst the red lights of the skyscrapers outside, turning his eyes the same color. For a moment, he was just a person.

When the elevator slipped open — the third time he had let them, after Tanaki had left — the doors to Mori's temporary office were ajar.

He didn't wander out for a reason. There were no guards in front of the doors, for once — unsure if he wanted to wander like a ghost or graffiti the walls, he simply stood, until hushed voices caught his attention. Floating to the slot to ensure his steps wouldn't echo, he squinted, searching the blindingly illuminated room.

“— brutality,” Agent Minami was hissing.

Chuuya didn't breathe.

“This organization has always prided itself in *regard*. Displaying your enemies for the masses to spit on?” There wasn’t any respect in the distance she kept from the Boss of the Mafia; the gun in her hands didn’t shake. “I might not be one of the officers on your case, but you are *very much* challenging the ease I could incriminate this whole building with *right now*.”

“Certainly,” Mori agreed, hands intertwined. “But the masses *need* something to spit on, Agent. After such intense weeks — even more so. Otherwise, they might grow restless and cause more problems than either of us desires. As for your little threat,” he continued, once her hesitation lasted too long. “I believe you should use some of that intellect I heard so much about.”

“Do you know how an illegal organization manages to stay alive for such a long time?” Lithe steps; back and forth, like a teacher, a congressman — maybe even a doctor. “By taking precautions. By having *something* on every *someone* who dares to pass through the door frame. And if you have no such thing, you build it for yourself.”

Mori offered her a polite tilt of his lips. In some indescribable, unreachable corner of himself, Chuuya thought it a cruel sight. In every other — he knew it to be earth-shatteringly clever.

“For example,” he started —

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The furthest side of the dumping site had been turned into a vehicles junkyard.

It was another mountain of sorts — tall and mechanical and glittering weakly with all its rust underneath the moonlight. When Chuuya picked up a discarded, sharp-edged pipe from the ground — something too burdensome to lift without *Tainted*, and a wonderful excuse to try all the same — and began smashing it on some old Toyota’s window, the entire mountain seemed to shake.

Chuuya was floating. He only regained physicality when his phone, abandoned on the edge of a vehicle, offered, after a three minutes long rant: “— *So yeah, I’m fed up with the prank calls.*”

If the nasal tone of his voice was to trust, Shirase had gotten sick during the holidays again.

It was a gradual thing — he felt the cold, first; pungent and muffled over the parts his kimono didn’t hide, whipping the newly burned strand of his hair against his nape. “— *call people*

*who will find you, you son of a bitch, and then we can have a talk in person, instead. You think I'm scared? I haven't been scared since the womb!"*

And then the sweat down his palms; the unjustifiable grip of his fingers around the pipe. Chuuya smashed a back wheel. At the edge of his vision, he could see the monotone edges of the shipping container.

He heard the steps even through the mess of well-planned smashing, because Chuuya heard everything — he recognized them, toes unhesitant on the descent and heels digging the metal.

"You know, he would probably answer, if you actually spoke," Dazai said, gingerly dragging his fingers near the speaker button of his phone. He wouldn't unblock it, probably — he only enjoyed entertainment when he was far away from it. Chuuya was still relieved when he shut the call off instead. "Not that I would dare assume you know how phones work. Dogs are yet to develop opposable thumbs."

Undeterred, Chuuya kept his eyes on the car hood in front of him — the crack at the center, widening a bit more with each strike; the lines of metal curling upward in razor-sharp lines.

*Tainted* could have cut through just the same. Kenta had been buried under maceries and a metal foil from the vents.

"How come," Dazai insisted, tone a tad too jovial for someone who had escaped the HQs in the middle of their celebrative frenzy, "Someone who's lost almost every friend he has refuses to do something to keep the ones left?"

The car good gave up under the rainstorm of the pipe's bent edge; a panel of it flew upward, and Chuuya struck it as if a baseball ball — watching it fly past Dazai's frame, a mere *breath* from his side.

It landed onto the side of the mountain with a roar. Dazai didn't even flinch.

Chuuya threw the bat away, unimpressed. "How come someone who goes around boasting about *partners* has no trouble keeping secrets?"

The boy tilted his head, owlishly. He didn't seem concerned. "Secrets," he spelled out, like the word held no meaning — only sound.

It echoed. Chuuya tried his hardest not to care — he knew he had failed by the time the words fell out of his lips, quivering like magma underneath the concrete. "Did you know?"

Dazai did nothing but look at him.

He traced the hems of his kimono, blowing with the winter wind. There had been almost no snow yet that year; the tips of his hair twirled into knots — shining a candid white in front of the half broken car lights of a Camaro.

*[“If you refuse to hand me the recording device hidden in your pocket, Agent Minami,” Mori said, smile untouched and eyes hard, “I will order the sniper in front of your apartment to put a bullet in Yuan's head.”*

*Chuuya's feet dropped to the ground.*

*The line of Minami's shoulders stretched to the ends of the earth. He couldn't see her face — he could recall the way she'd looked at Yuan, day after day he went to check up on them. She had bought her some gifts for Christmas; Yuan hadn't laughed, but she hadn't left either.*

Even if it wasn't, *he thought, humbly*. Even if it wasn't — people from the light wouldn't let someone die. *Even if it wasn't —*

*Chuuya thought about killing Mori.*

*Too late. Too unconvinced. The woman fished a metallic square from her pockets, throwing it at his feet. "And you'd kill me before I could leave the building," she concluded, bitterly.*

*Mori's smile was brilliant. "Precisely."*

*With utter clarity — because he had thought about killing him four times, since the first time his name had been whispered; because Chuuya never, never could — he understood.]*

Fake snowflakes and something in Dazai's eye, too *unending* to be fake. Chuuya only figured out the ache in his jaw when he heard himself laugh.

"He had it all planned," he snorted, head thrown back, spine aching and scars burning. He could have flown with it — the sheer exhilaration of a magic trick; the flicker of the last piece falling where it was meant to and spelling out a life sentence — a *life*. "The son of a bitch had it all planned — from day one. He was *testing me*," He kicked a loose wheel; insisted, threatened, spelled out: "Did you know?"

The record started again — Dazai's face was wiped clean of any wrinkle resembling a beating heart, and he shrugged. "Does it matter? *He* did."

Body swinging as if paper, he walked across the metal parts and airless wheels, until he could cross his arms behind his back and lean forward, blinking obnoxiously too close to his face. "Don't tell me you thought your little bottle-redhead had found time to leave a dead sheep on your mourning ruote?" A sigh. "Oh, well. Guess that's why I'm Executive and you aren't."

The thick smell arose from his memory, sagging his throat. Bait and bite; rinse and repeat. Breathing shallowly, Chuuya concluded: "I'm not doing this."

Dazai hummed. "When's your transfer to the *Special Division*, then?"

Something settled inside his skull; it began to be rattled by his own lungs, a melodic *tin!* that made him think of Social Workers and the face the boy had made with a gun to his temple. "I'm not doing this," he said, again. Then he turned, and he made his way through the scrapped cars — *away*.

"Not many would be so glad to be manipulated," Dazai called, scratching his ankle with his other foot — the way he did when he was hiding a gun there. He was following him.



“This is his game,” Chuuya replied, eyes on the junk — eyes on the shipping container. The bright fireworks in the sky; the distant decorations. “This is his city — this is *his* game. Did you ever think I didn’t know?”

Their steps matched — the boy was too lazy to find the best places to walk on not to disrupt the mountain, and too annoying not to pretend he didn’t know that place by memory.

“Chuuya,” he asked. The wind and the silk caressed his skin; Kouyou’s gifts and the feeling of Dazai — the idea of something leaving. Temporary and amnesiac — quiet. Always quiet. “Do you think you’re going to kill me?”

The wind not brushing his nape was still an unfamiliar sensation — his hair, he had noticed, was growing with urgency. It would be long again soon. He would still be there.

He felt his smile land on the ground. When it rolled down the trash, leaking pipes baptized it in something a bit realer — stuck it to his face as the hopeless *nothing* stuck under his nails. “You’re not this stupid.”

“Maybe not,” Dazai admitted. *Like you’d ever let me. Like anybody could.* “But I heard what you said to the *Bishop’s Staff*. Tell me this — do you feel powerful?”

He stared at his shoes. He climbed the crater. He always had. “I know I am.”

“Divine, then.”

“That wasn’t —“

“I’ve got other synonyms,” he insisted. Dazai had longer legs. He could have caught up with him. “I know all of them. Holy. Celestial. Almighty. Mythical. Otherworldly — Do you feel *otherworldly*, Nakahara Chuuya?”

Fireworks pounded against his eyelids. Chuuya was still in the elevator — still in the ballroom of cheering mouths; still stuck in the slot of Mori’s door; still curled up under a plastic roof, being told his name for the first time. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Do you think you could do it?”

“I’m not playing this game.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No,” Chuuya stopped; turned. None of the crazed, blown-out-pupils haze was left between Dazai’s ears; something calmer had taken all the space, bleeding down like vomit. “No. Have one of your moods somewhere else.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never wanted to see me bleed out,” Dazai insisted, stepping forward. He had the same look Mori had had — only from the other side. “Don’t tell me this isn’t *maddening* — me in your seat. Me with you, in the title the underground has decided to fear.”

“It’s consequential.”

“It’s inescapable.”

“I don’t run,” he snapped. “You do.”

“I’m not running,” the boy let him know. His eye seemed to dig through the barely reconstructed skin of his scars, poking at the brink. “You told me you don’t dream — do you think you’d dream of this, if you could? Maybe more theologically,” Out of nowhere, he dropped to his knees, good fabric in the mud and trash, clenching a death grip around the edges of his sleeves.

“*What* are — “

“With altars and worshippers,” The light of his pupil was psychedelic. “Bleeding me out for a *cause*?”

“I’m not —” Chuuya spelled out, startled — attempting to pull himself out of that horrifying picture they painted, “— *doing this*, Dazai.”

“Why? Do you think Mori would be mad?” He didn’t laugh; the curve of his mouth was nearly invisible, but sharper than the moon. *Why did he look like that*, Chuuya had wondered, meeting Mori’s eyes, as they chanted. *Why did he look* — “Don’t be so disappointing, now. What else have you been snooping around my business for?”

“Don’t fucking try to shoot yourself in the open air if you don’t want people to get their brains moving,” he hissed.

“Alright,” Dazai promised. The like of the shipping container appeared from each of his ears; there wasn’t enough blood. “You do it instead.”

Chuuya’s teeth were aching. His head was right by his hands — if he could have touched him, he could have made his brains leak out of his eyes. “Don’t tempt me.”

“You keep saying Arahbaki is nothing at all,” he insisted. “You talked a lot in the aftermath, you know? *Merciless*, you said. *He doesn’t care about anything. He lacks the pure notion of caring.* But he would murder me with his bare teeth, if he could manage to escape you for a second too long. You *swore* that. It’s why you did the heartbeat thing, yes? Because it might keep him at bay. Because you fear you won’t be able to do it, one of these days.”

“Dazai.”

“You think you can kill me?” He seemed sincere in his marvel. “I’m not a quarter as special as any man in that ballroom is convinced of. Neither are you. *I don’t need Arahbaki to kill you* — you said that. You could shoot me. You could rip my heart out with your hands — you wouldn’t even need to take the gloves off. You wouldn’t even need to clean up — the goons *begging* to watch you maul someone into pieces would do it for you.”

Chuuya could feel his heart in his throat. He didn’t know if it was anger. He didn’t know if it mattered. “What are you doing?”

“Drop me from a building,” he listed off, a bit closer, a bit lower with every syllable. “Push me off into the bay. Accuse me of betrayal — tell the entire organization I attempted to steal Mori’s seat. Let them burn me alive. Set me on fire yourself. You think you need Arahabaki? You think Arahabaki *needs* you? You think *Mori* does?”

He held his breath.

“You think there’s a *corner* of this earth,” Dazai whispered, pulling his sleeves until he had no choice but to bend — he always did. “A *corner*, Chuuya — one where you can live knowing you aren’t needed? One where you wouldn’t let that hunger kill you? You think you can *kill me*?” He smiled. “I think I can kill you. I think Arahabaki can kill you. I think your squad —“

Chuuya kicked him right in the middle of his chest — in a whirlwind of dust and metal parts, he landed through the unstable floor.

He exhaled.

It came winding down quietly, after.

The world stopped being blurred and red at the edges. Another memory laid over it all — one of the alleys of Suribachi City.

A morning of old smells, when some of the kids on patrol had come to tell him about visitors. Chuuya stuck his hands in his pockets; made his way to where Dazai was laying in the dirt, and set his shoe in the middle of his ribcage.

“He called me *invaluable*,” Chuuya let him know, easily. He felt him stiffen even through his sole; could have found *something* in his eye, if he had bothered to let it linger — he didn’t. “He told her the deal was off. *Nakahara Chuuya is, frankly, invaluable.*”

Dazai looked at him like he was waiting for the punchline.

A singular red line chased the top of his nose, landing in gentle droplets onto his Adam’s apple. The fireworks rained down in kaleidoscopic shards. They painted gentle landscapes on his bandages; when Dazai blinked, it all made him look a tad too young for a framed picture in the Hallway.

*If the price is reigning it in, Chuuya didn’t know how to explain, then I can never let it flood again.*

“Of course he did,” Dazai said — a tad too quiet. He hadn’t changed a bit since Suribachi; he was a crafty stranger in skin Chuuya knew better than his own palms.

It left his mouth before he could stop it — it had been stuck in his teeth since that summer morning in Kouyou’s bed. “Just *why* do you live here?”

The boy still seemed deep in thought — in a strange kind of resignation. Chuuya didn’t enjoy being looked at like a caged thing. Chuuya wasn’t stupid enough not to believe it true. “Why do you care?”

*I lost them the moment I set my eyes on that bandaged bastard*, he had explained to Noguchi, once, over stories of his Sheep. All he had tried to quieten the buzz of power with was covered in the half moons of his nails. With revolting certainty, despite its untruth roots — *it's just us*, he had said — Chuuya watched him bleed and concluded: *you're all I have left*.

Dazai sat up — still locked underneath the grasp of his shoe. “Do my tattoo.”

A pause. “What?”

“You lost our bet,” he insisted. He cleaned the blood from his forehead; studied the red tips of his fingers with something akin to wonder. “I bet you I would become the youngest Executive in the Port Mafia’s history. I am.”

He squinted. “Technically, I forfeited.”

“I don’t care.”

“And my punishment is completing your tattoo?” Chuuya eyed him, skeptical.

“So you shall look what you lost right in the eyes, yes,” He raised a hand, waiting. “And because Ane-san will kill you if you get it wrong.”

*Invaluable*, he tasted. They had called him *Vice-Executive*.

Something cold settled on his calf, under the hems of the kimono. The shape of a thumb pressed against a vein; the fingers curved around his ankle like a bracelet. It was a strange point to be touched — nothing compared to viscera; everything to the strange way Dazai stubbornly met his gaze.

“Has he been quiet?” he questioned.

The silence had come so suddenly it took him a moment to understand. “You saw it. No black lines,” Chuuya replied. “I think he disliked being used as a training exercise. He wants to taste air that’s a bit more — *purposeful*, I suppose.”

He tapped his thumb. “I thought he didn’t want anything.”

“He doesn’t. But I do,” He shrugged. “And he’s as *me* as I let him be.”

Dazai let go of his calf. He sat up more — Chuuya took his leg back, and tried to figure out how much glass from the cars they both had stuck under their soles. “As *I* let you be.”

He set his jaw. Didn’t answer; which was an answer enough.

“I don’t want to touch your slimy skin,” he informed him, when Dazai dangled his raised hand in front of him, quietly requesting.

He curled an eyebrow. “You’ve touched my slimy skin countless times.”

“Are you admitting you’re slimy?”

“Are you admitting you touch me a lot?”

“*Me?*” he spluttered. “You hang off of me like a — like a goddamn *koala* or something —“

Eventually, because there wasn’t much left to do, Chuuya grasped his hand, and they made their way to the entrance.

He studied the electrodomeestic parts underneath their feet — the barbed wire; the dying shadows from the old neon signs. Moss grew between the metal, and Dazai’s steps at his side were too familiar — and he thought of the serpent tattoo on Rin’s middle finger, crushed underneath rubble. He thought of his cheek against Dazai’s leg, and the *sound* that he hadn’t allowed his ribcage to expel when his eyes had opened to the end of the world.

There was ivy between the junctures of his shoulders — burdensome and inevitable in the hollowness of the bones; it might always be there. So would the Port Mafia.

*Invaluable.*

*Despite of*, he could imagine Mori tut, with that smile of his. *Not because of.*

“I’m going back,” he declared.

Squinting, he could see the scaffolds on *Building One* in the distance. Kouyou had to be drunk, by then. Tanaki could be convinced not step on his feet too much, if she truly wanted to dance. The Flags’s fake graves had to be covered in snow — his squad’s had to have landed in the depths of the Bay. The people could talk all they wanted.

Dazai crossed his hands in his *obi*; he played *Hopscotch* like he did when he was going to meet Oda Sakunosuke. “I know you are.”

A slug charm dangled from his phone, new and shiny. Chuuya blinked, belated.

“You —“

“Ah, yes,” Dazai commented, locked in his *Hopscotch*, with *faux* innocence. “I forgot to tell you. I finally found my souvenir from France.”

Chuuya gaped like a fish, feet locked to the ground. He had to run to catch up with him, eyes so wide they ached, following the swing of the slug charm like one might a pendulum dangling to the hour of death. “You — that was in —“

“In your office,” he agreed, helpfully. “You didn’t think the new lock would keep me out, yes? Or the code on the safe — this is the sixteenth time, Hatrack. There is a finite number of Kouyou’s birthday combinations you can use.”

“You had no right to — that is *not* —“

“I didn’t bring you a present,” Dazai continued, undeterred, stalking to the makeshift gates. “But that’s fine, because *I* gave *you* a birthday present, and you *didn’t* —“

“You refuse to tell me when your birthday is —“

“Not my fault if you can’t guess. By the way, I took the initiative to hang your own on your phone. Since you bought us —“ Dazai’s lower lip trembled. “*Matching phone charms.*”

Horror sagged his veins.

Laughter exploded from his sickly, bandaged lungs. “*You* bought us —” Dazai chuckled, skipping like a schoolgirl, mock radiating off of him in waves, “*Matching phone charms. Matching phone charms. That’s pathetic!*”

Chuuya couldn’t scramble for his phone fast enough — the new hanging fish charm stared back at him, still smelling like the Parisian roads he had bought it from. Passersby and tourists had paid no mind to him; it was a summer morning, and traces of fault did not show on body.

For the first time since he’d flown from Yokohama, eyes on a souvenir stand — he had wondered if Dazai even knew he had left.

A senseless thought. Perhaps it was Arthur’s home — *Arthur*, who had called Verlaine his *partner*. Dazai, who had never gotten a present, and had only started to play *Hopscotch* on all streets after seeing Chuuya do it, and refusing to ask him what it was.

“Fucking *fine*, ” he muttered, staring at the moon like it might offer him mercy. “Now shut the fuck up. It was just — shut up. Fuck you. It was *funny*, alright, so I bought it — I was *drunk*, anyway, so it’s not like — Give it back.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m gonna wear this *forever*. You’re absolutely embarrassing. Everybody deserves to know just how *loyal* my dog — *hey!*”

Despite the protests, Dazai didn’t seem to mind the hits to the knees much. He was busy studying the small item in his hand, devastatingly silent, as if struggling with the concept of it.

*Double Black*, Chuuya tasted. Bile and blood; *stuck*, like all of them. *Double Black. Double Black.*

“They *will* forget it,” he said, offhandedly. He didn’t know who he was trying to reassure. He thought of leaking pipes at the Headquarters, an infinity ago; Dazai’s wet fringe hiding the crease between his brows. *If we’re doing this partner thing* — “They’ll get bored of this, too.”

Somehow, Dazai knew. His phone lit up with the name *Odasaku*. His fingers twirled in the air, eye distracted by the lone firework dying out. *They could never get bored of power*; he signed.

He scoffed. The boy hummed.

Blood sticking to his soles, Chuuya said no goodbye, and made his way to the Headquarters.

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*[Continue reading]*

*[...] as far as our analyses go, there is no other interpretation of our current predicament. Inevitably — putting aside the lakes of blood left in their wake and any moral consideration regarding the dynamics of this conflict — we are to thank **Dazai Osamu** and **Nakahara Chuuya** for this final result, and for the balance they brought to this city after eighty-eight days of chaos.*

*Or — as the underground appears to have begun to call them — Double Black.*

*Special Ability Department Agent.*

*Intelligence Archivist 061, Ango Sakaguchi.*

*end act one.*

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## Chapter End Notes

dazai, roughly ten chapters ago: chuuya is, frankly, invaluable

mori, scribbling on a notebook: go on this is fire

(the poem from the verlaine's letter rimbaud corrected (it is my personal headcanon they used to send each other's letters back and forth, "correcting" their answers over it; don't mind me as i offer the idea of a fic i'll eventually write) is from irl paul verlaine)

i'm once again in a little hurry, but first i want to say: R.I.P. kazuko. no pet survived this arc finale. the way i hadn't even noticed? that's kinda funny. wonder if that snake really died that easily...

and so we end the second arc of this fic! mori is once again to blame for most of it; did you expect it? he planted the dead sheep, and he always knew chuuya had yuan/was dealing with her — call it a final test before he refused the Ability Permit in his name. the interesting detail is, i don't think mori ever suspected chuuya would betray them. i think he just wanted to verify how important his past — which he knew always held him back a bit — was to him.

(anybody wants to discuss future symbolism of chuuya being the first reason why they didn't get an ability permit, and the actual plan mori has in canon to get one? and who will be killed by it? no? we will see more of it i guess)

we're about to enter the 17 Soukoku era (as soon as chuuya's interlude is posted), and i'm very excited for it. the next arcs will be shorter, but they're some of my favorites, so i can't wait to show them to you guys! we're going back to dazai's POV. i hope you liked my interpretation of chuuya, and i hope you guys will continue to be as sweet and supportive as you've always been — it really keeps me going, seriously. i can't thank you enough.

i'll see you soon! keep warm <3

p.s. you've probably caught it, given the joke at the start and everything, but the reason dazai froze when chuuya told him the words mori had used to refuse the ability permit in his name were the exact same words dazai told mori at the end of last arc. fyi! ;)



# LEAVES

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

## interlude

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### **August, four months before.**

The needle glistened threateningly inside the makeshift tent of Kouyou's silkiest sheet.

"Why do *I* have to do it, anyway?" Dazai complained, holding it between two fingers the way one would bomb cables. But Chuuya had seen him deal with *those*, too, and he could swear he'd been less farcical about it. "I might hate dogs, but animal cruelty won't look nice next to my honorable accusations."

"Your honorable accusations of torture and manslaughter?" Chuuya pointed out. "I'm sure you'll live. Just put the goddamn thing in."

"Kinky."

He grabbed the spare needle and stung his palm. The boy howled as if shot.

The ice cube pressed behind his earlobe was starting to melt; the freezing droplets should have been a relief against the summer heat, but the absolute darkness — only broken by the flame of one of Elise's night lights; house-shaped and abandoned between their brushing knees — tinged the air colder.

"Why can't you just ask Kouyou, anyway?" Dazai insisted, stalling. Chuuya could hardly trust it was a matter of squeamishness, given his job; he assumed it was just to be difficult. "Like *your* old business should have told you, she knows all and any jewelries around the city —"

“*Because*, jackass, she’ll bitch about them making me look like a gangster.”

The boy stared. “We *are* gangsters.”

Chuuya offered him his most revolted gaze. “We’re refined gangsters.”

“Oh,” Dazai tilted his head to the side. The makeshift sheet-tent over them crumpled a bit with the motion; the triangle of their breathing space grew ever warmer than the summer air. “Is that why your ugly suits are of actual good quality now?”

“They’re not *ugly* — “

“You look like a gold-starved slums-child.”

Chuuya raised his chin.

“Great,” he sighed, pained, “You’re actually proud of that.”

He stuck his hands in the space between the beds, drying them from the melting ice and holding it up with his Ability — given the endless rooms of the *villa*, Kouyou had saddled them with a shared room purely out of spite; their response had been to unscrew the beds from the floor with *Tainted* and move them around, out of *better* spite. “*Jacketless-Tie Van Suit* doesn’t exactly have a right to judge my sense of style.”

“Never heard of that brand,” Dazai replied, willingly obtuse. “This is *Armani*. Thank you.”

*This* being his everyday clothes. Unlike Chuuya, he had taken one look at the traditional *yukata* in the wardrobes and ranted about the *unshakable grip to tradition of tasteless nouveau riche*, and stayed as he was.

Pointedly, Chuuya flagged the green sleeves of his own *yukata* until they whipped him. He rolled the spare needle between his fingers.

He recalled — Albatross had had one ear pierced; Lippman both of them. He had forgotten both the facts until one of the more zoomed-in pictures in the man’s kitchen had landed on the floor. Noguchi wore a flower shaped pendant on his left ear every weekend, when — according to Tsuchiya — he went to the cemetery; Rin had more piercings than one could count.

Three days after Arahabaki had wrecked him open, he had stared at the regenerating skin of his separated earlobe, and wondered.

*Bad idea*, Iceman would have said. Always focused. *More things to grab in a fight*.

*I don’t get grabbed*, Chuuya would have replied.

The man would have *almost* smiled. *I grabbed you*.

“On my three,” he insisted, pushing his hair back again. “We’ve been at it for an hour. It’s just two holes.”

“That’s what she said.”

This time around, he was fast enough to escape the needle before Chuuya could pinch him with it. Wrestling grounds, shoot-outs, and secrets about the vaguely divine, vaguely poisonous thing in his veins — Dazai could never be surprised more than once.

“You should have had this teenage crisis when you were in an actual gang of brats,” the boy muttered, squinting at the little x he had drawn on his earlobe. “Leather jacket and all. I’m going to buy you sheep shaped earrings.”

“Liar,” Chuuya accused, too fast to land on something less vague than a desire for rebuttal. “You don’t know what a sheep looks like.”

Actual irritation flashed on his face. “What does that even mean?”

“I’ll tell you what it *means* — “

A stinging, lighting-quick jab pierced the skin of his earlobe. He didn’t flinch — the press of the needle against the ice rolled more water drops down his throat, though, sending shivers that died as soon as the drops met the barrier of the choker.

“I said *three*,” Chuuya seethed.

“I can’t count,” Dazai replied. “One out of two done. Move.”

“You *just* counted —“

He ripped the ice from behind his ear — made sure to hesitate long enough for it to drool on his crossed legs, before holding it behind the other lobe. Chuuya grasped for the stolen paper clips he had abandoned near the night-light; he opened one of them up, and stuck it in the hole.

“That’s probably unsanitary,” Dazai let him know, tongue between braces-sporting teeth as he aimed.

“I can’t exactly wear Kouyou’s earrings,” he huffed, flicking the dangling paper clip. It stung a bit — more like a distant itch than actual pain; the weight was imperceptible, but new enough to warrant a moment to get used to. “Those things are actual gold. They’re heavier than me. I’ll find something when we’re back home.”

“Aren’t you technically weightless?”

“Only if I make myself so. One, two —“

Dazai stuck the needle in.

“For *fuck’s sake*, I *said* — “

The door of the room opened; light rained in, blinding them both. Dazai let out an overdramatic yelp; Chuuya stuffed the needles and the ice between the beds, and peeked from

under the veil.

“We’re doing drugs,” he offered. A bit too late, he slapped his hands on his ears. “Promise.”

“The execution is in three days, in that case. Boys,” Kouyou greeted, gracefully, studying the set up with something stuck between eye-ticking exasperation and mild interest. “I don’t know if the notion might even remotely interest you — but the purpose of a *summer house* is, often, that of spending time *outside* of it.”

Dazai peeked from under the sheet as well. “*Outside*, where Hirotsu is wearing swim pants?”

Chuuya shivered.

The woman crossed her arms. Her summer concession had been giving up the layers of pink kimono for a pinker *yakuta*; her hair, braided on her right shoulder, had the telltale sign of Tanaki’s hands on it. “Is this about Muramoto Kei?”

Pettily, they stared.

Her sigh was never ending. “Really? *This* is the front you two decide to share?”

They recoiled. “I don’t share fronts with dogs,” Dazai let her know, horrified. “This is *my* front. Chuuya is merely pretending this situation was an insult to his microscopic self as well.”

He glared. “Last I checked, *I’m* the one who had to drag those disgusting corpses to that weirdo farmer’s porch for him to do *who knows what* —“

“I still think he’s a cannibal.”

“Muramoto isn’t a cannibal,” Kouyou said, with the tone of someone who was right on the verge of being tired of *repeating it*. “For the last time, boys — He’s merely a guard for the border. Given the *fundamental* aid he offers with our shipments, I don’t believe gathering one or two trinkets for him is that much of a job.”

“*Trinkets*,” Chuuya echoed. “He had a two page file about physical requirements for the sort of *trinkets* he wanted. He’s fucking the corpses.”

“He isn’t fucking the corpses,” the woman and Dazai chorused.

“I’m telling you —“

“Because he’s *eating them*,” the boy said. “I beg you to use your intellect, however little. Every competent person in the underground knows that green eyes taste better.”

Chuuya gaped. “That’s so not true —“

“All the same,” Kouyou interrupted, her knuckles rattling the door frame. The flower *frescos* on the walls followed the motif of her clothes; she was stuck like a leaking trace all over the

house. “If you didn’t wish to be saddled with official matters on the weekend break, you shouldn’t have driven Hirotsu’s car into the lake.”

“I like official matters,” he muttered. “I just don’t like necrophilia-adjacent grandpas.”

“*Cannibalism-adjacent.*”

“*Necrophilia.*”

“Cannibalism.”

“Necrophilia.”

“Can—“

“Would you consider forgiveness,” Kouyou cut through, once again, tilting her tone the same way as when she offered the last deal to the men in the dungeons, “If I told you Hirotsu is merciful and willing to teach your horseback riding?”

They fell quiet.

She raised her eyebrows, waiting.

Chuuya was dragging the sheet back into place long before he could catch a glimpse of Dazai doing the same — hidden by that makeshift tent again, their gazes met, questioning.

*Swimsuits*, Dazai mouthed. *Hirotsu*.

*Horses*, he rebutted. Then, using his fingers to trace the idea more clearly: *People falling from horses*.

His eye lit up.

“I want the biggest, fastest, coolest one,” Chuuya declared, tearing the sheet off to jump out of the bed. “And I want it to be black.”

“We shall see what we can do,” Kouyou smiled, watching as Dazai scrambled off the bed, loudly complaining about the claim. Then, she blinked: “Chuuya — why do you have paper clips hanging from your ears?”

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Kouyou's summer *villa* was a three stories, traditional Japanese palace of curling wood, gentle flowers and warm stone, mere steps from the near middle of an enormous emerald lake right outside Yokohama.

Trees circled the valley, moving along to the summer breeze and reflecting on the clear waters. Chuuya had already wet the edges of his sleeves to drag Hirotsu's car out of the river, not willing to pollute that little valley; the ripples on the surface were gentle amidst the swimming bodies — as if grateful.

"Thank you," Kouyou had said, when he had dropped the dripping vehicle in the grass. The summer sun had given her freckles; she had ruffled his hair. "We wouldn't want to be interrupted by noisy men with their noisy machines."

*Being invited by Executive Kouyou is a big deal*, Pianoman had said, the year before, when Chuuya had explained where he would be disappearing for a weekend. *Every year, she uses the occasion as a means to establish her inner circle — the people she trusts. It's a message to the rest of the organization; you should take advantage of it.*

"I'll name you Slug," Dazai said, caressing the candid mane of his horse. "Because you look rather slow and you've clearly never had a single thought in your life."

Chuuya clenched his jaw so hard it hurt. "*Why* was *he* invited, anyway?" he hissed, hiding his words in his own horse's neck, staring Hirotsu down. "He's not in Ane-san's inner circle. He's not even *remotely* near the outer circle."

"Boss offered him as a substitute, given his necessary absence," the man said, patiently. He had been saddling the horses with expert hands and a good explanation for everything — when Chuuya had glared hard enough to kill, being offered help to get on that unfairly tall beast, he had simply coughed and mimicked the word: *Ability*. "The meeting in Tokyo couldn't be rescheduled. Dazai was kind enough to show up as a representative."

"And you smell," Dazai was insisting, in his world, his caresses growing a tad too vicious. "And you're clearly too short compared to your peers. And you're ugly."

Chuuya let *Tainted* light up his veins; he sat on his horse with enough aggressiveness to hurt his thighs.

"Can we get on with it?" he snapped, at last. Then, raising his voice: "*Mackerel* here has a little competition to win."

In the process of attempting to climb his own ride, Dazai gasped. "You're so unoriginal."

Hiding amusement, Hirotsu grabbed both his and Dazai's reins, and led their horses outside the small stables, into the meadow.

Spread across the grass, familiar faces shone underneath the sun, meeting Chuuya's gazes with mostly sheepish grins. Virgil was curled up next to Tanaki, reciting passages from the

notebook he was always carrying somewhere in his pockets; there was a softness to the hands the woman had curled around her abdomen that spoke of a less painful remembrance.

Kouyou was entertaining some of the most frequently-visiting subordinates of hers; a few of the older women from the *Pomegranate* splashed water in the lake, laughter echoing off the branches and the food-filled porch.

*But why not me?*, Kajii had whined, all the way until Chuuya had left. *I've been nothing but a delight! Tell her to make me inner circle. I deserve a vacation.*

He hadn't been sure of how to vocalize just how many accidental explosions of his had been a pain in the ass for Kouyou's own missions; or that the woman always had a *too-polite* comment to make about *that scientist's tacky glasses* — so he had merely promised to talk to her about it.

“Remember not to be aggressive with it,” Hirotsu was saying, shushing *Slug* and *Mackerel*. “But not complacent either. They aren't leading you; they are *your* ride. If you need to stop, pull the reins near the ends and kick right — *here*.”

Dazai raised his hand too high. “Would you know anything about the rate of horse-related accidents?”

Not pausing, the man replied: “I'm not sure anyone has ever committed suicide by horse.”

“It *must* have happened,” the boy insisted. “All those paintings in Ane-gan's gallery here — too many horses. Too many battles. Too many horses in battles. It *must* be possible. Are hooves as painful as they're said to be?”

“I suppose —“

Chuuya pulled on the reins. “Whatever,” he called back, as *Mackerel* neighed his approval to the starting. “If you wanna die on a horse, choke on my dust!”

Clearly petulant, Dazai watched him sprint through the grass, arms crossed as he screamed: “You're stupid! That's not even *death by horse!*”

The closest thing Chuuya could compare to the feeling of it was riding Albatross' motorcycle — only with a pulse underneath his hands and the feeling of convulsing muscles under his grip. He began to get an idea of why horses were used as a measuring unit for speed in vehicles. Hot wind whipped his face, dangling the chain of his hat so viciously it bumped against his nose — he grinned.

Dazai did appear, at some point; he seemed much less enthusiastic than he had been before the suicide had been ruled out.

Nonetheless, he and *Slug* chased him with the same energy reserved for the lights of the Arcade — eventually, once they had lost count of the races, Dazai settled for turning in circles and reciting passages from the love letters his — for whatever reason — yearning past dates had sent along with bombs to his rather uninterested horse.

Chuuya, utterly surprised at the acceptance from his own ride — having assumed dogs, cats and parrots' dislike of him would have spread to other animals as well — wandered through the trees, close enough to the lake to study his reflection.

He found *Golden Demon* first.

“Meeting benevolent water spirits without me?” he questioned, attempting to drag the horse to a halt near the rock Kouyou had curled up on.

“Don’t be silly,” she replied, running river-wet fingers through her hair. *Golden Demon* was slashing the crystalline waters with an absence that was almost human; when the drops hit the sun, a thousand shards of rainbow shimmered. “I would never entertain benevolent spirits. Too many good wishes,” She tilted her head. “Malevolent ones, on the other hand.”

He snorted. It took some coddling to get *Mackerel* to stay still — munching on grass and huffing at the gravity-heightened pebble Chuuya had settled on the ground, upon his reins.

“I know, man,” he said, pious. “Stick and stones.”

Kouyou perked up, wincing. “That’s not what that —“ She deflated. “Never mind.”

Chuuya shrugged. He made his way to her; unhesitantly, the woman offered him a hand, helping him perch on the bundle of rocks, feet brushing the surface of the lake. Chuuya kicked his shoes away to dip his toes in — she watched them fly off, and curled an eyebrow.

“I know, I know,” he huffed.

“One word?”

He thought. “*Elegance.*”

“*Grace*, maybe. You’ve got *ballerina* feet. I merely suggest you act accordingly.”

Chuuya arched his feet, blinking. “I don’t really know how impressed enemies would be at me pirouetting at them.”

“It would surprise you,” Her side was warm where it was pressed against his, shoulder to hip — a strand of her hair flapped along to the wind, cutting her face in two. She reached up; flicked his makeshift left earring. “How come?”

“Too many reports and never enough paper clips at hand,” he lied.

“I’ll get you something prettier,” Kouyou insisted, more to herself than him. “We might be mafiosi, but we are *refined* ones,” He snorted; she frowned. “Something to match your eyes, maybe?”

He shrugged. She pulled the edges of his fingerless gloves, only once — then they settled, studying *Golden Demon’s* choreography in silence.

“How is the competition going?”



Chuuya kicked the water. “Same old.”

“There are many voices,” she said, after a moment. Careful; measured. There was something she didn’t want him to misunderstand. “There are advantages to ignoring them. There are advantages to paying attention, too.”

“Bad publicity is still publicity,” he summed up.

“Yes,” Kouyou agreed. “But it is also better to know just *what* of you makes people talk. It will give you an advantage over them — it will tell you exactly what they are most afraid of.”

He made a face; splashed some water to the sharp blade in *Golden Demon’s* hands, watching her blink at him with something *almost* offended. She wasn’t aware enough to feel so, of course; she was merely worse at pretending than Elise. “Didn’t need the competition to know.”

Kouyou didn’t reply.

Eventually, once screeches came from the side of the lake closer to the house — something like Tanaki’s voice; something like Dazai’s victory speeches — she offered: “What do you think of this year’s invitations?”

Chuuya glanced her way, careful. “This is *your* clique, Ane-san.”

“I would still like your opinion.”

“Apart from the bandaged bastard?”

“We only have a few hours before dinner,” she said, sounding vaguely nauseated. “So — yes.”

“The girls from the *Pomegranate* have been whispering about you,” he said, after a bit. “But I assume that’s why you invited them.”

She hummed. “I needed a closer look. They won’t do anything rash, but — well. They’re this year’s selection for the arranged marriages.”

“Because that isn’t prehistoric in the least.”

Her glance was a warning.

“Yeah, I know. I’m just saying,” he grunted, uncomfortable. “You can’t exactly blame them.”

“A syndicate is still a syndicate,” Kouyou replied, with the cadency of a sentence carved on the ceiling of a cell. Chuuya had never quite had his stomach full enough to judge where necessity had pushed him; Chuuya knew there had to be a limit, somewhere. “Their sacrifice deserves better than to be pitied. And I will die before I leave them in the hands of just anybody,” She glanced his way. “You should consider yourself *very* lucky. Arranged marriages used to involve high placed mafiosi *only*, when I was your age.”

His head snapped to her. “You — ?”

She made a face; raised her chin, proudly.

“Who?” he pushed. “Do I know him?”

“Perhaps.”

“How come it didn’t go through?”

Kouyou nodded towards *Golden Demon*. “I was declared an asset. The marriages were either a means to temporary alliances with other gangs or an occasion to raise ranks in the Port Mafia itself. My worth grew inestimable in less than a night,” She studied her nails. “Ace didn’t quite compare.”

His jaw dropped into the lake. “*Ace?*”

“Close your mouth. Malevolent spirits will get in.”

“Ace as in *Ace*? That *rat*?”

“Do you know many other Ace?” Kouyou said — *almost* a snap. “Nobody knows of this — the old high court has long since been dismantled. Mori took care of it, thankfully. Hirotsu might still remember. I trust you will keep this to yourself.”

Chuuya couldn’t wrap his head around the idea; a mixture of disgust and terror settled in his bones. “You would have eaten him alive.”

“I would have,” she agreed, satisfied. “Your word that you won’t tell?”

“Only if I can see pictures of what the rat looked like as a teenager.”

Another hum; basically a confirmation. “And you won’t tell that partner of yours either?”

“*Dazai?*” Chuuya spat. “Why would I tell him?”

“Who knows,” she trailed off. Something like amusement flashed in her eyes; he fought off the urge to tuck the whipping hair strand behind her ear, and lost. Right before he could remove his knuckles from the sun-heated apple of her cheek, she said, nonchalantly: “You know, had one of you been a girl, and had we been in the old regime, you would have undoubtedly been promised to each other.”

He mimicked retching. She laughed; it was only a inch louder than the summer wind — only a tad warmer than the pressing sun.

“I won’t tell about Ace if you don’t tell *that* to anyone, how about that,” Chuuya muttered.

“You truly hold so little loyalty for me, you have to be transactional?”

He shrugged. “Should have thought about it before you took me in as one of your own.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied, for the second time. She slid down the rocks with the grace of one of the leaves landing in the river; *Golden Demon* immediately turned in her direction, like a flower to the light. Kouyou looked up at him, *yukata* only parting enough to show off the Mafia tattoo in the middle of her clavicles — a mirror of his own. *We hold it to our chest*, she had said, after bringing him to get his own. “You are mine.”

*We hold it to our chest, and we let it beat.*

Dazai didn’t manage to throw him into the lake when they came back to the house, despite all his best efforts; Virgil did, though — a brief pause from his reading, full of enough mischief that he had to believe it was a bet with the squad.

Chuuya cursed him all the way from the near center of the lake, *yukata* floating around his kicking legs and hair sticking to his eyelashes. The weight of the water reminded him of Albatross; for a moment, he thought he could see the edge of his blond hair. *Just swim faster*, he used to laugh, *and we’ll be home before you can think about getting mad!*

“Was he the one to teach you how to swim?” Tanaki asked, floating just far enough from him not to get splashed.

“*Teach* is a loose term,” he replied. “He just turned around enough times to make sure I hadn’t quietly drowned behind him.”

But there had been kindness in that too, he thought — there had been *reason*, too. The failed returns had only started to rise in number after Chuuya had offhandedly mentioned never seeing the sea, back when he lived in Suribachi City. The Flags had all been like that — quiet in their reasonings; endlessly blinding in their intentions.

He attempted to float next to her — stare into the sun until his eyes pulsed, lulled by the echo of Virgil’s laughter and the annoyingly high pitched plastic recorder Dazai had stolen from who knew where. *This is for you, my beauty!*, he dedicated, winking at one of the *Pomegranate* girls. For some reason, it seemed to work on her — she stared up at him with a light blush on her cheeks, and a ravenous light in the eyes she dragged down the wet bandages sticking to Dazai’s neck.

Peace didn’t last long.

“First to drown wins!” Dazai squeaked, as he landed into the water with a dip vicious enough to raise a wave — dressed from head to toe, framed by a sky growing darker and darker.

From the edge of the lake, Kouyou cleared her voice — face fractured by the fireworks some nearby village was beginning to paint the sky with. In the way only thoughts of Mori’s made her, she suggested: “How about a *holding your breath* competition?”

Chuuya glared. “I was trying to relax.”

Dazai glared harder. “And *I* was trying to kill myself.”

“Are you admitting defeat?” the woman questioned, saccharine.

“I’m not falling for that.”

“Yeah, I’m not falling for that!”

“I see,” she considered. A glint took over her gaze — she directed an apologetic glance to Hirotsu’s direction. “And how about the winner gets to drive the tractor?”

A blink later, both their heads were shattering the reflections of the fireworks in the lake, disappearing underneath the surface.

The afternoon faded into a dark cobalt sky and ripples of water, between choruses of *Ane-san, are you watching? Ane-san? Ane-san? Ane-san, are you, Ane-san?*, and Virgil’s red-cheeked acceptance to read his drafts in a louder tone. Chuuya got lost in the blurred panorama underwater — fish and old trash and pebbles and falling fireworks, and the edges of Dazai’s bandages, carefully tucked back into place.

His fingers turned wrinkled right as the edge of the lake was painted blood red by the vanishing sun. Chuuya had never experienced a fever, but he assumed the feeling of *insistently* warm *ice* all over him had to be similar. A perpetual sunburn, and air-starved lungs — tired eyes falling on the curling stretches of fabric of his *yukata* underwater.

“It’s so weird how fast they heal,” Dazai commented, at some point.

The lake had been emptied out; most had retired into the house to change into something dryer. Hirotsu and Tanaki carried grills outside to prepare dinner; Virgil was letting Kouyou pick his next *yukata* under the porch, his stuttering praises amusing her to no end.

Chuuya, water all the way to his nose, had to squint to see Dazai’s face — the reflected greens and golds and reds from the sky, painting him like a fractured fresco. “*Corruption?*”

Dazai hummed, unnecessarily. His hair was still too long; half-submerged as he was, mirroring him, it floated around his violently sunburned face like a poisoned halo. He was going to get a fever for sure. He always did. “Sometimes they look like they might never stop bleeding.”

He couldn’t quite imagine.

He had no real memories of his wounds opening; he hardly had any memory of what pain felt like at its peak. He studied his arms underwater — having hooked his gloves to his silky belt, the swirling black of his hands curled up his wrists, dispersing like ink and mixing up with the fireworks.

The scars were so white they looked like skin on a corpse. Dazai’s dress shirt was soaked and bubbling like a jellyfish under the surface — even with the kaleidoscopic light, Chuuya couldn’t see the glass-shards marks he had caused him.

He couldn’t quite stop thinking about them either.

“They do,” he replied, attempting to nudge his knee underwater. It was all too slow; *Tainted* was stuck behind gates. Fireworks made his bandages look more cheerful than Chuuya

wanted to believe them to be. “That’s what I pay you to do.”

A glare. “If only.”

From the porch, Tanaki’s laughter filled the valley. Dazai tilted his head in the direction of the sound, as if in wonder; when only his eye stayed above the surface, it looked too wide even for a kid.

Chuuya stuck his hands on his head and pushed him underwater.

Eventually — once he had resurfaced with offended splutters, uselessly attempting to climb over any part of Chuuya to push him down too — Dazai knotted the end of his tie around Chuuya’s own hand, lapping around the lake with loud tales of dogsitting on his lips.

“Keep those bloodied,” Hirotsu warned him, a bit later, when he tied the upper part of a dried *yukata* to his waist and helped him out with grilling the meat. They’d had to force Kouyou out of the cooking area; Chuuya and her subordinates had offered enough tales about the kitchens she had almost set on fire. “Tanaki likes them raw.”

“How come she’s not *Madame* Tanaki, but Kouyou is *Executive Kouyou*?” Chuuya questioned, handling the forks carefully.

The man tilted his head, as if he had never truly thought about it. A sunburned circle had been left under his monocle. “Where would you place Tanaki in our hierarchy?”

Chuuya wasn’t sure. “Everywhere, sort of.”

He shrugged. “Then, she hardly needs the added weight of a title.”

It took the sky growing dark for his hair to dry into a knotted, strangely rigid mass. Right as the cold painted goosebumps over his chest, he fixed his clothes in place and floated the plates over the gathered group, dragging his fingers through the knots. Virgil started a bonfire near the porch; with a strangely youth-lined gasp, Kouyou dragged him to use *Tainted* and settle furniture from inside the house around the rising flames.

“You know,” Dazai informed no one at all — avoided by every gaze that wasn’t familiar, apart from the *Pomegranate*’s blushing girl, still exchanging charged gazes of sorts with Dazai’s doubly-suicidal tendencies — as he gingerly picked at his meal, “They used to throw bones in the flames and talk about their dead ones. That’s why it’s called a bonfire.”

Scoffing, Chuuya threw himself onto the carved, cushions-stuffed chair the boy had curled up on, elbowing his way into the too small space. “Who are *they*?”

“Just *they*,” he replied, vague. He elbowed back. “I won the competition, *and* the tractor isn’t even working. I should get the best chair.”

“You didn’t win shit. I get the chair.”

“I can get you guys the matching one from the basement, if you want,” Virgil offered.

Dazai frowned at him. The man flinched — Chuuya wondered, for the umpteenth time, just what their conversations during the *Nine Rings Conflict* had been like. “I was here first. Even a dog should get that. And it’s not the same chair.”

“Well,” Chuuya kicked, “I’m not leaving.”

“*Well*,” He threw a piece of meat right into his face. “I’m not leaving either.”

“*Well* —“

A cleared throat. “Some more meat, yes?” Hirotsu called, just a tad too loud to be casual.

Fireflies swarmed across the grass as they ate their dinner on every available seating surface around the glimmering flames; some of Kouyou’s subordinates took turns telling stories of missions gone wrong, saying names Chuuya recognized and talking with a camaraderie that made his chest burn. He had to take his eyes off of it — he studied the sky, instead, darker than even his gloves and littered in more stars than he had seen since he’d climbed out of the Suribachi ruins.

Kouyou’s hair was free and unkempt, even if nobody would have called it so. Hirotsu had his coat on his lap, like one of the endless blankets he and Virgil had dragged outside. Tanaki’s tattoos seemed to grow colorful against the flames, as she did her best to prep marshmallows into long sticks.

“How about you, Tanaki?” one of the girls from the *Pomegranate* asked, huddled close to the fire. She and Dazai were exchanging gazes more curling than the flames; Chuuya sort of pitied her. “Sitting there all day, watching all of us come back — you must have heard some great stories.”

The woman blushed, just a bit; she passed Chuuya one of the marshmallow sticks. “Depends on what you mean by *great*, I suppose. There is much sadness to be taken from our lives.”

“Gossip about other organizations, then!” one of Kouyou’s subordinates replied.

Shyly, propped up on a wooden chair right by Chuuya’s own, Virgil studied the few fireworks still stubbornly blooming in the sky, and offered: “You could tell them that story about your sister.”

Something passed by Tanaki’s face. The x scar shattering her face into pieces glistened with the flames, seeming more silver than white. Filled in with mercury; making her eyes seem darker. A small wave of murmurs arose from the group — in a practiced show of nonchalance, Kouyou and Hirotsu exchanged a glance.

“*Oh-oh*,” Dazai commented — so low Chuuya wouldn’t have heard him, if his cheek hadn’t been crushed against his shoulder. It was a somewhat uncomfortable fit; Dazai was growing too tall and too awkward to fit against him as easily as before, and both refused to uncurl their legs and leave them on the ground. “Dark past unlocked.”

He poked him with the stick.

Tanaki settled a bit straighter. Rolling one of her marshmallows in the flames to the point of incineration, she offered: “There’s not really much to say. We all know enough victims of the *Special Division*, don’t we?”

Chuuya didn’t stiffen. He didn’t lock eyes with Kouyou either.

“My older sister was full of ambition,” the woman started, some eternity later. “She was loyal, too — to the very bone. The syndicate she joined when I was a child didn’t truly see that; I think it used to bother her. She would stretch herself into pieces just to prove her commitment. From what I know, though, they used to chain her in the room she would work in. *Latecomer*; they called her. *Too ambitious*. Nobody drank or ate around her.”

“The organization fell. Like most do. It was all but a quiet crumble; it shook the entirety of the underground,” She extracted her marshmallow and bit it, ash and all. Half laying down on a couch, Kouyou studied her with her chin in hand. “My sister was the sole survivor.”

“She told me she had this memory — one of the heads of the organization, dying right by her feet. He looked at her with more contempt than even his murderer. He told her —“ Tanaki’s voice bent into something goosebumps-inducing; with flames painting caves on her face, she recited: “*It doesn’t matter if you survived us by cleverness or by betrayal. It doesn’t matter if you wanted it or not. You are alive, and we are dead, all the same.*”

Not even the wind whispered.

Dazai turned his stick into the fire. There was something both distracted and too careful in his eyes, when he hovered the marshmallow too close to Chuuya’s face for it to be accidental.

He took a single bite; Dazai finished it off. Chuuya chewed and stared at a wandering firefly until his eyes began to burn.

*The dead cannot blame*, he recalled. He had begged Kouyou to invite the Flags, the year before. *Next year*, she had promised. *The dead don’t give a shit*.

Tanaki cleared her voice. “My sister never really forgot,” she admitted. “Obsession devoured her. Her only aim was rebuilding the syndicate — she thought proving herself to the air and to the lingering ghosts would be enough. The *Special Division* caught up with her, though.”

“Did she have an Ability?” Kouyou asked, with a gentler tilt to her tone.

“I’m sure she did,” the woman confirmed. “She never showed me. Perhaps she thought I was too young. All the same — she was taken. I haven’t seen her since.”

A mocking sort of grin took over her face — it was the same facade, devoid of it all, that she had worn to blame Chuuya from an old Hospital bed. Mourning; desperate for a target.

“Syndicates, organizations — calling them crueler than whatever the *Division* is makes little sense. I don’t believe methods or traditions make a person. They can make a group, but not the people. Mercy is mercy everywhere,” Briefly, she met Chuuya’s eyes over the dancing tips of the flames. “And they don’t know anything about that.”

The bonfire creaked, devouring the wood. There was *something* in the way Hirotzu offered Tanaki his next marshmallow; something in the unmovable, warning smile Kouyou directed to all of her subordinates.

Imperceptibly slipping both of them a bit lower down the seat with every blink, Dazai stared at Tanaki, and didn't move his face an inch.

Virgil stared at the grass. "Well," he started, somewhat quieter. "If we want to talk about how pathetic the *Special Division* is, I do have this story about one of their agents slipping on blood and breaking his own nose."

Madame Tanaki was the first to snort. It unclenched something in the air; the subordinates began butting in, offering strange anecdotes.

The fire creaked some more. Chuuya didn't quite choose to start zoning out; he let words like *hilarious* or *ridiculous* sit on his lap longer than words like *mercy* or *all the same*, until he couldn't — then, he started counting tiles at the *Old World* to match his breathing, and studying the spasms of his fingers to remember what the *Net* had felt like.

The laughter and the stories lulled him like the hum of the Suribachi always-on engines. Dazai didn't speak either, content to watch.

His head was a sweaty weight on his shoulder; with no marshmallows to throw in Hirotzu's hair, his fingers grew bored too quickly — he settled them over Chuuya's own, tracing all the corners where the leather had started to fall. There was a vein right by his cheek that pulsed too loud, or that Arahabaki was too focused on — he could feel it thunder against the curve of his neck.

"Get off me," he murmured, weakly.

"Yes," Dazai murmured back. Chuuya wanted to pinch him between the eyebrows; he was too tired to. He settled for pushing his feet under his thighs, wiggling his toes. "Disgusting."

He wondered if he cared about the glances thrown their way, murmuring. Chuuya was too languid, too cocooned to linger. The chair sucked him in like deep waters. Eventually, when Dazai got bored enough to untie the outer layer of his arm bandages and set about wrapping it around Chuuya's wrist, he did nothing but memorize the pattern — never as simple as mere circling motions.

Because it was *him*, and Chuuya despised him, and Chuuya would have recognized his burnt fingertips even if his own skin had been pried off. Slowly, he let his eyelids flutter over the rhythmic puffs of Dazai's breaths on his clavicles.

"*Two spiders in a cage*," he heard him sing, in between a yawn and a push of his head, settling closer — Elise's favorite jingle for when she braided her doll's hair. Who knew why Dazai did the things he did. "*Sixteen legs and too much change*."

He thought he saw Kouyou's eyes on them. It was too blurred to be certain.



“Another,” the subordinates encouraged, as Hirotsu went over the most brutal ways the *Black Lizards* had killed some *Division* officers. “Another story.”

The goosebumps from the sunburn and the afternoon in the lake twirled on his skin. Chuuya watched Kouyou throw her head back to laugh — hair like specks of blood over the flames — and didn’t think of anything at all.

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Chuuya opened his eyes to Virgil’s hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him awake.

“Hey,” he whispered, very soft. Soundless fireworks made a halo around his head. The entire firmament stood behind him, framed by the smoke of the dying fire. “Want to see something?”

He was slumped over the armrest, and his back protested the treatment. Dazai was slumped over him, unmovable and seemingly truly asleep. An overgrown coat had been laid over them. All the chairs and couches were empty — Hirotsu had only left that piece of clothing behind.

He yawned, over the smell of burnt food and dew. “Hell yeah.”

It took some maneuvering to get himself out; Virgil did his very best to set his eyes elsewhere as Chuuya awkwardly hovered over Dazai’s curled up form, removing the bandages stuck around his own wrist and tucking them over the single layer left on the boy’s own.

*Tuck and bent*, he recalled. Then, because Dazai didn’t sleep in public, and the curve of his face was a tad too soft for the open air, he tucked his fringe away from his forehead and *pulled*.

It was painful.

Dazai didn’t move — his heartbeat took a note that was unmistakably awake, though. Fireworks were splattered on him like blood; they curved over the thick curls on his forehead, and divided his lips into two chapped halves — gently parted; stuck on a breath that was warm over Chuuya’s naked wrist. He was good at pretending to be sleeping.

Something in Chuuya’s chest pounded. It was vicious; he grimaced. *That’s what looking at his stupid face too long does*, he concluded, irritated. He thought about asking Doc about it,

just to make sure — thought about it again; felt like throwing up; decided that was probably the point.

He threw the coat on him as rudely as possible, to balance the weird thing in his veins out, and didn't stay to watch the *Pomegranate* girl's feet make the porch tiles creak, as she made her secretive way to him. Dazai half smiled at her. Chuuya climbed up the grass with naked feet, and jumped on Virgil's shoulders with a *whoop!* that he almost fell from.

"When we crumble to the ground, please don't blame me," the man hissed, fixing his hands under his thighs to drag him to the pier.

"I've seen you weight-lift with Rin. You can do this."

The man winced. "You mean you saw me get destroyed by her biceps?"

"Almost the same thing," Chuuya peeked over his shoulder, studying the unmoving surface of the lake. "Midnight skinny dipping?"

Virgil blushed to the top of his ears. "Even just midnight dipping is fine."

"How come?"

He shrugged. The movement rattled him. "I've never done it," he admitted. "The closest lake to Rengoku was — Well. Poisoned."

"Yeah," Chuuya tasted acid and flames; mimicked passing out. "I recall."

"Maybe Dante made me do it," Virgil said. There was nothing in particular in his tone; there was a slightly tighter grip on his legs. "I don't really remember. Can't have been fun."

"Can't have," he agreed. Spurred, he called: "Last to jump in has to tell Tsuchiya he broke her fox mug at the Orphanage."

He was already catapulting himself off the pier, as Virgil tried to catch up, screaming: "This isn't *fair*, you *know* I hate cold waters —"

The moon wasn't as blinding as the sun had been; less of a persisting ache and more of a hum sliding between his eyelashes. He floated with his arms and legs spread wide. The rush of waves in his ears muffled everything else; but he felt Virgil's hesitant entrance in the moving currents, and forced his cold-numb fingers to reach out to pinch his side once he starfished next to him.

"It's colder than I thought," he admitted.

"Don't think about it," Chuuya said. "Just focus on the tactile sensation. How the water *feels* — not what temperature it is."

A pause: "It feels, like — smooth."

"And?"

“Wet.”

“Is water wet?”

A side eye, half hidden by silver liquid. “I am not doing this with you. I’m not Noguchi.”

Chuuya huffed.

Some heartbeats later, he dared: “Was it Albatross who told you that?”

Blond tufts of hair in the distance — a booming, always entertained laugh. He thought of Tanaki’s eyes, stuck in the fire. “What’s with you and bad memories today?”

His flinch shook the water. “Call it a search for inspiration.”

Chuuya felt somewhat guilty. *Impulsive*, the Sheep used to call him — one of the things they had gotten wrong. Chuuya always thought before acting — just too much. “It’s fine if you do it with me,” he said. “Just be — *careful*, with Tanaki. She’s very reserved. If she told you stories, it means she trusted you with them.”

“She thinks stories deserve honesty,” Virgil replied, still somewhat chastised. “I just — words have always been much easier than thoughts,” A beat. “Than mourning, too.”

“That’s what nightmares are for, I hear.”

He dug invisible lines in the water with his legs. “I don’t really dream much.”

Chuuya turned to study him. Water got in his ear; in the muffled blink of silent fireworks, he offered: “Me neither.”

He searched his eyes. Whatever he found got his traits to soften; Chuuya cleared his throat, staring up at the blindingly candid circle in the sky. “It’s better off this way, I think,” he said, a bit too fast, “Hear the nightmares are shit.”

“Yeah,” Virgil agreed. The fabrics of their sleeves intertwined underwater; a braid of green and blues that had Kouyou’s taste all over itself. “I think I would dream of her more than him.”

“Beatrice,” he guessed. Perhaps he only said it out loud out of pettiness; *fair is fair*.

“I write about it, sometimes. What sort of nightmares would be more realistic?”

“Are they even meant to be realistic?”

“It’s easier to believe so,” he replied. “I need more practice. I’d dream of her face through the windows of the Institute. Spying. Maybe her in that Hospital bed Dante was in,” He curled up on himself; gasped in the effort not to be pulled down by his own weight. “Or maybe that first time — her and Dante’s bodies bent over me. *It will work. You’ll wake up soon,*” Virgil frowned. “It’s the last thing I remember. Death was very — quiet.”

Chuuya traced the slowed down motions of his hands underwater. *Rage*, Kouyou had said, *do you truly think you know what it is?*

“Lippman,” he said. The name was rough on his tongue — familiar as the poisons Mori had smiled as he offered him. “I think I’d dream of him the most.”

The man didn’t talk. Didn’t breathe, either.

He couldn’t keep his mouth shut. He didn’t dare to open it. *I used to wonder if maybe he was alive in that car trunk, even for a second*, he could have said, the curve of his mouth a tad too cruel. He covered it with his fingers; held still enough to make sure he wouldn’t sink his nails in. Had he ever even told Virgil? Maybe it had been Noguchi. Everyone in the Port Mafia knew everything about the Flags’ end. *If he wasted his last breath trying to warn me. I’d dream that I could have saved even just one of them, and I didn’t.*

“Your Limbo,” Virgil asked. Selfish like an author; but gentle by the edges. *Friend*, Chuuya mused, fierce and desperate, *it’s my friends, and it won’t be like last time*. Dazai had once muttered something similar, out of Mori’s office — *what’s the point of a wound?* “I never asked what it was like.”

He thought of the elevators at the HQs. The hum of the water all around him; holding his breath.

“A tank,” Chuuya offered, low. Some things were to be kept close to his chest. Others were to be plasmed like the earth before being bled out. “A glass one. Somewhere.”

Virgil’s eyes traced his profile. There was an antiquity in them that matched the one Beatrice’s own had held. He had the strange, cruel realization that Kouyou always looked him straight in the eyes when they talked.

“I’m floating in it,” he added. He knew he wouldn’t understand what it meant. But Chuuya would — Chuuya had understood what it was from his first infinity in that Limbo. He had breathed in onyx water and *known*, even if he didn’t remember. It was as familiar as a womb. “Some men are talking outside. Barely voices. I float. I don’t do anything else.”

*I want my mom*, he didn’t say. *I want my dad. I want to go home. I won’t remember any of it by my next blink, and I’ll never even know.*

“That sounds boring,” Virgil said.

Chuuya snorted so viciously some of the water went up his nose. He choked, sitting up to cough it out as the man attempted to hold in his laughter. “Yeah,” he gasped, between puffs of his hilarity, “Fucking boring.”

“Boring isn’t bad,” Virgil insisted, carefully. Maybe Kouyou had told him too much. Maybe he had noticed her staring into his eyes, too. “Boring is safe, sometimes. Kenta always says so. *If I’m bored I’m not getting chased by guns*. We’re all safe.”

“I know,” Chuuya assured. He swam up. He followed a firefly with his eyes, all the way to the grass. The fire had long since died — the little bug settled amongst the smoke. “I know, man. I’ll make sure of it.”

### **January 1st.**

“She looks pretty happy, yeah?”

Perched on top of the bench, Chuuya kept the hood of his jacket on, and didn’t offer any sort of acknowledgement.

Officer Matsuda didn’t even huff. He sat right by his legs, strangely well-dressed and holding onto a steaming cup of coffee, and followed the line of his vision all the way to the two

women on the other end of the square. If he had anything to add onto that description — if the tentative curve of Yuan’s mouth, and the delighted light in Agent Minami’s eyes might mean something other than happiness — he didn’t dare theorize.

“I have to leave for a bit,” Chuuya said. It was an understatement, but the man didn’t need to know — uniform on or not. “Can you keep an eye on her?”

The man curled an eyebrow.

There was something painstakingly *heavy* in the way he studied his too casual clothes; the look of someone observing old photographs. The texture of the hoodie had brought bile between Chuuya’s teeth — he had worn it in *spite* and *because of*.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said.

“Chuuya, you left her with one of maybe the most untouchable people in Yokohama,” the man said, nodding towards Agent Minami’s arm — where the golden badge of the *Division* rested. “I doubt she won’t be safe.”

“Maybe I don’t trust the most untouchable people in Yokohama all that much,” he replied.

Matsuda frowned. “Don’t you think they could help?”

It was too complicated to summarize. “Will you or won’t you keep an eye on her?”

“Of course,” he said, after a pause. There was too much honesty in his gaze; he didn’t want to look at it, so he didn’t. There were eyebags too; restless nights fixing up the city after the *Dragon Head Conflict*. His lips itched to ask if his squad had been registered among the fallen — he knew it hadn’t, though. The idea of not asking was as nauseating as the principle of an unchanging truth — he would forget the sound of their voices soon enough. “Of course, Chuuya. You know I will.”

He nodded. Nodded some more — studied the auburn, familiar tinge of Yuan’s hair and the old green leather that had nothing to do with her festive clothes, and tried to determine if any of it meant anything.

*Does it matter?*, he wondered. Chuuya was leaking from all the pores. His arms and hands hadn’t been black and decaying since Shibusawa. *Are you content*, he wanted to ask, sometimes, to the only being who would never answer, *was it enough?*

He knew he would say no.

“Well,” Chuuya jumped down the bench, hands in his pockets. “Gotta go. Do try not to be an asshole to your ex wife for the festivities.”

“She’s the one who —“

“She made *sweets*, man. Your loss.”

Matsuda sighed.

In typical fashion — he waited until Chuuya had almost vanished from sight to call out his name again. When he turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised, hesitancy curled his shoulders forward.

“Listen,” the Officer spat out, all in one go, drying sweaty hands on his pants. “I was about to go visit Murase, if you wanted to come.”

Chuuya stared.

“What in hell makes you think he’d want me there?” he questioned, before he could decide if it was a smart sight to offer.

Matsuda seemed to gain thirty years in a single breath. The wrinkles by his eyes grew a tad deeper — the light in them blurred, as if hiding behind cataract and too many things he had not been able to do more than *look* at. “Chuuya,” he said, almost like a reprimand. “You don’t get to decide that, kid.”

Only *Tainted*, subtle and invisible, kept him from taking a step back.

“Fine,” he heard himself say. Yuan had long since crossed the street. She hadn’t even seen him; Murase had died looking at him. They always did, one way or another. *If you knew*, he thought, as Matsuda’s shoulders relaxed. *If you knew*. “Fine.”

Quiet, walking side by side, they made their way to the cemetery.

## Chapter End Notes

virgil: i love to swim under the moonlight and have fun

chuuya: i sometimes wonder if my friend wasn’t dead in my brother’s car trunk

virgil: ok!

a little interlude for you! next chapter, we’re moving into the next arc and dazai’s pov again! we got some of tanaki’s backstory (she’s a silly character, but i can’t wait to casually mention her in future fics and giggle like a living easter egg lol) and one of kouyou’s mafia rituals (she’s my wife). i hope you guys like this little break, and i’ll see you soon! (heads up, it might be a day after the usual, ‘cause work decided to give me an event right on the usual day)

see you soon! <33



**OR**

Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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## ACT TWO

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*[...]*

*i wonder if he knew*

*he was dying.*

*he would laugh and tell you*

*the stars became him,*

*when he stared at them.*

*[...]*

**[autumn poem, nakahara chuuya,**

## second stanza]

It only took a shot to reduce the screaming child into a rag doll.

“Hello, there,” the man said, as the doctors dragged the body out of the room. The echoes of her shrieks pooled down all the utterly vacant faces in the room; she’d stained the floor in blood, banging her skull against it. “Mind if I sit?”

He was tall, and unassumingly awkward. If not for the his hair — brushing the shoulders of his lab-coat — he might have gotten mistaken for one of the doctors relentlessly roaming the halls of the psych ward. But the personnel weren’t allowed to keep their hair long.

*The patients like to pull*, the Hall director would have explained, if asked.

Gloominess dripped from the walls of the *Game Room*; the visitor’s smile, though, was very warm — almost encouraging the silhouettes in the room to go back to what life had been, before a naughty child and her blood had interrupted it.

His intention to wait for an answer seemed as genuine as it was pointless — the muzzle-shaped restraint around his interlocutor’s jaw would birth no words.

The plastic chair on the free side of the table screeched against the floor as he sat. Similar set-ups filled the rest of the brightest room of the facility, with card games and thoroughly checked knick-knacks for the short-lived entertainment. The boy had already extorted one hour more in the *Game Room* from the nurse who changed his sheets and rattled his skull whenever he managed to get them bloody — whatever that not-doctor wanted, it would have to be quick.

As if he’d heard, the man lowered his eyes to the chessboard, humming.

He pushed one piece forward.

“Your turn.”

The boy — muzzled and handcuffed; too small for his seat — stared.

“It can’t be fun, playing on your own,” was the man’s conclusion, after several moments of nothing but the hiss of the moving hospital-gowns. “I come here often, to check on a little friend of mine. You never have anyone to play with.”

Observance meant *something*, for all did. The boy had seen the man too — chatting up distracted doctors and standing where *she* would not notice him breathing her in.

*She* — fourteen and always a bit pensive; taller than he was at eleven years old and paler than even the scars on his back — belonged to the age group next to the boy's own; it was rare for them to meet eyes. Solace was in the familiar, viciously stark and painfully obvious when seated next to a crying child whose restraints were meant to help *them* — before any eventual victim. He knew, with placid certainty, that she had killed before.

He knew she knew he had, too.

*[In a room of chains and chained up ones, the ink had told him, what does it matter who is guiltier than the other?]*

“Say,” the non-doctor proposed. “Do you know Morse Code?”

He nodded.

They played.

It took longer than it normally did — the times when the boy moved pieces in his mind and chuckled when either *he* or *himself* won the game. The former doctor did not ask the purpose of abandoning a handcuffed child in a room filled with toys — he did not take the offered advantage and move his pieces somewhere he hadn't told him to. All he did was smile, a bit more amused with every *checkmate* the boy couldn't vocalize.

The boy wondered if the man remembered him.

“What a mind,” he sighed, after his seventh loss.

Staring pitifully at his Queen, he intertwined his hands, leaning his chin on them. With some curving and some pulling of his cuffs, eyes squinting, like a passionless painter studying his reference — the boy mirrored him.

The man huffed; not quite a laugh. Framed by the dirty windows was a painting from other times, times yet to come. *A mirror*; the ink had said, *is only so when it can break*. The boy dangled his feet, too far from the ground and the blood they wouldn't clean until the next morning.

“Did they lock you up here because you were too clever,” the man asked, “Or because you weren't clever enough?”

He tilted his head. The muzzle was more uncomfortable than it was a bother; the stuttering words he could not say would have been nothing but a reminder of better times. Worse times. *Betterworse*, he concluded. He had no name and he had no blood; all he had was a chessboard.

*Neither*, he tapped. *Just was*.

Another hum. “Your turn.”

He asked his question.

A spark of surprise overrode the man's face; he looked right into his awaiting eyes, searching. He looked right into his eyes — because observance meant *something*, and he had killed enough to know when to breathe in.

"I do have one," he answered, eventually.

*What is it?*

"Ah," His smile was timid. His tongue wet his lips, slow. "That's a secret."

The boy squinted.

"Do *you* have an Ability?"

The painfully white lights flickered. There was no real need for them — not when the sun mercilessly embraced the world outside the endless windows. The general consensus, though, was that being locked up in that place meant some things deserved to be taken away.

There was a curtain of hair upon only one of the boy's eyes. There was an unmistakable kaleidoscope of unspeakable things shattered across the boy's features. The man recognized it — *solace*, he thought, *was in the familiar*.

*You've done your counts wrong*, he thought, as he would again, four years from that white room and those pointless lights. *You've done your counts wrong about him*.

*Doesn't matter*, the boy said, tapping it on the bloodied ground. Crossing the doors, the doctors returned from disposing of the girl. *Doesn't matter at all*.

He stood up. Clever and quick learner, he did not make a sound when he smashed his head against the corner of the table. Once the guards had approached, it only took a single shot to reduce the screaming child into a rag doll.

*scene iii.*

*[learned to do one trick and does it again and again]*

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The boy in front of him was human.

Dazai knew this with an expert's certainty; no rabid dog could have ever walked even two steps carrying the full weight of the hatred in his eyes. Contempt was too rational of a thing. *Human*, he thought, watching him run, blood dripping profusely from his wounds, *but new to it*.

"An Executive is free to take on whatever underling they might wish to," he explained, dangling blood-soaked shoes from the rock he'd sat on. *An Executive*, he did not say, but he tasted it inside his mouth. *But new to it. Only a day old, in fact.*

Eviscerated and wide eyed on the ground of the woods were six men — the wounded human in front of him couldn't keep his eyes away from them. Revenge was among those types of hunger Dazai had never quite understood; but recognizing the unfamiliar was much more useful than the opposite.

*You wanted them dead*, he did not say. He wasn't looking for thanks. *They killed your friends. Here are their bones.*

Akutagawa Ryunosuke heard anyway.

According to the voices, the latest devil's child of the slums had eyes like those of a silent dog. Dazai found he disagreed — found that the useless attack he had attempted against him, the malnourished skin of his frail body, and the deep *nothing* cracking his eyes from the inside, much more resembled —

*[“You are responsible, Dazai,” Mori told him, polished shoe deep into the dead thing's throat, eyes settled on him — speaking through metaphors just to keep the not-quite-anything that kept them two steps from each other unnamed. “Until the end of times, you are responsible for what you tame. If that is what you wish, find yourself another snake, and this time — break it until it fits.”]*

*There wasn't much to add. Kazuko had long since closed her eyes. Bored, he questioned: “Why are you quoting books at me, now?”*

*His smile could have banished Yokohama's regent blood moon, bright as it was. “You like those very much, don't you?”]*

But the boy appeared human, and Dazai was not in the habit of despising the unreachable.

*Utterly stupid*, he considered, *this whole revenge thing*. Both hatred and vendetta — both the moonlight and some boy who could not be older than fourteen; who had very well attempted

to kill him even after recognizing his name.

Most did, these days.

*Competence is the weapon of the long-lasting*, Mori would have said. Hands on his shoulders; pride in his eyes; something never-ending in his carefulness not to touch his skin. Never uncautious; not when Dazai was in the room. He had put on a different coat today, just for the occasion. *I will not tolerate mistakes, and you will not either.*

“I’ll give you money, if you choose to refuse my offer,” he told the boy, shrugging. “Enough to bury those dead friends of yours. Enough for you and your sister to live comfortably until your lungs stop working.” He tilted his head to the side. “If not *life*, though,” he added, holding tightly onto the rope, skinning his palms to keep the weight of *comfort* from drowning those promising shoulders. “If you choose the Port Mafia, I will give you *everything*.”

Odasaku wouldn’t have approved.

*Orphans aren’t promising*, Dazai, he said, in some corner of his skull he might have called a conscience, both to his face and not. He liked to hold it on winter days — liked to see a reflection he did not quite recognize. The unknown was more tempting. *Orphans are just orphans.*

“Not without trial,” he conceded, lending some rope to the voice in his head. “There won’t be no easy treatment. This fake god of mine tells me the slums are hell on earth. What awaits might just make you long for that hell. But if you do have the resolve...”

Men should not pride themselves in forcing rats to run through mazes for food. But men were not rats, and men were taller than their cages, and it made for easy judgment — being *different*. *Get a pet*, Ango might have said. Ango did not care for orphans; he did not care for much, Dazai thought. *Get a pet*, he would have said, still. *Get a pet, and let those who are meant to be corpses be corpses.*

“Is there something you wish for?”

For the second time since their eyes first met, Akutagawa Ryunosuke was human.

“A reason to live,” His voice was littered in cracks and dirt; the dying wisteria in his lungs had splattered his lips in blood, and granted him only a few years of life. Enough to make him long for it. “A meaning to my life.”

*There is none*, Dazai might have told him, had he been Odasaku. There was purpose; there was stubbornness. There were the placid waters of Kouyou’s contentment; the whips Chuuya would allow to land on his back, taking one piece of skin away, giving a rope to hang on. There was little more. *Go to your sister and die where it’s warm.*

But he wasn’t Odasaku.

“I will give you one.”

There were comparisons to be made, when he laid the coat that was not Mori's around his shoulders. Black swallowed him, starting from his eyes and only abandoning the tips of his hair, snowy as his skin. *Atlas, you fool*, he thought, and then, *be grateful it's new and weightless*. And then: *I'll fill it*.

When he screamed — when he *howled*, in grief and in oath and in a thirst for life he did not recognize — Dazai offered him a grain of honesty.

*Make it last for years*, he did not advise him, bad mentor from his first breath, *and you might even find a way to lie to yourself*.

“Good answer,” he told him. Hands on his shoulders; thumbs brushing naked skin. *Get a pet and break it*. “Let's go home, Akutagawa.”

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## FOUR MONTHS LATER

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*Case number: 78665432*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] reported a hundred percent success rate regarding the [...]*

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***Secure encrypted communication line — Yokohama, The Temple.***

*“—move before they—“*

*“—can't, all the entrances have been—“*

*“—Fox? Fox, answer immediately—“*

*“—gravity—“*

*“—they are here, they—“*

*“—black?”*

*“—black!”*

*“—get out of there before—!”*

***Dear Odasaku,***

*See? I told you I would accommodate your ancient ways. I still insist you should let me show you how SMS work, but if mails are your preferred method of communication, I suppose I can take a step back, this once. Don't take it for granted! I've been hearing voices around the syndicate that daring to demand a sacrifice from me equals a death sentence! Say, Odasaku, do you believe me so terrible?*

*I ask you to forgive my impatience; missing one of our Friday nights at the Bar has left me unnerved. But the Boss is the Boss, and those three rules of ours can't quite be defeated by respectable whims. Well, I could. But Mori would whine. And then Elise would whine. I'm sure you understand the less than optimal circumstances.*



*I hope to see you before I embark on this bothersome quest. I'm not sure of how long we will be away; Chuuya put his foot down to have us return to Yokohama at least once every two weeks, but there is much to do, and not a lot of time. Unfortunately, he's too stupid to understand it. Unsurprising, but I am but a fool who is still weak to the art of disappointment.*

*We have a great deal of money to situate; and a great deal of control bases to establish with it. Most importantly, we need to make sure the sudden immigration of syndicates we received during the Conflict does not happen again. I would very much enjoy not dealing with Americans ever again.*

*And you? What will you be doing? Something exciting, I'm sure. Your job is much more interesting than mine. Ever since I was promoted, the paperwork has been endless. And Chuuya refuses to do it for me! That means I have to waste at least fifteen minutes of my day figuring out how to trap him into doing them. A bother. I could use them to check on you, instead.*

*Please send my regards to Ango, should you two meet up all the same. Which I would be horribly tickled by. Let him know that the notebook with the reports from the last months ~~he will surely be losing his mind over~~ is safely kept with me. I meant to give it back, but the prank will have to last some more. Pitiful.*

**Regards,**

**Your friend.**

**Secure encrypted communication line — China, 樱花**

“—在他们到达之前立即退休—”

“我们不能再失去更多—”

“不到 1778 人死亡—”

“—black?”

“Double—”

*Secure encrypted communication line — South Korea, 떨어진 가지.*

"사령관이 죽임을 당했다—"

"Double—"

"젠장 Port Mafia —"

"대답하다. 대답하다. 대답하다!"

***Dear Odasaku,***

*Forgive the delay. Chuuya smashed my phone. I proceeded to put needles in his favorite pair of shoes — but it took me some time, and this nauseating motel we're staying in had no computers to offer me. The Slug's presence poisons the air I breathe and marks my days with endless martyrdom, but I've been told of a certain mushroom that might just be the solution I'm looking for. Deadly in 78% of the cases, they told me.*

*Did you hear about Ango's promotion? It's great news! Soon, the two of you will both have much more interesting jobs than mine. I had to leave Yokohama in the middle of the night just two days ago, and you want to know what my last order was? An execution. One I couldn't even witness. No, I just had to give the order! How is that fair?*

*It could have made for an interesting show; apparently, the men had already attempted to end their lives in our dungeons. Watching them die could have been interesting. I have rarely seen men get what they want.*

***Regards,***

***Your friend.***

***Secure encrypted communication line — Germany, Bluthunde.***

*„—sie haben jede letzte Verteidigung, die wir aufgebaut haben, ausgeweidet —“*

*„Sind sie Dämonen? Wie konnten sie-“*

*„Pass auf, bevor sie – Marcus? Markus —“*

*„Double—“*

***Dear Odasaku,***

*I am inconsolable.*

*This city is too well organized. I attempted to kill myself, as I told you I would the last time we met, throwing myself in the midday traffic — to no avail! These cars know the rules of the street too well! I had several men and women stop and insist they could bring me to the Hospital, and being all worried about the only wound I managed to give myself — a scratch down the elbow! It wasn't even the result of the cars, that rabid dog of mine just tried to stab me with a pair of chopsticks! (!!!!).*

*My pain is never ending. Every passing day I wonder where I might be going wrong. But fear not; I have since then realized that such grand methods will not suit me. For starters, there was no beautiful woman to follow my journey to the Aftermath. Secondly, I think too many cars at once might end up being painful. Perhaps just one, next time.*

*How are you? How are the kids? Did you carry any interesting packages? I know you told me you're more interested in my stories, but I do believe we should be even. You had me tell you all of my secrets; it's only fair I try to gain something back.*

*Do not take me for calculating. As much as my self-inflicted thorns allow me to, I promise you genuineness.*

***Regards,***

***Your friend.***

***Secure encrypted communication line — Tokyo, Black Widows.***

*“—the entire plaza has been annihilated, we cannot—“*

*“—for two fucking sons of a bitch—“*

*“—black!”*

*“We cannot find—“*

*“Commander? Commander, what is—“*

*“Double—“*

*“Get away! Move away immediately, get—!”*

***Dear Odasaku,***

*I saw a child die today, and I thought of you. I also thought of Kazuko, but that was short lived. I keep thinking I should feel as you told me — saddened by her absence. Truth to be told, I don't. Killing children doesn't really help, but it's the job.*

*Have you ever killed a child? You must have. Did it feel different? It doesn't for me. I know it does for Chuuya — he gets this look on his face that speaks louder than even his barks and growls. I think it's a bit hypocritical. What difference does it make if I shot a five or a ninety year old? Did the kid have more days in front of them? Perhaps. But why should their hundreds of days be more important than that old man's two, three, ten left?*

*I tried to ask Chuuya about it, because research is the heart of the matter. He didn't react positively. He never really does. That's fine. It's very entertaining. He called me some weird names, and then he said, “At least, an old man had enough time to do something bad.”*

*Your snotty orphans tried to steal my coat, last time I saw them. Akutagawa's gloominess keeps ruining my days. Is that fault enough to deserve death?*

*I don't remember if I ever even saw something akin to a mirror. You remind me of it, at times. Not quite reflecting, though. Opaque, maybe. Ango would know the term. You're so weird, Odasaku. I do rejoice in your existence, still.*

*I can't help but think that, should everyone understand that death and life are all but dissimilar, less people would munch over worth. You understand, don't you? You die anyway. We all do. Asking if we deserve it — if we did bad enough to deserve it, if we were too young to — is inconsequential. Was I too mean to deserve sunrise? No one would ask.*

*But I did think of you when I saw that dead child.*

***Regards,***

***Your friend.***

***Secure encrypted communication line — Tirana, Ujqërit.***

*“—bomba tashmë shpërtheu, ne nuk mund të bëjmë asgjë—*

*“—ata djajtë japonezë nuk munden—“*

*“—djajtë? Kjo është vepër e perëndive, jo—“*

*“—Black?”*

*“—ndërkombëtarisht, ne duhet të—“*

***Secure encrypted communication line — Alaska, C65ss.***

“—*insane? Retire immediately!*”

“*We can’t just let—*”

“*Don’t—*”

“—*can’t stop—*”

“—*to me, not them, never them, get—*”

“*Commander, we—*”

“*Step away from Double Black, now—!*”

# 1. [Yokohama Intelligence; Recording 6785].

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“Rebecca Winfield threw up in the pool, and White-Teeth Jackson’s having a fit over it,” Chuuya said, as he appeared between the wooden seat-legs caging Dazai under the table. “Why are *you* throwing a tantrum?”

“Are you *kidding me?*” Jackson — the *birthday boy*, as his pair of sparkly sunglasses read — groaned, right in time, somewhere over the crowd. Had he been closer to the DJ station, he would have probably demanded a record-scratch. “The cleaning system won’t activate until *six in the morning*, dude!”

Whatever makeshift lackey had brought the news forward shrugged apologetically, pushed back and forth by the crowd.

Dazai could only truly see their legs; the kitchen table that was his roof was uncomfortably short. Sweaty, pimpled bodies had been dancing since crossing the threshold of the so-called *king* of the Baltimore’s Lions High School; holding up plastic red cups and throwing *glitter-y* decorations around to the sound of the beat.

The mansion could easily accommodate it all: an assortment of highschoolers of all ages partying in widely different ways, drunkenly destroying antiques and singing songs Dazai did not know. He had spent a little less than twenty minutes extorting information from a fourteen year old on the verge of a panic attack; half an hour after, he'd scared off the football squad from doing body shots off *his* table, and settled.

"I'm not *throwing a tantrum*," Dazai let the boy know, gathering some joy from watching his knees end up in a pool of discarded red ponce. "I'm changing my tactics."

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. "For what?"

"Three out of the *three* girls I've proposed a double suicide too —"

"You're a shitty toilet paper substitute."

"— mistook my intentions for a mere flirting technique," he explained, inconsolable.

"I mean —" Blinking, the boy pushed one of the seats, until he could sit next to him, caging them in that claustrophobic space. "Isn't it, sort of?"

"*No*. It's the *flirting* that's the *technique*."

"Why are you flirting with random chicks, anyway? Didn't you come here with that Charlotte girl, from Biology?"

"*Lottie* is not particularly serious about this, I assure you," Dazai laid his chin on his hands, just as sad. "And given her respectable amount of bear plushies and the college applications on her desk, I doubt suicide would fit into her agenda."

Chuuya made a face. "Dude, *gross*, you went to her *house*?"

Before he could answer, a roar rose through the partying crowd — someone had stood up on the glass table of the dining room and allowed two cheerleaders to rain commercial beer on his white shirt. Whistles ensued; the DJ — a thirty years old man *very* invested in pretending to be drunker than he was — put on a song about the USA's coolness.

"You hear this?" Dazai nudged his arm, ear to the lyrics. "You turned seventeen and *tonight is the night*. Perhaps your hat will finally devour the little that's left of your brain."

"I'll fry you like tempura," Chuuya said. If he could have sank into the floor, he thought — with or without *Tainted* — he probably would have. "Am I losing it, or have they been playing this song in a row since ten P.M.?"

Chances were he was right.

How a party could appear both so cheap and so *grand*, he wasn't quite sure; perhaps it was the American way. Half the people in that place he wouldn't have recognized, hadn't they spent days memorizing every face they might meet at the school. An arduous job, for a one week long infiltration — but they were getting free alcohol out of it.

“Tanaki’s right. They’re a living stereotype,” The redhead’s nose scrunched up, watching some guy jump on the piano to start a *Go Lions, Go Lions!* chant. “And why is every guy here wearing a varsity jacket, anyway?”

He could hardly talk, when he had stuck himself in a grey one as well — but Dazai knew his contempt was the result of a week of barely contained murderous intent, *barely* quietened by his own pinching fingers on naked skin.

*[That little violence-proof trick had caused a great number of voices — among many others. Not every day two Japanese transfer students entered the doors of Baltimore’s Lions High School — according to Therese, their first-day guide — and people there were endlessly attracted to gossip.*

*“Plus, you two look very —” She’d cleared her throat, blinking at Dazai’s bandages with almost vocal desperation. “Exotic. Wait, is that racist?”*

*Voices had been many and wide: suppositions about their criminal background — Chuuya had started a fight in the school canteen by the second day; Dazai had stuck a pair of child-proof scissors in the P.E. teacher’s seat when he’d asked him to get rid of his bandages — suppositions about their clear lack of interest in making friends — Chuuya had failed to understand the cheerleaders’ flirting by asking him to teach them his high-kicks and locked them in a severe training regime; Dazai had gotten the Chemistry experiment wrong just to stop Mitchel, from the Debate Team, from talking to him — and about their general connection to each other.*

*But birthing voices about them had been the intent, so they hadn’t complained.*

*Mostly.*

*It did not, of course, stop the voices. It hardly could. As far as the students of Baltimore’s Lions High School were concerned, Dazai only sat next to Chuuya, and Chuuya only talked to Dazai — and both occasions were so hostile, they mostly ended up with them in the principal’s office. They shared their lunch on the roof and attempted to throw each other from it.*

*The school Dean had memorized their names by the second day. ]*

“How long until we can bring him out?” he asked, keeping his eyes on Jackson’s swaying frame.

“He’s still the life of the party,” Dazai replied, leaning down to miss the impact of some drunk guy sitting on their table. Chuuya yelped, bumping his head under the bent wood — *why is everything in this country made of paper*, the boy had complained, mere days ago, staring at the hole Dazai’s head had left in the wall.

As a window got smashed in the distance, Dazai added: “If you had found a way to befriend the fool, we wouldn’t be here now.”



A gasp. The buckle of his choker was caught in the colorful lights — it almost distracted from the collar of bruises he'd received during their last shoot out, somewhere near Boston. "How is it my *fault* if Miss. Bailey refused to put me in tutor classes with him?"

"How is it *my* fault if you can't even pretend to suck at Physics?" he scoffed. "Who gets every answer wrong on a test? *Obviously* she figured out you were lying. Statistically, a hundred percent failure rate is — Oh, *hey*, Charlotte is here!"

Dazai extracted himself from under the table, ignoring Chuuya's offended spluttering.

The drop of his tone was enough to get a painful retch out of the boy as he climbed out; the moment the giggling girl stepped closer and stuck her lips to his, he saw his eyes roll *deep* in the corner of his own.

He paid him no mind.

Kissing was a new concept. The dentist Mori had dragged him to to get rid of the braces, at last, had winked and said something about it; in the one class he didn't share with Chuuya, he had listened to fast English murmurs about himself perhaps nobody had thought he would catch. *Lottie* didn't kiss very well — but she always stared at him, and Dazai knew what a ticking clock meant.

"Hey there, handsome," she murmured, smirking on his lips. She had a mole under her left eye, the same black of her shimmering skirt.

"Hey there," Dazai echoed.

"Refrain from drooling in public," Chuuya barfed, in quick-snap Japanese.

"I share none of your slimy slug tendencies, thank you very much," Then, in English: "Sorry about the hiding. *Someone* lost his earring."

"I'm not even *wearing* —" A kick to the shins; Dazai tapped the side of Chuuya's shoe, dirtying it, because it was *Italian leather*.

"I told you to text me when you arrived," Charlotte reminded him, after laughing puzzlingly at their antics. Her fingers were skirting across his jaw; it didn't feel as ticklish as Dazai had been waiting for. "I wanted to show you Jackson's parents' wine cellar."

*That* got Chuuya's attention. Before he could act on it, the girl had already grabbed the hem of Dazai's turtleneck, pulling him forward — and Chuuya, too, given the two fingers Dazai had hooked in his pants' back pocket — towards a circle of people on a quieter corner of the floor.

They settled, bony knees against bony knees, surrounded by sliding dancing bodies and the unmistakable taste of children playing mature. When he tried to sit next to Charlotte's spreading skirt, she playfully slapped his chin. "You can't sit next to me, dummy," She rolled her eyes, hanging onto her giggling friend. "Or do you *not* want the bottle to land on us?"

“Right,” Dazai said, squinting at the empty beer someone was carefully fixing at the center of the circle. A wordless glance exchanged with Chuuya — *what’s the bottle for?*; answered by a mouthed, *shit if I know?* — abandoned them on opposite ends of it. “Can’t wait, Lottie.”

She grinned. Jackson fell somewhere next to her; unseen, Chuuya tapped the bottle with his foot.

A blur of music, ugly laughs, and the unholy sounds coming from the body-shots corner filled the time. Someone passed a joint; both he and Chuuya accepted it, sharing a cringing look. *Mori would kill them if he knew.*

A few couples threw all decency away with the midnight *tick*, occupying the nearest couches and walls — as he came to learn with each round of *spin the bottle*, that was exactly the point. He lost count of the making out sessions, hickey dares, and various pieces of clothing that got lost. Charlotte offered him a chuckling apology before sticking her tongue down Jackson’s throat; a girl with green eyes whose name he couldn’t remember pecked Chuuya’s lips with a squeal, and he courteously fixed her skirt where it had risen up.

*I thought the dares would be funnier,* Dazai’s knuckles tapped on the floor. *No one was asked to jump into the vomit pool yet.*

*I’m gonna stop the bottle on me and dare someone to try and shoot you,* Chuuya replied, pushed further and further into the wall by the couple rubbing all over each other next to him. *That will light up the whole evening.*

*How scandalous.*

*L-O-T-T-I-E wants to lock you in Jackson’s bedroom and get you to fuck her,* he informed him, once he’d unsightly stared at her whispering silhouette on his other side. The effort he went through to spell her name denounced *something* Dazai would mock later. *Stop judging what I get off on.*

He tilted his head. *Me?*

Chuuya’s knuckles hit the ground. They didn’t crack it open — but the bottle reacted to the pull of *Tainted*. It spun and spun, slowing down with each clap from the drunken circle, until it landed on —

“*Ooh, get it!*” Charlotte’s friends roared, shaking her so viciously her brain had to be rattling in her skull. “Her boyfriend and the *competition!*”

Chuuya’s face grew deadly calm.

He knew what that expression meant. “I’m too high to remember what we were doing,” Dazai slurred, immediately, swaying. He yawned. “What do I have to do to the Hatrack?”

His whole body jolted forward. “Why are you *assuming* it’s *you* who —” he snapped, in that slightly accented English of his. The mixture of that tone and his boastful brightness had gained him a *different* sort of attention; one he was steadfastly blind to.

It hardly made any sense — not when the list of his negative traits should have been far more blinding. But Chuuya was Kouyou's deserving disciple, overfilling in the delicate lethality she'd beaten into his swift steps; he'd been sharpened not unlike one of her blades, until he was just as *unignorable* as she was. Dazai had watched those children gawk at his seamless existence and unmatched eyes, and he'd —

*Reluctantly* understood. Somewhat. It made no sense, still, for the sloppiest dog in existence. But Dazai had never had the gall to decide what the sun was supposed to be.

“— Seven Minutes in Heaven!” some jock was telling him, screaming to overrule the teasing roars of the circle. “And don't even try to *cheat*, we'll keep time.”

“Don't take too long, though,” another girl snorted. “We don't want poor Lottie to cry.”

“What do you know, maybe she's into it.”

“Oh, shut *it* —” Charlotte lamented.

“Seven Minutes in Heaven,” Chuuya echoed, over the forceful touches of the people pulling him to his feet. “Sure. Obviously.”

Miracle came unexpectedly and joyously. Jackson jumped up. “I gotta show you guys where the closet is. Follow me.”

“Great,” Dazai commented.

“If they don't already know,” the same jock from before murmured. Laughter exploded.

“Delightful,” He smiled, not understanding a single thing. Language barrier, he assumed. Amongst the whistles, his fingers found Chuuya's wrist. As they followed Jackson's skipping steps, he leaned down to hiss: “*Seven Minutes in Heaven?*”

“Fuck if I know,” Chuuya replied, defeated. A moment later, eyes digging into their guide's back — his gaze grew unrestrained. “Sure don't know us if they think we'd get even seven minutes there. What, like an exchange year project?”

Too focused to snort, Dazai followed the curling line of his lips until it felt like violence.

Jackson's house branched out into thin, disconnected stairs, leading to an upper floor the partying crowd had been politely ordered *not* to destroy. The further they went, dirtying the shadows with their vomit-soaked soles, the more muffled the chaos from the main event became. Dazai crossed his hands behind his back, climbing the steps with calculated calm.

At the end of the staircase was a bright yellow sticker, something akin to an anti-slipper safe.

It caged the garden outside the mansion and most entrances, too; Dazai's researches hadn't been able to give him a name for that high-level technology. The videos he'd stolen of Ability Users being reduced to a babbling mess because of its bolts were clear enough.

Not a fly buzzed when they passed it.

[“Brad heard from Lily, who heard from Janet, who heard from Marcus, who heard from one of the transfers, that the police will be doing rounds,” they had watched some girl from Chemistry tell Jackson, the day before. “You need to get rid of the security system for the night. Your parents connected it to their alarms, right? Those things will shriek if we tip-tap.” ]

“*Aaand*,” Jackson sing-sang, knocking on the wardrobe at the end of the hallway. He opened the doors, showing off a small cubicle of overcoats. “Here we are! You two have fun. Ah, not *too* much fun, you know. I don’t want jizz on Mom’s fur.”

Dazai should have guessed. “Seven minutes, you said?” Another roar came from downstairs; his joint hands reached for the gun in the back of his pants.

His eyebrows danced. “Not one less, not one more. Do tell Lottie if it gets you *good*, though. She’s a sweet girl. Don’t lead her on. That *sucks*. ”

“Seven minutes,” Chuuya said, again, very casually. Something in his tone shifted the boy’s attention to him. “Yeah, I think we can do it.”

Jackson’s father’s office occupied the entire third floor of the mansion. Four glass walls leaned on a square-wide balcony, equipped with a Jacuzzi and a nice view to the city; all the furniture was offensively white to the eyes, modern and minimal to the point of impersonality. Jackson’s passed out body got tied to a chair the moment Chuuya got bored of floating him around; Dazai browsed his father’s computer, occasionally criticizing the decor.

“We were right about the Ability-morphine cargoes,” he informed. “He’s refilling the Special Division *legally* — and through other means for anyone who makes a big enough offer. Apparently, he’s known as the *Ability-Destroyer*,” He frowned. “Wouldn’t *I* deserve that title?”

Chuuya scoffed. Blood had splattered on the white collar of his varsity jacket and on his jaw, from the bone-breaking punch he had knocked Jackson out with; in the moonlight, and paired with the gun he had stolen from Dazai, it could have been a fashion statement.

If Dazai only looked at him peripherally, a valley of bright spirals and *Corruption* scars littered his skin. “I have some other titles in mind. Did you put the —“

“Of *course*, I did. Did you cut off his —?” He meaningfully lowered his eyes.

A scoff. “If we’re trying to frame his parents, wouldn’t that be in sick taste?”

“Yeah,” Dazai said, stretching the boredom out of his limbs. “That’s the point.”

The mechanical sound of a safety being switched off curled in the air right by his ear.

Still crouched down in front of Jackson’s seat, Chuuya paused. His hands hesitantly raised to his shoulders, pulling away from the kid’s legs; he kept his eyes on *something* a tad too tall to be the top of Dazai’s head, and rose to his feet with well calculated slowness.

“Alright,” he said, calming. “Let’s not.”

“Free my son and we can talk about it,” the male voice by Dazai’s ear said. He had frozen on the spot the moment an unmistakable weapon had been pressed against the back of his skull; when the owner of the house pulled his collar to straighten him, he followed, obediently. “Delete whatever framing evidence you’ve put into my computer, let the kid go — and I might *consider* not shooting your friend. If you’d rather be interrogated tied to the same seat.”

His tone was utterly pleasant, but lined by a smell of sweat. Daring to dart a look to his left, he saw a slightly crooked nose and silver hair, and the rain-covered jacket of someone who had just come home.

*You didn’t check the outside stairs?*, Dazai mouthed, enraged.

Chuuya’s jaw dropped. *That was your job!*

“Eyes on me,” Jackson’s father growled. It broke in the middle; a shard of panic. He pulled Dazai harder to make up for it, digging the mouth of his gun so deep into his skull it *burned*. “I’m not above killing kids.”

““You’re not above acting out against the American Division for Special Abilities’s orders either,” Dazai commented. “Or above financial theft. Or human experimentation. Or whatever that squirrel statue at the end of the hallway was. Why would we think you’d draw the line at child murder?”

“Will you *shut up*,” Chuuya called, teeth clearly gritted, “I’m *bargaining for your miserable life* here.”

“That is rather kind of you. I *have* been researching the painful side effect of bullets based on areas, however, and —“

“The statue wasn’t even a squirrel,” he cut through, “It was clearly a monkey.”

“Are you *blind*? That —“

The bullet Jackson’s father fired grazed the shell of Dazai’s ear. He wouldn’t have noticed — distracted as he immediately was by the sound it made as it opened a crack in the wall right by Chuuya’s raised hands — if not for the warm trail that soaked the neck of his shirt; he grunted. “Now that’s ticklish.”

“*Are you fucking listening to me?*” the man snapped — just loud enough to fight a reasonable war against the music downstairs. Dazai could see his eyes frantically lay on his son’s bloodied temple. “I don’t know who sent you. I don’t know what your aim is. I’ve got men who’ll make you *beg* for a chance to tell — but right now, you either do what I’m telling you, or *I fucking shoot him* —

“Listen,” the boy tried.

“— I will *shoot him dead*, are you listening to me?”

The light in his burned eye — *oh my god*, some of their classmates had gasped, on their first day, *were you born like that? Are those contacts?* — dimmed out into something not disconcerting.

Dazai's shoulders stiffened. "Slug —"

"Fine," Chuuya said.

He raised Dazai's own gun.

Fire-laced, thundering ache exploded right between his eyebrows. The world got blurred and more blurred; vaguely, he heard the sound of the man behind him choking, screaming words he did not catch. Dark bloomed in his pupils; Dazai felt nothing at all.

When his eyes opened again, the same song about the *mighty cool USA* was playing somewhere under his feet, rattling the bones of his legs.

Chuuya's face appeared upon him, upside down. "Is that shit about how electrocuting people in the water doesn't leave marks real or not?"

The rush of the turned-on Jacuzzi came to his ears a bit belatedly; when he managed to blink the headache out of his eyes, he saw the passed out bodies of both Jackson and his father half hanging from the edge of the bathtub.

A hole had been drilled right in the dead center of his forehead. "I thought you'd said you didn't like this strategy," Dazai whined, rubbing it.

"You're welcome," Chuuya replied, flicking that same exact spot — like it was a normal response to follow up shooting him in the head. Blood attached itself to his forefinger like cooling honey; distractedly, Chuuya licked it off his glove. "*You* came up with this strategy."

"You said you could make it painless."

"*How*, asshole? I said *bloodless*."

"That's so not *fair* — Chuuya has to take responsibility — "

"Fifty-four kilograms, by the way," Chuuya grabbed him by the wrists, hauling him up through whines. "More or less. The — *oi, you're heavy* — the wonders of gravity. The bruise will be wider than Ace's frontal teeth."

"One day," he promised, fervent, trying to keep the world from feeling like a spiderweb connected to his aching forehead, "Ane-san and everybody else will see through your act, and accept you as the sadistic psychopath you are."

Somebody downstairs began chanting a *Happy Birthday* choir, unconcerned with their missing guest. Belatedly, they turned their heads toward the bodies in the Jacuzzi.

Dazai curled an eyebrow.

They exceeded the seven-minutes deadline — if the consoling pats being delivered to Charlotte's shoulders meant anything. Hands sticky from blood and from the rubber from the electricity cable they had torn off the ceiling, they leaned on the railing overlooking the ground floor, studying the swaying crowd.

Framing one of the most infamous assets of the American Abilities Division would have no impact whatsoever on their lives. Baltimore's Lions High School might organize some service to mourn a *beloved student*; those teens would gossip about *Mrs-Jackson's-Mother* and whatever signs they would *swear* they had caught that she was insane.

*Criminals rarely get caught for their own crimes*, Mori liked to say, when *Social Services Day* came closer. And as with every grain of sand, Dazai learned.

"Go on," he said, still pettily rubbing his forehead. "I'm bored."

Chuuya muttered under his breath. Still, he tapped feather-light fingers on the railing, waiting until *Tainted* had spread down the stairs and across the makeshift dance floor. Less than fifteen seconds later, they were walking among the passed out bodies of Jackson's guests, pale underneath the techno-pop music.

One of Chuuya's fighting boots ended up in Charlotte's curls, a spreading halo. His *hum* of consideration echoed all the way to the kitchen, where Dazai made sure to steal one sealed bottle of whiskey.

"That was boring," Chuuya commented, floating some grains of salt he'd stolen in the air. "But kids are wild these days."

"I get elderly people are usually on the shorter side as well," Dazai replied, as they fell inside the stolen car; he downed a sip of whiskey, studying the LED lights from the windows. "But you're still not *ninety*, so maybe lay it off?"

The boy grunted, starting the car.

*No more Lit homework*, he considered — a bit hypocritically, considering he had completed none of them. *No more cheerleaders rallies*. *No more English*. *No more school*.

Fingers pinched the space between his eyebrows. "Earth to Mackerel," Chuuya snapped, rudely inserting them into the street with only one hand, using his free one to rip the bottle from his own. *Vibrant* old Chuuya, still freckled in blood, still a dog, still *unlike them* — and thus, consequently, inevitably — "I haven't bothered to learn the way to the port. If you don't want me to fuck around and find out, pay attention."

*Stupid*, he thought. Unless he was aware that Dazai would lead them elsewhere out of spite. They *had* saved most of the missing budget — and there had to be at least one Arcade around. "Sure."

The edge of the knife they had used to cut the table was pressed against the side of his throat, before being hidden in Chuuya's shoe again. Dazai cheerfully spread salt on the tip of his middle finger, and pushed it against the boy's mouth.

Chuuya, ever so efficient, made sure to loudly announce his disgust, before licking it off and downing some whiskey.

*His mouth*, Dazai thought, inconsequentially, *was warmer than Charlotte's* — even on the bruised skin of his fingers. He wondered, a bit too analytical, if he'd be warm to bite.

“Happy birthday, by the way,” he recalled, licking his own salt off, throwing his feet on the dashboard. He'd planned a kidnapping to celebrate — organized it all to the dot, so that the sycaries would easily manage to break into their motel and bodily drag Chuuya away. And then Dazai would *finally* get some free time, as the shorter boy had fun beating them up into a pulp.

*Truly*, Dazai mused, *he was one partner of a kind*. It rarely went appreciated as it should have.

“*Mmh*,” Celebrations had long since grown sour on his face — neither the Flags nor his squad had ever witnessed one of his birthdays. Dazai wondered if every occasion was good to grieve, for a beacon of destruction. “May thirteenth?”

“*Dang!*”

“June twelfth?”

“You should give up. Nothing assures you I'd tell you, *if* you actually guessed it.”

“I don't know,” Chuuya swerved right into traffic, shrugging the varsity jacket off for the road to devour. “I have the feeling you might.”

Two hours later, they reached the port of Baltimore, and — as Chuuya's other, glory-lined birthday gift — they blew up every last one of *Mr-Jackson's-Father's* cargoes. Four hours later, his phone was blown up with facetime calls, showing the boy's bloodied, shrieking face as he kicked the sycaries into human craters — undeterred by how Dazai steadfastly sang *Happy Birthday* to him, with his flattest tone and a broken kazoo.

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*In the way of money*, Mori had explained, as he showed off their pictures in the hallway of the high-names and cracked frames, *you need to travel*.



*In the way of blood*, Dazai had corrected, since the man would never say it out loud, *I need you two everywhere*.

“I don’t get it,” Chuuya said, head tilted so far to the side he resembled the smartly-eyed owls depicted on the walls of Kouyou’s home. “Art should look like art, y’know?”

Clicking his tongue, he chirped: “That’s a high standard, don’t you think?”

Berlin was blossoming and sticky at night — the stench of stillness filled up its own city with a polite sort of insistence. Its museums held the same kind of polished grandeur; the modern art section housed enough monochrome canvas to get even a mission-focused Chuuya curious enough to ask.

“I’m not saying I could do this,” the boy insisted. “I have as much artistic talent as that one drunken lady that plays the saxophone outside the *Old World* —“

“Don’t you always tip her?”

“You seriously need to stop it with those fucking spies you have on me. I’m just saying — it seems like a cheap way out.”

“If this poor man felt like a blue square on a canva,” Dazai replied, mighty, “Then he felt like a blue square on a canva. Don’t be so judgy.”

The crowd around them was unassuming; high-placed betters and event organizers — swirling their minds to explain the decades of pain behind a single stroke and why half an inheritance would be worth the buy.

“Do you ever feel like they can smell it?”

The lines of Chuuya’s newest accessory — a leather harness crossing on his chest, caging his Port Mafia tattoo and Dazai’s bullet scar he still had from the parking lot accident — cut a stark line on a too white dress shirt; neither of them looked *too* out of place amongst the well dressed nobility, but Dazai had been feeling eyes on his neck from their first step in the room.

“Your wet dog stench?” he asked, stealing the Champagne glass of a particularly busy woman passing by him. “Absolutely.”

“The smell of your bullshit will cover it.”

“Doubt.”

“The blood,” Chuuya insisted, stealing the glass from him — finally straightening his head to drink from it. The painting in front of them grew even duller from the lack of attention. Dazai did a quick mental count of his new Executive pay, and wondered if those *Babysitting Union Official Unauthorized Proposal* emails he’d been receiving could be soothed by buying Hirotsu such a gift. “Does it ever feel like they just *know*?”

“That statue seriously looks like a finger,” he mused, squinting at the podium in a faraway corner. Behind it, a man with silver hair and dark eyes was doing his best not to look at him. “What do you think the symbolism is?”

“To shove it up your ass.”

“Do you kiss Ane-san’s cheek with that mouth?”

Instinctively, Chuuya straightened.

German high society didn’t look much like the Japanese one. Their clothes were less intricate; their mindless chat just a hint more pragmatic. The evident lack of honorifics made their words a slightly strident in Dazai’s ears; but he knew better than to judge respect based on speech. Charity events looked the same everywhere, though.

“Familiar calls to the familiar,” Dazai shrugged. He met the man’s eyes; nodded. “If they smell it and recognize it, that’s on them. Pretend to pass out.”

“What?”

He smiled at the passersby; underneath his breath, he spelled out: “*Pretend to pass out.*”

Promptly, Chuuya dropped to the ground with a *thump!*

“And you say you aren’t a dog,” Dazai let himself mumble under his breath, stepping away from the concerned, gasping circle that was slowly gathering around the boy’s fallen body. There was a *tone* that would get Chuuya to answer; Dazai couldn’t quite point out *when* he had conditioned him to it, but he could only compliment himself for it. He made his way to the speck of silver on the other side of the room.

Marcus Schulz, head of the *Black Glove*, welcomed him with an extremely tight smile and new Champagne glass.

“Wonderful exhibition,” Dazai greeted, in a badly accented German. “I do wish to warn you — Miss Bachmann has every intention of offering you gambled money for that Malevich. You might not want to deal with the hassle.”

“That is surprisingly generous of you,” the Boss commented. “But perhaps the surprise is my mistake. You easterns always seem to display more politeness than we can rationally accept.”

“My mother taught me manners,” he lied.

“Mine tried. Given this, I thought I should let you know that my men have all of your men at gunpoint, as of now,” Pleasurably, Schulz glanced at the circle of concerned guests slapping Chuuya’s cheeks. “All I need is to say *go* and they’re all gone.”

Dazai hummed. “That’s problematic.”

“Indeed. So perhaps, you may want to go back to your Boss and let him know our deal has changed?”

“You mean,” he attempted, “Instead of *you* allowing us to store our money in your city, you want to simply take the money and return me and my partner’s bodies stuffed in a German *krapfen*?”

“Something like that,” Schulz agreed.

He hummed again, tapping his fingers on the side of his glass. The sound of a commotion startled a good number of the guests gathered by the fallen body and the head-tall finger statue; it seemed one of the *Black Gloves* had had no qualms about grabbing Chuuya’s skull and smashing it against the ground.

His neck was bent at a weird angle; his eyes were open and vitreous, lifeless. One of the women who had been raising his legs *screamed*; the woman in *tailleur* on her other side extracted a gun out of nowhere and shot her in the chest.

“That is not nice,” Dazai commented, only barely louder than the commotion of guests. A good number of them almost threw him to the ground in their haste to reach doors they would find closed, chased by bullets of men who didn’t want witnesses; both he and Schulz stood still, holding their glasses. “My Boss has taken quite a liking to that pipsqueak of my partner.”

“Does your Boss know your syndicate is on its way to an end?”

He sipped the champagne. “How come?”

“Your efficiency during the *Dragon Head Conflict* is commendable, but it attracted too many eyes,” Schulz explained, studying the pool of blood under Chuuya’s skull. “You had enemies in your city. Now you have enemies everywhere. It’s only a matter of time before they come for you — and I have it on good authority that some of them may have a tighter grasp on your Government than even *you* do.”

“Problematic,” Dazai echoed. “But I will deal with it once I’m home, I suppose.”

“You?”

Subtly, like a cat stuck on the counter, he took advantage of the chaos and the blood on the walls to push the finger statue to the ground. “Ah, yes,” Schulz said, suddenly. He studied him with an interest that was almost scientific. “I do know who the two of you are. The pride of the Port Mafia.”

He blinked at him. “And you think you’ll come out of this place alive anyway?”

“Rather.”

“How admirable. Are our men dead?”

Schulz tilted his head, casually, listening to his in-ear. He muttered something in German, too fast for him to catch; he nodded. “Now they are. So, should we get on with it, or —“

The wet, creaking sound of bones snapping into place was stark; but not enough not to get muffled by the choked scream out of the man who had been leaning over Chuuya’s body. The nail of the finger statue breached his back where his heart rested; turning his head back and forth, working a cramp, Chuuya kicked his corpse off, and snapped his fingers.

“Yes,” Dazai said, gulping down the last of his Champagne. “Rather.”

Later, when the room of the exhibition had turned crimson, and Marcus Schulz’s body had been left on top of a mountain for the authorities to find, Dazai was the one with a gun pointed to the hollow of his throat.

“Our men are *not* your *fucking chessboard pieces*,” Chuuya snarled, standing in Port Mafia blood outside the museum, pushing him against a gelid stone wall. The siren lights of police cars were growing closer; they both knew this dance to a fault. “You can’t just up and *sacrifice them* — we could have moved faster, and you fucking know it — “

“*You* know we needed an excuse to exterminate the *Black Glove* without appearing to be starting a conflict,” he noted, dull. “We have big contacts in Germany. We can’t just paint ourselves as bloodthirsty. As far as everyone will know, they came here and slaughtered our men unprovoked; no one knew they had made a deal with us. End of the story.”

His laughter was filled with disbelief. He had blood on his eyelids; keeping his eyes open seemed harder because of it. Chuuya was no more than a Sysyphus; he would knock on every family door and apologize for a wasted child — he would do it again. “There were a thousand possibilities that did not involve them dying for —“

“I told them to bring guns,” Dazai leaned his chin on the weapon in Chuuya’s hand — he gulped, just to feel it press against his carotid. *No one is listening*, Mori had said.

“They’re Mafia. They should have known how to use them.”

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“Ma’am,” The pulsing vein in Chuuya’s temple seemed to move along to his broken English. Counting its tics, Dazai leaned on their fuming, stolen car, ignoring the creaking metal of the *SLOW DOWN!* sign they had crashed on. “For the last time. We did not steal you ladies’ booze. We haven’t touched alcohol in —“ His face fell. “In far too long.”

The biker didn't seem impressed. There was a fake mole painted on her upper lip, bright against the hot pink lipstick; her haircut was as stylish as it was windswept, and the snake tattoo that circled her throat looked at them unkindly.

"You stole it," she insisted, stone-faced. "You give it back, or we run you over."

The three rows of bikers behind her — all of them women; all of their vehicles shimmering; all of them sporting hot pink jackets that read *Switzerland's Hot Chicken Wings* on their back — nodded in unison, staring them down. A particular lady wearing an eyepatch dragged her thumb along her throat.

"We've had our own shit to deal with," his partner insisted. The sleeves of his jacket were still raised up to his elbows; they had been trying to get the car to magically restart for three hours. "All we did was stop at the same gas station as you. There was no need to follow us for thirty kilometers and start a professional chasing."

"There was," the leader insisted. "Because you stole our booze."

"We *did not steal your goddamn booze.*"

The chasing itself hadn't landed them on the *SLOW DOWN!* sign, to be fair. It had been rather intense, and Dazai had given unnecessary commentary — but Chuuya was adept to racing. The problem had been the sudden realization that they had been driven miles off their course.

*The map, Chuuya had said. We need to be out of here by tomorrow. The contact is waiting — and he's got that gun collection Mori told us to subtly steal from him. He'll get pissed off if we don't.*

Possessed by an urge Dazai hadn't quite understood either — not that he would ever admit it; perhaps, realistically, he'd blame it on a desire to watch Mori's eyebrows twitch in disappointment — he had thrown the map out of the window.

They had watched it land under the bikers' wheels in stunned silence.

"My —" Chuuya was still saying. The word seemed to escape him, "*Partner*, here — He lost a map we *really* needed, and we got in a bit of — an altercation," *Fancy wording*, Dazai mumbled to his own thoughts, massaging the nose the boy had crashed on the dashboard. He *had* accidentally dislocated Chuuya's little finger during the fight, which they had needed to cut part of his glove for; but it was hardly as relevant. "That's why we had a hard landing. We weren't trying to challenge you."

"That," one of the bikers intervened, hand pointing at the *SLOW DOWN!* sign, "Is the *Holy Hot Chick Wings Oath* location, you creature."

Decades of exhaustion landed on Chuuya's shoulders. "Beg your pardon?"

With a chest-deep sigh, Dazai climbed to his feet, and made his way to the stare-off. Cars passed by the highway sporadically; the sun would go down soon, and they would probably

be left for dead on a Swiss road — which would make Mori *more* than annoyed.

“Is this where you madams take the oath to join your — gang?” Dazai questioned, leaning his elbow on Chuuya’s shoulder, smiling charmingly up at the leader. “It’s a marvelous location. What inspired the choice?”

“We killed a man and buried him here.”

“How lovely,” He clasped his hands. “Well! Ma’am. You’re more than free to check our car — or what’s left of it. You won’t find your —“

“*Secret Appletree Wine.*”

“Your *Secret Appletree Wine*,” he agreed. “It’s the easier solution, isn’t it? You check, and if it’s not there — we all go our separate ways.”

“Not like I haven’t proposed it,” Chuuya muttered.

The leader — whose name tag read *FIRE LORD* — squinted at them, before exchanging a glance with some of her comrades. Skeptical, she said: “You could have drunk it already.”

“Oh, *trust me*,” Dazai told her. “You would know if my partner here had drunk just enough wine to feed an entire gang of beauties — such as you,” Cospirationally, he leaned down, hiding behind his hand. “Don’t tell him I said it, but Chuuya here is a bit of a lightweight. Let’s just say that sign wouldn’t have gotten destroyed for a tussle.”

“*Mmh*,” The light of an idea shone in the back of FIRE LORD’s eyes. “You don’t say.”

Paying her no mind, Chuuya shrugged him off. “Who the *fuck* are you calling —“

“What, are you going to deny it?”

“I can hold my wine perfectly fine —“

“Let’s not lie to ladies as pleasant as these. Which reminds me,” He made to turn his widest eyes to the crowd in front of them, grinning, “I don’t mean to presume, but would any of you women be amenable to a double —“

Dazai only saw it in the corner of his gaze — too fast to react to; too outside of Chuuya’s rumbling complaints to be stopped. The pink leather of a gloved, enormous palm landed against his temple — and the world went utterly black.

At some vague point, he came alive with his cheek squished on the back of a *Hot Chicken Wings*’ jacket. He only managed to turn enough to find a similarly passed-out Chuuya on a bike close by; the sky had already turned dark.

By the time a whole glass of some sort of liquid was thrown to his face — Dazai’s gaze landed on the inside of some road-trip bar.

“Hirotsu can never know,” he warned, his voice low, watching Chuuya’s eye tic from the stool next to his. The bikers had picked a round table with a hole in the middle — they had placed them in that central space, and were staring them down under the lively sounds of the bar. “He’ll think that babysitting bill of his has some value to itself.”

“Maybe it fucking does,” Chuuya hissed, studying their surroundings. “Can I just blow the place up? There’s too many people, though, I —“

“And kill so many beautiful women?” His tone turned grievous. “And if anyone has the map, it must be them.”

“*Maybe* if someone hadn’t decided to play fucking kite-catch in the highway —“

“Maybe if *you* hadn’t made us sleep under that bridge in Italy for four hours yesterday —“

“Well, maybe if *you* hadn’t told the mafioso who’s gonna guard our money that his wife would be a perfect suicide partner —“

With a dull *thud!*, two chest-tall glasses of a yellowish liquid were placed in front of them.

FIRE LORD crossed her arms, rising from her seat like an unlikely member of the last supper. She pushed the glasses close enough to almost fall into their hole-shaped space; then, she ordered: “Drink.”

They stared.

“What?” Chuuya asked, politely.

“You said you couldn’t have drank all of our wine to hide it,” the leader insisted. “You will prove it. You will drink until you black out, and we will see if it matches up with how much wine we are missing.”

The sisterhood nodded. Dazai felt himself laugh. “That’s actually kind of ingenious! It’s —“ A thought passed by in his mind. He paused. “It’s — *Uhm*. Ma’am. Lady — Lord. Remember what I told you about my partner?”

“Yes. Lightweight.”

“I am *not* a —“

“I’m gonna have to deal with him once this is over,” Dazai begged, joining his hands under his chin. “And he’s going to go crazy after half of this first glass. Find some mercy. Don’t do this to me.”

Chuuya reached up to slap the back of his nape. “Can you fucking stop talking like I’m not in the goddamn —“

FIRE LORD raised one hand, mimicking a slap.

They stilled.

“Not a chance you can give us our map and let us off with some verbal humiliation?” Dazai tried one last time, with his most convincing smile. “I’m sure it would blow off some steam. And it wouldn’t waste your wine.”

“*Drink,*” the table chorused.

“I’m gonna strangle you,” Chuuya let him know.

Gingerly, they reached for the wine.

Dazai’s expectations were defied. It took *less* than a glass.

“And *that’s,*” Chuuya stuttered, engulfed in a *Hot Chicken Wings*’ jacket — so big his gesturing hands were lost somewhere around its elbows, “And *that’s* —” He insisted, nearing his face to that of the woman who had sat him on her lap like a misbehaving child, “*That,* my new, beautiful, *beautiful* friends, is why the goddamn streetlights are the — the *reason,*” He squinted. “The reason. Yes. What are they so tall for? *Narcissism?*” He slammed his hands on the table. “No mind. Who’s up for an arm wrestling duel?”

The women around him cheered.

“You know who else is fucking tall for no fucking reason?” he snapped, in the middle of the contests — no *Tainted* and no mind for the easy defeats from the bikers’ biceps. “That *bastard Dazai.* Fucking beanpole. *Ha!* He thinks he’s the goddamn Tokyo Tower. *Milk?* I’ve seen his fridge! He doesn’t even *have* a fridge, how would he have milk? Store it in the fucking *bandages?*”

“Nightly supermarkets,” one of the women proposed.

He gasped. “That *cheater.*”

The crowd clapped again.

Chuuya bowed with wide motions; one of them — ANGEL DEATH — straightened him up before he could fall. He looked at her upside down, blinking confusedly.

“Oh my God,” he gasped, eyes turning into bowling balls. “*Hirose Fumiko?*”

“She is a formidable specimen,” ANGEL DEATH agreed. “I am flattered.”

Promptly, Chuuya kowtowed in front of her.

“You were not lying,” FIRE LORD said, a bit disappointedly, from where she had sat on the boy’s now free chair. “*Lightweight.*”

“We would have run ourselves over by ten seconds if he had been driving in that state,” Dazai informed, idly sipping on the first glass of wine. Chuuya’s own was *almost* empty, to be fair — and it was way bigger than normal. Watching his eyes gather tears as he pulled ANGEL DEATH’s pants, he made a face. “You’re a mean one, FIRE LORD. As cruel as beautiful. I’m gonna have to drag him to steal a new car by the ankles.”



“Call me Firey,” the woman clicked her glass with his, before downing a good half of it in one go. “I can help you with the vehicle. As an honor bound apology for falsely accusing you. My lady, back at home — she’s like him.”

“My condolences.”

“Love is a stronger chain than hardships.”

Chuuya climbed on the table, disheveled and bright eyed, beating his hands on his chest. “*Get me a microphone!*” he screamed, just loud enough to call the attention of every patron in the bar. “I will show my devotion, *right now!*”

Dazai stared. “So is hatred.”

“*Mackerel,*” A weight of thousands of rocks landed on him — he only barely managed to keep upright as Chuuya blinked unfocused eyes up at him, speechless, attempting to point at the group of women behind him. “*Hirose Fumiko.*”

“Yes, that’s wonderful,” he swore.

“*Mackerel.*”

“Yes.”

“Tell Hirotsu.”

“Tell him that someone ought to kick you out of the Mafia for embarrassing conduct?”

“The —” His eyes seemed to zoom out. “The babysitting bill. Lost my tongue.”

“I think you do have your tongue,” Dazai supplied, helpfully. “Though the world would be given a service if you did lose it.”

“No,” Chuuya insisted. He opened his mouth far too wide; choked. “The fucking biker polly pockets took it from me. That’s why they’re so *evil*. All the evil is stored in the pockets. *All of it*. And I’m *better* with a motorcycle —”

“He’s joking,” he assured, slapping his hand on his mouth so fast, the boy gasped as if he had been shot. Dazai smiled up at Firey. “He’s stupid. Stupider than a rock, really. Don’t mind him.”

“The French are coming,” Chuuya swore, through his drool-lined fingers. “With the polly pockets and with the *fucking streetlights*.”

“No, they came last year. Verlaine?”

“*Silence!*” he cried out — then he tore himself from his grasp; with *Tainted* appearing out of nowhere, he started to float up to the ceiling.

“Was your Boss truly clever to send out two brats to deal with something as delicate as you say?” Firey questioned, watching as Dazai hooked two fingers on the hem of Chuuya’s shirt, holding him like a balloon. “It does seem awfully important.”

“I’ll let you know that we are renowned in our field,” Dazai replied, doing his best to ignore the fake leaves Chuuya was ripping from the ceiling, to throw them to his head like bullets — before they got nullified. “Forgive us if we didn’t quite account for you. Is there any way we can help you find your wine?”

FIRE LORD curled an eyebrow. “You’d do it?”

Dazai shrugged. “It was a nice evening, all things accounted for,” He nodded to his makeshift balloon. “And Slug here is gonna be mad if he learns we haven’t helped out some cool women in trouble. He has this pseudo sister, you see —“

“One word,” Chuuya said, immediately.

“Whatever you say.”

“I appreciate the gesture, kid. I’m afraid there’s not much to be done, though,” Firey shrugged. Her eyes turned cruelly sharp. “I suspect our rival gang might be responsible.”

Chuuya somersaulted clumsily, directing a dramatic *gasp!* to their direction. “Rival gangs — *Mackerel.*”

“Yes.”

“Like — Tanaki’s dramas. *Mackerel.*”

“Like *your* life, you —“ Dazai sighed. “I do have contacts. What’s this gang name?”

“*White Lotus.*”

He froze.

With a surprised yelp, Chuuya landed on the ground, limbs sprawled and glass broken. The jacket covered him entirely, like a sheet on a corpse; one of the bikers reached out to tie his shoelaces.

“Gun collection,” Chuuya mumbled. “The *Lotus* bastards,” He hiccuped. “Mori is so *old.*”

“Well, my lethal Firey,” He smiled. “If you can bring us to them, I *think* we might catch two birds with one stone.”

The *Switzerland Hot Chicken Wings*’ did not have phone numbers; instead, once the group, Dazai, and a hangover Chuuya stood in the middle of a knocked out circle of *White Lotus* men, they offered them two pink jackets with an address. If they carried any resentment for how Chuuya had blabbered the whole night away, and throw up on two of their bikes, they didn’t show it; in fact, they seemed to hug him tighter than Dazai.

“Train with beer, baby chick,” ANGEL DEATH let him know, patting his shoulders.  
“Remember — little glasses. You can become a stronger man. We will meet again, and your liver will be deeper than a woman’s heart.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya muttered, red as a beetle, kissing her knuckles. Dazai had the bad feeling he would pay for it. “I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

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Forced cooperation came in shapes.

Dazai had naively thought a balance had been reached in Yokohama, when they had been making a name for themselves; said *Double Black* name, though, was full of unexplored corners. And they both lacked patience.

Given Mori’s radio silence, they had no real possibility not to try anyway.

January was spent tip-toeing.

The name on their enemies’ lips was fresh, and the snow under their feet always grew red before anyone expected it. The myth of the devils of Yokohama had flown over the borders — no one had believed it quite *enough*, though.

After a massacre, they cornered a bunch of kids from the closest Arcade and bet all their coins on Dazai’s good aim. Once they realized the gun he was holding was real, the bet was quickly called off — and the coins lasted for a good five hours.

*It might be sensible to remind you what your funds are for*, Hirotsu’s update email let them know that same night. They scratched their heads for a bit about *how* he’d known — eventually, they got distracted by the umpteenth *P.S.* note on the *babysitting union*, which they had scribbled fake signatures and drawings of children on a leash on before sending it back to Hirotsu.

“He’ll hang it on his fridge,” Chuuya told him, unconcernedly peeing while Dazai took a bath in some Ukrainian motel bathroom. “He’s kept every single mean drawing we’ve ever done for him during a meeting, did you know?”

“Of course,” Dazai sniffed. “He’s not one to know better.”

That same night, they put a bomb on the wagon of a train, and waited until the boss of the *Red Fly Lillies* was done crying on the wretched carcass of her sister's body, to be told where to store their money.

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February and March were mosquitos bites inside their ears, and the suffocating knowledge of never being alone.

Chuuya lacked shame.

*I hardly mean to offend you*, Kouyou had been far too quick to tut, when her *protégée* had spluttered at her declaration. They had been caught steps from the women's bathrooms at the Headquarters — Chuuya still quite perplexed by Dazai's exasperated insistence that they couldn't simply *walk in* and get more shampoo. *There's a difference between shameleness and a lack of sense of shame. It's rather amusing. Now scram.*

Calling it naivety would have been more than a disservice. The Sheep had shared makeshift beds, and they had shared used-up bandages, and they had shared the snot dripping from their noses.

Nudity bore the same weight as an eccentric — but mostly inconsequential — raincoat.

“— and they swear the data is correct, but I went by the calculations myself, and they mean *jack shit*,” Chuuya grunted, toweling his hair with enough viciousness to rip it off the scalp. “If I find out you've corrupted my datas again, you slimy asshole, I swear to —”

“Chuuya is always accusing me,” Dazai was quick to whine, biting his tongue to squint at the stitches he was currently sewing on his calf.

“*Chuuya* has reason to.”

“Just because I changed your mission info once or twice it hardly means —”

“You sent me,” he cut him off, with feeling, “To *Alaska*. The meeting was on third floor —”

“And Elise *loved* the souvenirs.”

He threw the towel on his face.

It didn't change much — the boy had been naked since he had stepped out of the bathroom. The apartment they had broken in was lived in but *cold* with it; the endless mirrors scattered around the walls were covered in old handprints and dust coagulations.

Dazai, however, *did* have shame. He threw the needle and the spare cotton puffs on the floor; rolled onto his stomach on the bed and only stared at the line of Chuuya's spine from a reflection.

"You hate emails, anyway," he recited, when the widest of the scars between his sharp shoulders grew pink with after-shower heat.

Chuuya had more scar tissue than he had skin — it was so well plastered to his flesh, though, that it hardly seemed more conspicuous than the freckles.

They were rather ugly. They were stuck anyway.

"Yeah, 'cause they're a scam," Chuuya said, skipping over the fallen bullets and reports to find his clothes. "And everyone with a shred of social adjustment knows —"

His rant was a familiar tune. "This is the fourth time a foreign syndicate warns us about a supposed *storm that is coming*," he interrupted, thinking back to the Chinese Boss' last words. "Do you think maybe the *Dragon Head Conflict* was more trouble than it was worth?"

"What," Chuuya snorted, scratching the bullet scar on his chest. Dazai recalled the sound of a parking lot crashing against the ground; the grip of Matsuda's arms around his middle. "The five hundred billion yen? Sure."

Muscles shifted underneath his skin with each step; rolling down his forearms and thighs the same way *things* seemed to do when *Corruption* was activated. His toes dragged on the moquette, red and bruised — Dazai recalled the sound of his clothes having to be torn from his skin, fixed with blood like a persistent bandaid.

*Beauty is hardly a reliable bias*, Mori liked to say. Chuuya's hips were covered in freckles.

"Hey," When he blinked, moving his eyes from the broad expanse of his clavicles on the oval mirror on the shelf — and why wasn't *Dazai* such a good fit for his bones, anyway? Shortness should have followed unsettled growth spurts. Why was he lanky and screeching; like a sheet on a child playing ghost? — Chuuya was bent over him, in a grey shirt that was not their own and boxers that were Dazai's. "I don't care if the torture damaged your brain. I don't care about conspiracies either. You're writing the next report."

"Of course," he lied, easily.

But Chuuya got under the covers of the only bed a beat later — building a pillow line between them; loudly arguing about it — and Dazai forgot to argue his case more convincingly.

Chuuya lacked shame. The only dislikeable things in existence were the ones *he* disliked.

Dazai wasn't allowed to pee while he was showering, *not even when it was urgent, no, you stinky fish* — but he had bought a bear-shaped nail cutter, and at times, he would grab Dazai's hands and do the unrequested. He wore layer upon layer of a suit that was still coming onto its stable form — he used Dazai's discarded tie to get his hair out of his face when he was extracting glass shards from his wounds.

He ate food with Dazai's teeth marks all over the edges — he got mad enough about Dazai using his shampoo to let a bullet graze him during a shootout. Dazai stared at his hands whenever he took off his gloves, and Chuuya never told him to quit it.

He bled all over Dazai's hands, and he was somewhat quiet in the aftermath.

“Las Vegas?” he read, one week and two power-asserting massacres later — face hidden underneath the hood of a gray hoodie that reminded Dazai of a fool with his friend's knife in his side. “Doesn't Ace always say it's too obvious of a place to hide money in?” He lowered his tone, sleep-deprivation seeping in the imitation: *“A den of faux jewelry embellished white patrons with narcissistic delusions of cinematic grandeur.”*

The Calgary Airport's flight information displays shone a horrifyingly blue light on the white marble of the floors.

Behind the windows it was night in the ways of reluctantly getting out of bed for water; the little crowd carried eyebags bluer than their suitcases, listening to the late announcements with murderous intent.

“That's precisely why no one will check,” Dazai replied around a yawn. When Chuuya tried to stick his disgusting energetic bar in it, he kicked his shins. “Simple men think the way Ace does. I had Ango spread a voice that the Demon Prodigy *himself* is taking care of the placement — They will assume I'm craftier than that.”

“Everyone makes mistakes.”

He steadily ignored him. “I even had them whisper about a supposed artificial island I'm having someone build in the Pacific —“

Chuuya's eyebrows touched his hairline. “And *who* is building you this island, again?”

“This one *very* obedient dog in a hat — I'm assuming he could just punch through the seas and drag the earth up or something —“

The endless spit of insults the boy directed his way was drowned out by the announcement of 3 A.M. flights, echoing across the flickering lights of lunch spots and souvenirs. Dazai had bought a little superhero keychain for Odasaku; it currently hung from the shell of his ear, flicked by Chuuya's fingers whenever sleep seemed to take them over.

Some late travelers hurried through the doors, almost slipping on their suitcases — the current of ice-lake air that slithered in raised goosebumps on every inch on his skin, awakening a sleeping newborn in nearby seats.

“I miss Yokohama,” Chuuya huffed, as if the temperatures would have been any better. He glanced nastily at the doors; but he still kicked an abandoned piece of trash, watching it glow red as it closed them by itself. “At least the cold makes *sense*, there.”

“That’s stupid,” Dazai replied, honestly. It was a gleeful pastime — saying the obvious. It made Chuuya’s lips tremble with *something*, and it was always more amusing than his own skull.

He huddled inside his coat, plastering his chest against Chuuya’s back. The boy did his best to shrug him off, dragging him around the mostly empty hall like a makeshift overcoat — Dazai tied his whipping sleeves around his struggling body, knotting it tight.

“You’re stickier than an eleven years old’s snot,” Chuuya grunted. “If you’re putting itching dust in my clothes again —“

He whined. “We’re about to get stuck on an economic flight for almost five hours. Would you mind briefly experiencing the wonders of positive assumptions?”

“Would you mind not putting yourself and the word *positive* in the same context?”

“Would you mind not —“

The newborn tore his lungs out crying.

Technically, the Port Mafia had an endless number of traveling resources on the palm of its bloodied hands — staff working at every airport in Yokohama; flying companies held underneath their thumb; Embassy-like quantities of private jets collections to assure Kouyou’s delicate kimonos would never touch the old fabric of plane seats.

Private jets had been wiped off their tools the moment Dazai had filed Chuuya’s information as *emotional support dog* and their resulting brawl had blown up the jet itself.

Chuuya *humpf*-ed. The call for their flight came through the intercom. Dazai wiped the last of the sneezing powder on his waistcoat, and then pulled the boy towards the check-in.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll teach you how to cheat at poker. You’re not embarrassing me in the land of free debt.”

Underneath lilac and blue chandeliers in a Casino of Las Vegas, Chuuya pulled an offensive amount of *fiches* close — a *perfect match* to the ones Dazai had won from eye-ticking old men in suits. The wink sent in his direction was sharper than a blade; the lights bouncing off the dangling chain slashed his face in two.

“You came too late,” he let him know, in the tone that spelled the Flags’ names out.

It was Dazai’s turn to *humpf*, smile stuck to his face like carvings on a stone statue.

Their target was dancing absently upon the closest table — according to schedule, she would keep doing so for the next five hours. He blinked at the mess of cards on the table — then he

gathered a deck and stuck some *fiches* down his shirt, before grabbing Chuuya's harness and raising his gun to shoot the dancer three times square.

"The bite to the curb will have to wait," he commented, under Chuuya's groan and the shrieks arising on the blood-splattered faces around them. "We have to settle this score immediately."

The police started a search party that lasted the entire night. Dazai and Chuuya stole a radio from one of the Casino guards, and used it to offer the other policemen directions for sightings of themselves in their most high-pitched tone. They hid inside an old box underneath a rust-covered bridge, and played poker until Dazai's *almost* consecutive wins got him accused of cheating; and until the *whoever wins this wins everything* round swayed in Chuuya's favor — which he threw all the *fiches* inside a nearby mermaid-shaped fountain for.

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Lately, Chuuya was quiet.

Not in the way he had been under Dante's spell; not in the way *Dazai* was sometimes called, either. It was its own kind of soundlessness; as loud mouthed as before, but lined in something rusted and too *knowing* — to afford the blind cockiness he'd worn like a crown in his youth.

Perhaps it was grief. The Sheep; the Flags; his squad; the Orphanage; the collateral damage of the thing in his veins. Perhaps it was Arahabaki, and the way Chuuya scratched him off himself when he got distracted.

Perhaps it was being seventeen years old, and Tanaki's sighs had had a point.

"Show it to me again," Chuuya ordered, studying his cuffed hands intently. The lights of the diner were a weight on their impatient bones; their contact was late. Dazai considered killing him, just for that.

"It's terribly easy," he insisted.

"It's not *easy*, you're just *weird*."

"*Or*, you're stupid."

"I'll get it. Just one more time."



“Sure.” His hairpin moved seamlessly inside the lock; with a snap of his fingers, the handcuffs fell on the table. Chuuya’s frown grew deeper and deeper. “Dear, there really is *nothing* up there, ah?”

They started a fight. It was a lucky deal; as he had expected, their contact had meant to betray them from the first moment.

The seemingly innocent crowd jumped to its feet right as they did, misunderstanding the violence splattered across their bodies; in a mess of limbs and the pulse of Chuuya’s Ability, the dam was rebuilt. Then they sat under flickering lights and blood pooling from the ceiling until sunrise, muttering about the handcuffs.

Dazai trapped Chuuya’s ankle between his own; he let him make fun of his sugary coffee. He ate with a split lip.

Three days later, Dazai stepped on a mine.

“I am truly glad your amusement demands so little to be satisfied,” he made sure to say, teeth gritted and body incredibly still, as he watched the boy roll on his back from laughter inside the river. The Korean border was quiet at dawn; the sound of his giggles was probably going to start a war. “No wonder that hat is stuck to your head. It must be eating your brain like a leech.”

“This is *hilarious*, shut the fuck up,” Chuuya gasped, soaked from his fall. “Mister, *I have memorized the mine map, don’t even worry about it* —“

“Yes,” Dazai snapped, “I did. This is a clear suicide attempt. I knew what I was doing.”

“Oh, *did you?*”

“Yes.”

“Alright,” he encouraged, sitting back on his heels. He motioned. “Go on.”

He set his jaw. “Mori will get mad if I blow you up too.”

The crimson light of his Ability shone on the boy’s frame. “You won’t.”

“I’m *not* dying with you, I keep telling you. This flirtation of yours won’t work. You’re even more pathetic than a dog. Give it up.”

Chuuya climbed to his feet, brushing dust that wasn’t there off his pants. “Alright, then,” He made to step away from the river.

“I have *simply* —“ Dazai called, too quickly. When the boy turned, eyebrow curled, he stood as straight as possible, glancing uncaringly at the sky. “— *decided* death by mine won’t be painless.”

“Oh, have you?”

“Do you even know how to unlock a —“

“Ah,” Chuuya smiled brilliantly at him. His head pounded; Dazai suddenly realized he had never been more irritated in his life. Reaching with his hands, stopped by his necessary stillness, he watched his hands flex with a need to grab his skull and *rattle*. ““Guess we’ll find out, yes?”

Between unreleased and yet overly shown tension and their endless strings of victories — *one hundred percent rate of success*, the reports swore; *never seen before* — April exploded in their faces — not unlike the weapon factory in rural Portugal they were tasked with destroying. It left Dazai with severely burned hands no amount of creams would save from scarring.

“I can change them,” Chuuya offered, that night, seated on the ground of their lock-picked apartment with the silver flask Hirotsu had gifted him. He wasn’t quite framed by the open door of the bathroom Dazai had stuck himself in; only its yellowish light illuminated him. “If you want.”

Dazai, naked but for his bandages, dangled his head from the edge of the empty bathtub. He studied the choker-less neck of his observer, and the slightly paler line it left around his throat.

His hands pulsed with every stream of smoke from the cigarette he’d started just to mock the wounds. The bandages were wet. They were suffocating and unkept. They were all he had.

*Odasaku*, he thought. He had to have seen under the bandages when he’d patched him up.

He had to have had questions. He hadn’t asked them; if Dazai could have a say on it, he never would. He didn’t fear judgement; he didn’t even quite *care* — caring was hardly useful and easily manipulated. Childish. He didn’t want to, still — *because*.

Dazai knew he called for him, sometimes. Chuuya had told him. Ango too, sometimes. *Can you give me a lift? Can you buy me another glass? Can you give me an answer that won’t bleed me dry?*

“Not yet,” he said.

The boy hummed.

“Tell me,” Chuuya would say, other times.

“Tried to hang myself while you were out,” Dazai would reply, throwing a ball to the ceiling and catching it as it fell — who cared if it was a prison or a hotel room, as long as it was *unnerving*. “Thought about overdosing, but it seemed like too much work. Tried to drown myself in the bathtub, four days ago. Ate that one traditional poison from this area. Stuck my head out on an Amusement Park ride, but nothing cut it off.”

Chuuya would hum.

Perhaps, he thought it made him appear particularly indifferent to those grim lists of his. Chuuya never looked concerned; just angry.

He was always getting angry, and never doing anything about it — and Dazai was always dying, and never dead.

“It’s a double mission for a reason,” Chuuya told him, one afternoon, in Greece, after coaxing him out of a window seal with one *yeah, hope you do it* and two threats to call Mori; and a *face*, a certain face — one that made Dazai mourn the chance to annoy him that killing himself right *then* would have taken from him. “You can’t die on me.”

“I don’t think being partners gives you any right to interfere with my life mission,” Dazai replied, offended. The doctor’s latest security camera: a dog’s bleeding heart.

He added: “Don’t let them think you don’t want me dead.”

“They can think what they want,” Chuuya replied, his thumbs digging into a cut a sharp edge had left on his jaw. He wanted to ask him how he *knew*; that Dazai hated pain and had nothing quite similar — that he would scrub at it all night, like an urge he wasn’t allowed to act on. Then he thought of his gloved nails down his scarred arms, and — “You and I know.”

“Do we?”

“I’m not a river or a rope,” he replied. “And there are just enough *Smash Smash!* rounds I can win to grant me your death.”

He snorted; choked on something too rusty to be blood and too sincere to be his tongue — and that night he slept inside the bathtub, and Chuuya pretended not to lay right where the bathroom could be seen from the bed. “I’d rather die.”

“You will. Tell me.”

He did.

Enemies barely managed to hurt them; it made for boring days of a beautiful season, so they took the matter on their own hands. Dazai wasted lives; Chuuya wasted his own. Dazai spat and prodded and pulled and *touched* and ruined the canva he had not allowed himself to paint, and Chuuya took it all in stride and doubled it with the sharpness of his brother’s eyes. Double, double, *double* —

“I’m your partner and you’re my dog for life,” Dazai told him, the next time they broke into a fight during a mission. “Deal with it.”

Not the last of it; maybe never so — but a rift all the same. *I can hate the shape of myself for fitting with yours*, one of Ango’s books had said, *but my wounds cannot change it*. Sometimes, when the work was done, he would sit in front of the TV and ask, *what’s your least favorite movie?*

A crown of black spread around Chuuya’s golden eye. He wanted to touch the retina itself; see if Arahabaki would flinch. *You know me*. “You deal with it first.”

They got stuck in Baltimore with high school kids who were probably innocent, and when their youth sagged his throat to the point of vomit, he leaned his cheek on Chuuya's back as he emptied out his poison in the toilet.

*Haven't you built a tolerance yet?*, he never asked him. *Not enough*, he would have answered.

The days were long. They skipped all lessons that would not gain them questions, though Chuuya always skipped less — though Chuuya would never admit the puzzled *carefulness* with which he studied every inch of a classroom.

Not something he wanted; not something he understood; not an itch he would leave alone.

"I don't get it," he would say, sometimes, when they sneaked on the roof and stole lunch off each others' trays. Hirotsu had sent them a letter through the encrypted line — congratulated them on a recent massacre near Boston.

"Unsurprising," Dazai would reply. "What don't you get?"

Chuuya never answered.

It was fine. It was pointless and never ending — he enjoyed causing troubles with the school server, and Chuuya enjoyed playing dodgeball. He would have accused him of using his Ability to win, if the arms he showed off — with that horrifying, vomit-colored sleeveless gym shirt the school forced them to wear — hadn't put him to the ground one too many times.

Whenever Dazai went down — when the teacher did not allow the *two-against-all* match they kept sending kids to the Infirmary through — Chuuya would lean over him, all bony knees and gloved hands no one dared to question.

"Who knows," he'd muse, "Perhaps that hit will fix your head."

It never did.

"You need to do my Physics homework," Dazai told him, dim in the silence of the bathroom. His toes brushed the opposite wall; he leaned his weight on Chuuya's never-fragile frame — unfocused on the curses between his spit. "And I need to charm Charlotte Hastings into letting us in that party."

"Those," Chuuya coughed, between spits, "Are *widely* different missions."

"You're the smart one."

"You're *literally* the smart one."

"No," Unprompted, Dazai sat up. He rammed his fist so viciously against the boy's back, all the poison came out in one go, shaking his frame with painful relief. Dazai pulled his hair back; knotted them, just to make it all but an act of kindness. "I'm the strong one."

What did it matter, outside of Yokohama? They existed to keep that city safe — on the other side of the border, they only existed to scourge. Decimate. Throw up in the toilet and wear dirty bandages.

*Dear Odasaku*, he wrote, in his next email. *Do not tell anyone. I find myself wishing to go home.*

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The tattoo on his nape only hurt when Dazai forgot about it.

Somewhere in an underground ship cell on its way to Novorossiysk, as some brute's punch attempted to fracture his jaw — the sweat pooling down his skin refreshed his memory.

Mori hadn't done more than shrug when they'd reported the penalties of their lost bet. *Do not ridicule yourselves*, he'd told them, handing a purely *fuming* Chuuya some stolen tattooing set. But that was a given he had been made to ignore, so he'd dragged unprepared hands to his nape on the unmade bed of his shipping container.

*It would have been funnier*, he considered, *if that scaredy cat of his partner hadn't secretly taken lessons for it.*

It had taken the whole day. Dazai had moved as much as he could, deaf to his makeshift tattoo artist's snarls and pinches. The needles had hardly even tickled; the smell of dying flesh might as well have been part of his nostrils.

"Seriously," Chuuya had barked, "Do you want to be stuck with this shit looking *good* or not?"

There was something to *obsess* over — Chuuya's genuine attempts at something *decent*, and the way he had to tuck his hair behind his ears to squint at the reference of Kouyou's own tattoo. He would push the tattooing gun harder with each remark Dazai offered; he hadn't asked to remove the bandages on his nape, apart from moving them aside.

*Want a picture or something?*, Chuuya had asked, throwing his gloves away.

An assortment of sincerity and hostility drowned whatever existed between them with persistence. *No*, he'd told him. He hadn't thanked him — hadn't dared to put into words how his skin had no strength to form goosebumps when it thought about strangers' hands doing that work. *Want a tattoo?*

The boy had soundly refused.

By the end of the night, as he slept, Chuuya had been gifted the small outline of a dog, on his underfoot. As far as Dazai knew, he hadn't noticed yet.

*"Leave them to starve,"* the man smirked, in a breathy Russian, as Dazai heaved from the punch to the jaw. Both he and his companion wore bright blue uniforms; it matched the decorations on the ship. *"'Heard it makes the bitches more useful."*

Chained against his back and dripping blood on Dazai's shoulder, Chuuya offered the only Russian words he'd picked up: *"Go down on your rotten grandmother."*

It gained him a broken nose — hit with enough force to crack *both* the wooden seats they'd been tied on — before the two men decided to slam the cell bars close and leave.

"They took my phone," Dazai whined, once their harsh breathings had subdued. The cell was mostly dark; the insistent swaying of the ship was nauseating. *"Chuu The Slug* better be okay."

"If you don't stop it with that name," Chuuya warned, slightly nasal, knocking his skull against his own.

*"I heard* you call your phone charm *shitty dead fish*. That's a name."

"That's an affirmation!"

"All of this," Dazai sighed. "All this for some senator's adventurous wife."

Five hundred billion yen was — to put it kindly — an aggravating sum. Those months had been a seamless, *dirty* assortment of solutions: stealing secure bases across the globe to store part of the fortune; destroying organizations who were talking about part of the fortune too *hungrily* — and making favors to senators to justify their borderline *mental* bank movements.

Senator Masayoshi was only one corrupt man in a crowd of corrupted men. Their payment was the *White Wolves* — the organization he had once funded, before betrayal had come in the shape of a scam and his wife's relationship with one of the commanders.

"He just wants them annihilated," Chuuya had concluded, after browsing through the report. "He'd enjoy the commander's dick on a silver plate, for his wife."

The chances they would follow the suggested plans were slim. But Mori had gone through such trouble after the *Special Division* had polished the magnifying glass they kept pointing at them — a refusal to write non-coded documents; the presence of the *Mori Corporations* logo on *everything* they reported — that Chuuya *never* ignored them completely.

Sometimes, when his unmatching eyes were fixed on some target he could not see, Dazai suspected some kind of guilt must abide him.

The knowledge that the lack of an Ability Permit was partially to blame on him — maybe the chirps of *Vice-Executive Nakahara* he sometimes allowed to straighten his back. Except insecurity had no room to devour in such a tiny body.

“So,” Chuuya concluded, once the steps had faded in the distance. “*Flowers of Buffoonery?*”

“Obviously. Go.”

“What? Why *me?*”

“Because I have weak knee joints,” Dazai noted. “And because you’re vertically challenged. I don’t have time to go over this with you again.”

“I did it last time. We agreed to switch.”

“*Promise thirty-four* does *not* include —“

“Fuck you,” Chuuya slammed the seat backwards, rattling their handcuffed hands. The metal had stuck them to the back of the chairs, too close for his Ability to work. It was rarely an ideal situation — a *technically* powerless Chuuya usually meant a pissed off Chuuya; who would do his very best to remind the world *why* he was known as the *best martial artist in the Port Mafia* before any *god* and *gravity user* title. “You deleted my last save on *Dragon Files*. You owe me.”

Dazai whined.

Lower body strength was more of the other boy’s business, considering his adeptness to kicks; nonetheless, he planted himself sturdier against the seat and *jumped*.

It took some tries for his shoes to land on the chair. An assortment of curses and sharp bones welcomed his backwards climb, as he turned his wrists inside the pinned cuffs to settle his soles on Chuuya’s chair, next to his knees. The binds pulled painfully at his beaten up shoulders, as he dropped his weight on the boy’s thighs.

“You need to cut back on the canned crab,” Chuuya grunted.

“Maybe it’s for best that we did it this way,” Dazai bared his teeth and leaned down, searching for the hidden pin in the buckle of his choker. “Whatever bones those brutes didn’t manage to break, you would have snapped them with that fat backside of yours.”

His head knocked against his own, hard. The dim lights showed him a bleeding nose; if *Tainted* could have worked, the *irritation* in his gaze would have forced it to. “I’ve seen *trucks* of dog shit weigh less than you.”

“Getting friendly with your family?”

“Trying to fatten up to fit your ego? *Hey* — Don’t *fucking bite me*, you fucking *animal* —“

Eventually, he spit the needle in his hands, humming as he worked on the locks of both their handcuffs — trapped between the clammy breath on the bandages left on his neck and the

lulling motions of the ship.

Metal hit the ground. “Fuckin’ *hell*, my back,” Chuuya scoffed, in that sharply *promising* way of his, all violent oaths.

He pressed his forehead against Dazai’s own, quicker than a heartbeat and warmer than summer; perhaps the hysteria of the seventeen hours they’d spent there. Dazai saw nothing but the moon, dancing between golden craters and blue shades. “Good enough, partner. Now get your ass *off*.”

The ship corridors were vast and extremely luxurious; they didn’t meet any passengers, but had to get creative when they spotted guards near the doors to the deck.

Chuuya knocked out the third they met; he passed the woman’s guns to him, and Dazai made sure to target the hidden cameras. The moment the glass exploded, a blinding red light appeared from all around them.

Alarms started to blare.

“Genius planning,” Chuuya screamed, over the chaos.

“Thank you!” Dazai replied.

It took no time for a crowd of guards to show up at both ends of the corridor. Without a word, they threw themselves against the bullets.

Dying was amongst the hardest things Dazai had ever attempted. Not a single projectile touched him, as he made his way towards the ranks with both guns flaring, eyes settled on the metal door at the end of the corridor.

The deck was mostly empty, illuminated by a silvery moonlight. The sounds of Chuuya’s massacre echoed behind him as he shot a portion of the pavement crossed by a *x* — the unsubtle, still useful indication of a Russian man the Port Mafia had bought with less money than he could have asked for.

One of the guards managed to climb out of the stairs, dripping blood. “*Vy ne mozhete byt'* — “ the *White Wolf* tried to say, hands lighting up in the unmistakable shade of an Ability — Dazai let the shards of the lounging wooden chair fly to his face, and rolled underneath them to stick the knife in his hands into his chest — deep enough for his naked hands to touch his viscera.

He died nullified. Dazai ripped one of his eyeballs off, for good measure — and used it to open the facial recognition lock of the security safe hidden in the *fake-hole* under the floor.

“Japanese translation too, really?” he muttered, studying the documents inside the little case. “It’s like he *wanted* us to steal them.”

The ship began to sink the moment the first explosion bloomed from the ground floor.



Like the clockwork of a particularly fed up machinery, explosions began to go off as he hid the last of the important dossiers under his shirt.

“Impatient dog,” he muttered, as he walked through the screaming passengers running to the deck; the corpses being devoured by the smoke appearing from the stairs. Another explosion went off; Dazai landed some stone-throws away.

The hit to the head pissed him off more than anything else — not nearly vicious enough to kill him; not nearly *nice* enough not to drool blood down his overheated face. A bird song came from the end of the hallway, more of a scream than a whistle —

*A sparrow*, he thought, which meant —

Distracted as he was with stomping his boot in running *White Wolves’* chests, Chuuya did not feel the grasp of Dazai’s hands on the back of his chest harness — dragging him up the stairs on a ten seconds count. “Don’t you *dare* —“ he didn’t have time to say, before Dazai was clicking the remote he had carefully hidden in his shoe, and throwing the two of them over the deck railing.

The breaking surface of the freezing ocean was the last thing Dazai felt; Chuuya’s string of curses reached his ears even through the waves, as the boat exploded in a flower shaped disaster.

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*This isn’t the White Wolves’ main base*, Dazai had explained, exploring the differences between Russian Arcades and Yokohama ones. *The Senator just wanted the ship destroyed. Or, well — what was inside it.*

The games still sculpted the professional edges of Chuuya’s shoulders into something more easily workable with — a kind of street even his driving-inept self would easily judge unbumped. And scamming kids was as easy there as it was everywhere else in the world; when a pair got aggressive about his bandages, Dazai removed the first circle, showing off the words he’d scribbled on his wrist with a marker.

*When did you have time to stalk the little fuckers?*, Chuuya had asked, cleaning the address off his wrist with saliva. *Before or after you found dirt on Masayoshi?”*

*What makes you think I have dirt on him?*

*The several calls from Mori that you keep declining in the middle of the night.*

Russia had been nice, he considered, as he made his way through the Hospital. Smoke-smell thick hallways and cockroaches in the shower; clean streets and the constant electric hum that seemed to sag the air. Most of all, he'd liked the *silence*; no other place he'd visited had managed to triumph in the art of being grievously quiet among the thousands of people they pickpocketed for fun and killed for a job — or the opposite. He didn't know.

*[Russia wouldn't, to their surprise, give him pneumonia. A wrecked cabin in Canada would.*

*It would slow down their tracking mission of several days — most of which he'd spend wrapped in every blanket a particularly peeved, perpetually muttering Chuuya would steal from adventurous explorers after knocking them out, sinking into steaming baths all the way to his nose, no matter how violently red and sensitive his skin would be after, digesting more fluids than he ever wanted to see again —*

*(And the antibiotics. He had a vague memory of those showdowns; brawling across the wooden floor and pulling hair and biting hands as Chuuya attempted to get a spoon stuck down his throat, and spitting the disgraceful medicine right in the other boy's face — pretending Mori hadn't forced him through more bitter, more disgusting solutions. The damn antibiotics.)*

*— and relearning the redhead's heartbeat, head always in his lap but never closer; lulled by Chuuya's mumbled insults and his tendency to wrap his arms around his head and strangle the stupid out of him.*

*He'd gotten pneumonia once already, when he was much younger. It had felt distinctively colder — he mused, sometimes].*

All of it had been nice, and utterly boring, and devastatingly repetitive — like the scars on Chuuya's face that mixed with the freckles and made him lose count every time.

"Finally," the man at the entrance desk huffed, juggling thick dossiers. "It's been *three days*, sir. Your cousin has started several fights with the staff, tried to escape the premises *seven times*, and kicked two holes on the wall of his room. We had to move him! Never saw a victim of a sinking ship so *pissed off*. With all due respect, we are very *willing* to sedate him again."

"That's just how he is," Dazai sighed.

Blame overflowed on his pale features. "You could have come *sooner*."

He *could* have — had he not abandoned Chuuya's passed out body to the shore after they had swam through half the bay. "I've been busy!"

His skeptical expression spoke more than any word he did not say; he sent him on his way, and Dazai made sure to snatch some pills off the first passing trail he bumped against. He detoured; he smiled at doctors and nurses who found him where they shouldn't — he stole morphine from the IVs of some rooms he hid in.

The promises of sedation had already come to fruition: when he kicked the door of the two-bed room open, Chuuya's battered body was asleep — drool on his pillow and a *clearly* annoyed expression painted on his features.

“Look at you, lazing around,” he lamented, abandoning his coat on the guest seat.

He wriggled in the small space between the boy's side and the metal railing of the bed, pulling and knitting the IVs stuck in his sun-kissed skin — muttering as he moved his head and his cascade of hair out of his face.

“Kouyou keeps calling your stupid phone,” he informed. “I only answered once, and told her you've finally fallen to your demise. For some reason, the calls only increased after that.”

Dozing-off mumbles came from the other side of the curtain, separating the two beds; Dazai studied the rapid climb of the moon outside the fogged up window, as the sky painted that snowy room in shades of copper. He pushed his head forward, the way Kazuko used to do to gain the attention of his bite-stricken palm — and planted his ear where Chuuya's heartbeat would echo.

Odasaku had once said, distractedly — *flares are beautiful because they are occasional*.

The face Ango made when he said something outrageous; Hirotsu's sighs; Odasaku's blank-faced warmth, his refusal to judge, his refusal to kneel, his refusal to let him pay for his drink at Bar Lupin. Blood, sometimes. Stitches, others. Bandages. Elise's ephemeral finger pinning flower hairpins to his head — just far away enough from Mori that their resemblance was easy to miss.

*Perhaps Odasaku would understand*, he considered.

*Chuuya can be bothered in every inch of the globe*, he reminded himself. Perhaps it was easier in the corners where few knew of his light — where there were no subordinates with glinting eyes and offering lighters; men who would have plastered their forehead on the scorching hot concrete to be kicked by his dog shoes.

Perhaps it was easier in dirty motels where he had no choice but to lay his hyperactive eyes on Dazai's coming-undone lines — for, willing or unwilling, he was the only thing alive for miles.

“I think these months of travel might be Mori's stupidest decision yet,” he informed the sleeping body underneath him, tapping his chest.

Touch bothered him the most, he knew.

Dazai cheated at video games; switched the wine in his beloved bottles with vinegar; stole all the blankets when fate or silence pushed them on the same mattress; snapped the brakes of every car he drove; scribbled on his face and bought dog whistles; stuck him in Hospitals even though he *hated them* with passions; broke out in *want me to tell you a story?* that never depended on his answer; told him nothing of what he could figure out; kept the *Chuuya Is A*

*Sore Loser* newsletter to life — and he molded his bones until they were small enough to live in the forgotten slots of his thousands shut doors, and he did it because Chuuya *hated it*.

*Seventeen is a big number*, Ango had told him. *Seventeen was like every other year*, to me, Odasaku had replied. Chuuya's heart spiked up and down, all wrong. He couldn't remember the last time he'd managed to sleep.

*Dear Odasaku*, he would write. *What's the point?*

He felt him wake up in his ear.

Fingers found his hair — chasms spread through his spine, pulling old scars apart; widening with every scratch of nails on the sensitive skin underneath. Sometimes, Dazai was a cat under the sunlight; sometimes he was a skeleton that could not remember the sticky grip of viscera. Sometimes he was unreal, transparent and see-through even to ghosts. He pushed his nose in the itchy fabric of the hospital gown and breathed *in*.

"I'm gonna deep fry your face like fucking fish," Chuuya announced, hoarse. Sedatives made him wobbly; if Dazai was lucky, he wouldn't remember a thing.

"Senator Masayoshi doesn't have a wife," he replied, extracting the dossiers and throwing them on the ribs he knew the boy had cracked. His free hand skimmed through the papers; he wondered if he'd have to beg for the remaining fingers to stay where they were. *I'm training him*, he would say, if asked. "He has a purchase from the sex trafficking market he tried to scam the *White Wolves* with."

"They keep him on a leash with the information they could release to the Japanese Government, and drain him of his money," he continued. "That's why he asked us to destroy that base. He wanted any and all upper hands to be destroyed, and he wanted the *White Wolves* to come after us instead — hoping his two bothers would destroy each other."

"But their main base is still active," Chuuya concluded. "So we need to get rid of it, now. And then we can be the ones with the upper hand on him."

"It's always better for the pawns to owe us a favor, than otherwise," he shrugged. "We'll get rid of them as soon as you stop lazing around."

The fingers tightened; *pulled*. "They kept *stuffing me with morphine*, motherfucker. Where the fuck where you?"

"Derailing a train," Dazai responded.

"*Mmh*. To make Masayoshi end up in the Hospital, I assume."

"Obviously."

"So that he'd lead us to his safe house, to gather *all* the existing proof we could easily sell to the Government."

He stuck one finger in an old hole of the gown, on the pelvis. He traced rising goosebumps; wrote miniature *kanjis* of insults that got his ear pulled. He blew a raspberry in Chuuya's side and got kicked between the legs for it. He was warm now, and it made his head spin. Warmer than the sun, than the season — than he could stand.

*It was easier*, he thought. Easier where no one would see what he'd been *prodigious* enough to secure.

"Precisely. You see, I was too busy to bring you flowers. I'll do it next time. Which one do you hate the most?"

"*Mmh*," Again. "You do know he's in the bed behind the curtain, right?"

His pause didn't go unnoticed.

"Of course," Dazai said, pointlessly — Arahaki knew his heart better than he did, and he would feel the lie. "That's why you fought the nurses to switch rooms, then."

"*Obviously*," Chuuya mocked. Raising his voice, he called: "Senator, good evening. I do hope everything is clear?"

It took an infinite time for an answer to appear.

Stuttering, the man behind the curtain gulped: "All clear."

That night, in the small television of the diner they dragged blood-soaked bodies at, the News offered worrying information: a victim of the late ship accident had escaped the Hospital. He had been caught sneaking out of the window with another silhouette, and he was yet to be identified or found. Authorities urged the local populations to communicate any information regarding the missing patient.

*[As it went for Double Black, it would become a bedtime story, too. Don't sneak out, the nurses would tell the younger patients, or the Red Ghost will pull you out of the window, and you shall never be found again].*

"Camellias, by the way," Chuuya said, between bites of a hamburger Dazai could see him force himself to devour until the end. Kouyou's teachings, perhaps; the effort to teach *waste* to someone who had starved.

"What about them?"

"The flower I hate the most," He licked sauce off his fingertips; behind the counter, a waitress kept moving her eyes from the pictures on News to their table. His fingers closed around his gun; *same old, same old*. "You're allergic to it, aren't you? Buy a ton. Bet they'd look cool on your grave."

His smile tore his face in two. *In what world am I buried where you're not?* "Bet."

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Through all but words, Dazai learned this: Arahabaki laid dormant in all mirrors.

Perhaps *reflective surfaces* would have been a better definition. *Eyes*, even, because Chuuya had a tendency to speak meeting those. Catching the fleeting difference between a *zoned out Chuuya* and a Chuuya who was *seeing* something was the same as chasing fireflies.

Not quite what Mori's orders demanded of Dazai, either.

"He's not here, you know."

Someone else wouldn't have felt his flinch; Dazai saw it through the rear view mirror both of their eyes had settled on — from the blood-sticky backseats of some hotwired car; the heating turned all the way on. More than that, he felt it shake his legs — where the boy's half-concussed skull laid, quiet and supposedly passed out.

He pulled on the soaked strands of his hair — sweat and blood and liquified viscera, and all that the Ability Users group in that old road in Singapore had had to offer to a gloomy deity with a sharing problem.

*(Arahabaki was a neighbor, Dazai would sometimes muse — only because no one but Mori would ever ask, and everyone but Mori would be a better person to tell. His picket fence was splintered, and he never waved when their gazes met from the windows. On a stormy night, he had rained on his porch, and Dazai had dried it off.*

*He was never quite forgiven for it.*

*But Arahabaki was the late owner of a sold mansion, and he had nothing left to do but turn it into a haunted playground. The new neighbors were far kinder. The ghosts would kill them, one of these days, and Dazai would clean the porch.*

*The ghosts wouldn't forgive. They'd be gone anyway).*

"We have to cut off some strands," he told him, then, with great joy. "Some knots won't leave."

"So you tried," Chuuya observed — always one for the unsaid.

His voice was nails on chalk. His eyes were stuck on the rear view mirror. Dazai — always one for the unseen — tried to see something more than the valleys of bleeding cuts; of the rotten-golden bruises and the violet stigma of ruined flesh.

*Corruption* was a last resort.

*It needed to be*, he thought, academically — and told a skeptical Chuuya whenever the scratches on his skin grew impatient and his voice sounded too distorted over the phone. Chuuya would have dragged himself by the elbows before admitting to a wound; Arahabaki would have let him. *What good is power for, if shattered?*

He wondered, sometimes, if Arahabaki's unawareness was *aware enough* to know; to feel the unrelenting desert wind drying the walls of Dazai's mouth, the pressure of eye bags when his eye escaped from his control and *widened* — and *settled* and *refused* to let go of the brightest thing in existence.

The two of them were rats in a maze, and hatred amounted to nothing at all, and they both had much to waste.

“He's not there, you know,” he informed him.

*(Sometimes, when it was quiet and it smelled of cigarettes, he saw Chuuya trace his scars. Too reverential for a vessel born to destroy himself in the name of manifested rage; too gentle for the way he talked about Arahabaki. But Chuuya cared for all strays, and Dazai was there, if anywhere — with the scabs of his scars, loathed and needed, and loathed some more, and in his skin).*

*You fool*, he recalled, *I'm not letting you fall*.

“I know he's not.” Quiet; as enraged as ever. Then, very quietly, he began to hum.

It was the usual tune — it had taken Dazai some time to recognize it, what with his grumbling and his canine growling. It couldn't be called a song — it barely lasted more than five seconds. But he had a tendency to hum it before he slept, and the few seconds before he started bleeding out.

“Want a violin to go with that too?”

No answer.

Chuuya turned in the little space he was allowed. His skin creaked wetly against the leather of the seats, dried blood and the metal spikes of his boots leaving a mark. *Corruption* rarely left him in a big enough piece not to have him dragged to the nearest place that might have a needle and some thread; whenever it happened, Dazai lingered.

*Sick*, he considered, running his forefinger down the bridge of his half-shattered nose. The boy batted his hand away, weakly; turned to lay on his side, that same nose stubbornly sunk in the creases of Dazai's ruined shirt, his eyes far from whatever he could not see. His body was spasming, still — seizures had left him viciously breathless.

*Sick and dishonest*, Elise sing-sang. *Find something more human to be fascinated by*.

But Chuuya spent too much time passed out, and Dazai spent too much time waiting for him to wake up.

“Here’s the story,” he would say, leg numb and police cars sweeping past them; Chuuya’s feet in a puddle, to wet his socks. “You hate the dog, and the dog keeps bumping against your legs, under the table.”

“He’s the neighbor’s dog, though; everyone loves him and feeds him. You can’t cast him away. The ghosts will get mad. They always did get mad when their garden was trimmed slightly differently from the other ones. Must have thought it was important,” he would hum. “So you let the dog bump against your legs, and you let him bite at your old shoes, and when they smile at you from the end of the table, you know the dog hasn’t bitten them *once*. The dog only hates you. Of course, at that point — *You have* to hate the dog.”

“Or not,” Dazai would stick his fingers under his choker, clammy and blood-soaked. Trace the paler circle of skin left underneath; press where there was a heartbeat. “Maybe I got it backwards.”

There were little excuses for Chuuya’s fugitive fingers, brushing against him in the days immediately *after* — tucking hair behind his ear to brush the shelf of it, muttering about a haircut or not saying a word; punching and slapping and fighting and being *mean*, like a child, and afraid, like an adult; pinching him when he got too close on the bed; sinking on his throat to listen to his heartbeat.

Arahabaki’s most hated, he assumed — Dazai had to be.

“That tickles,” Chuuya muttered, face in his pillow. Buenos Aires had come with a slight curiosity for high quality rooms — soaked in more blood than any of the men at the reception would ever appreciate. “I’ll tear you apart.”

“That would be a greatly exaggerated reaction,” he let him know. In the aftermath of *Corruption*, he supposed his approval didn’t mean a thing.

No broken bones, which had been a nice change. The absurd amount of those spiral craters of his — under his skin but not *quite* ; tearing him apart but never for *too long* — had stubbornly refused to be stitched up, though — and the bed was paying the price.

He hoped it hurt. He knew it didn’t. Chuuya carried wounds with grace, and crossed without checking both ways.

The city was nothing but lights behind the wide windows they had forgotten to shut, in their haste to end the trail of blood disappearing through the door frame.

“Then I’ll — tickle *you*,” Chuuya insisted, delirant. He had smashed his own skull against the building Arahabaki had dropped him on, making a hole through several floors. “And *that* will teach your stupid *ass*.”

“Of course it will,” Dazai assured. His fingers worked quickly around the buckle of his choker, nails across leather and the swallowing motions pressed against his knuckles. He removed it and threw it in the trash. “You just need to grow tall enough to reach my ankles, how about that?”



Hands hooked themselves on his waist, right where his shirt had been ripped apart — the messy work of Argentinian busybodies, who had certainly done their best to torture him, between one slip up and another.

*Bad choice*, he had told them, as he waited for familiar steps down the stairs. They never listened, though.

Calling what that grasp did *tickling* would have been too *nice* on the boy's slumped muscles and absent mind; and yet, less than a blink later, Dazai was jumping ten feet away, snorting.

They stared at each other, horrified.

"No," Dazai said, immediately. His lower half was at the edge of the bed; he backed away from the dangerous glint shaking the redhead's body awake. "No. *No*. Hatrack. Listen to — !"

Fingers wrapped around his ankles and pulled him back into the bed. He *shrieked*.

The rest was a blur.

His brain registered frames and neon thoughts; Chuuya tearing apart every stitch he had given him — and if it wasn't his frantic motions, it was the nails Dazai was attempting to *sink* into his skeleton to get him off. They had forgotten the bathroom lights on. His foot crashed against the headboard, and he knew the bruise would last for weeks.

His body was stuck: the dying fits of cackles escaping his throat sent conflicting signals to his emptied out skull. It was overcharging to the point of tears, and every escape and kick and bite he attempted was fruitless, and Chuuya had always, *always* been the strong one.

"*Leave me alone!*" Dazai screeched, curled on himself, pushing the weight off. He was rolling in bloodied sheets and it *sucked*; he — "Bad dog! *Bad dog!*"

"We might just have a new entry to my list of revenge methods," Chuuya replied, fascinated, attempting his very best to choke the life out of him.

His face was vertiginously close, though it was all blurred — though his grin might just have been a hallucination, because Dazai wore more layers than any deity could break through, and laughing was a mere physical reaction, and that apartment was too wide for how close they stood.

But he was the mind, as the voices went; and Chuuya was not. Unsurprising and yet world-shattering — he pressed even closer; stuck their bones to each other until their hearts beat in tandem, as if genuinely convinced Dazai had either; shook the ground with the words brushed against his ear, inconsequential and *everywhere* he could breathe.

"Tell me a number, Mackerel," he said, and he *grinned*, close enough to bite, and Dazai thought, *Mori will burn me alive*, and he thought, inanely, *if he's kind*.

In the windows, when that pointless brawl gave Dazai his own concussion against a bed column and Chuuya a fallen tooth, he thought he saw black wings spurt from the boy's

shoulders — an unfamiliar smile bleed down his chin.

The next day, they fought under a bridge, and slept in different beds again. He took the room with a mirror in the bathroom.

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Dublin was rainy.

It was among his worst days; he couldn't quite recall anything else from their stay. But Dazai didn't have *bad* days, *per se*. The lingering dread was saliva on his chapped lips; it burned and it mended, and some days he was too busy to taste metal. Some days he was too busy, but the world was littered in raindrops and the thick odor of human remnants — and some days he wasn't a corpse enough.

*It was a complicated thing*, he would have written to Odasaku, had he found the right reason to, *being a constant guest. You'll need to leave, at some point, won't you? To stop bothering those who let you in; to walk in the rain, towards —*

*It was a complicated thing.* The house was a body, and there was nowhere to go.

"Snap out of it," Chuuya dared to snarl, at some point, pushing him against the graffitied wall of some alley they were hiding money under.

"Being so tiny certainly can't be a deal for your brain," Dazai replied, automatically.

He could have pushed him away. He could have held his naked skin and killed him.

Conflict raced between his eyes. Loyal little dog; angry never-ending god. Months of forced cooperation had shown him just how *deep* the rotten lines of Dazai's carcass went; Dazai knew, no matter effort, that he didn't quite see the point of pulling him from the edge.

And yet he did, cursing and spitting, soaring through unknown streets at least one night every week, until he found him at the bottom of a river or with a swing's rope wrapped around his neck. Chuuya had shot his palm to get a gun away from his forehead; had stuck his head under the shower until his lungs had accepted to breathe again.

With furious eyes and despising motions; if he didn't want him dead, he still didn't want him alive.

But he stuck. And he followed.

*You can't even grab me*, he wanted to tell him. His saving ways were the most selfish part of him — Dazai knew, in the way of the unspoken between the matching scars on their thumbs, that if Chuuya were to sit in front of another grave, he might never get up. *If I jumped, you'd fall with me. You can't do it.*

*And how funny it would be*, he didn't tell him. Double suicide for Double Black. They would tell bedtime stories about that, too. Bickered in life, bickered in death.

*[“You'd probably find some creepy ass necromancer to make me into a — a fucking dog zombie, or some shit,” Chuuya ranted, as he tore each soaked layer off his shivering body, all but the bandages; as he gulped down pure ire and pretended Dazai's heart hadn't stopped, just for a few breaths. “Or my soul would be so fucking aggravated by your existence that it would get stuck on this damn earth as a ghost. You know that 'unfinished deals' bullshit? No way. I'll kill you myself. You hear me? I'll kill you myself.”*

*Dazai didn't ask. He didn't talk. He'd only heard half of that ode; had been underwater for most of it.*

*My death is your death, he thought. Your death is mine. All Dazai needed was to convince Arahaki to take two at the price of one. Gods tended to be greedy. Vessels tended to be loyal].*

Dublin was rainy.

It had rained when they'd found Kazuko.

He wasn't *sad* about her death, he noted, academically — two fingers on his unhurried heartbeat; on the newly stitched scar down the side of his neck. He thought he ought to be. Odasaku had offered him *condolences*, when he'd told him. *I know you liked her a lot.*

Dazai liked tons of things. He liked his console and the fireflies that sometimes lit up the dumping site. He liked the smoke circles Kouyou had taught him to do with his cigarette.

He liked tons of things. He didn't know how to grieve for them.

*I'll prove my worth to you*, his newest responsibility had chirped, dressed in clean clothes that only burned the *contrast* into his retina. Akutagawa Ryunosuke. Dazai had once sat and watched a car accident he'd planned play out, until the very last piece of brains had landed near his shoes. Dazai had once wanted *permission*. *It's all I can do.*

Was it?

*Kill me*, he'd told Mori.

Dublin was rainy.

He didn't know how long he'd been lying there. His coat was soaked; all of him was, attacked by the rain and the puddles the speeding cars kept submerging him with. Highways

were large in that place. Traffic was benevolent. Dazai couldn't understand how he hadn't been hit yet.

*It hates you*, Mori had explained, once, tapping his nose; like a child — tapping his naked ribs; like a corpse. *Don't you get it? It hates you. It won't let you.*

*Please*. His lips didn't move. *Won't you do it one more time?*, she used to ask him. *Please, please, please.*

It thundered.

On his next blink, red appeared.

“Come on,” Chuuya said, dripping, vacant. “You’re no cat. This death would be stupid even for you.”

He tried to focus on that string of words. *Snap out of it*, he'd told him. Common mistake.

*You should tell me to kill myself*, he didn't say, because medical gauze and a blind eye did not make for helpful men. No interior emptiness would ever manage to beat the sheer *need* Dazai had to do everything Chuuya wouldn't like.

The boy was aware. Perhaps, he even knew how easily manipulable he was. Perhaps he knew that Dazai knew and that Dazai *let him* — let Chuuya slap his wrist when he stole food off his tray; let himself give up on suicide missions because Chuuya had called them *smart*, let him, *let him* —

Car horns screeched.

Insults were bitten in the wet air, followed by self-explanatory hand-signs the boy had picked up during their short stay. He was rough and he was exasperated when he grabbed his calves, pulling him towards whatever stolen car he'd stopped mere inches from him.

The concrete burned his skin. Water entered his ears. *How do you find me every time?*, he appointed to himself to demand. Finding Chuuya was easy; one just went where it was loudest. But him? *How do I get you to stop?*

“I don't like pain,” he reminded him, over the storm.

“*Yeah?*” Chuuya screamed, not turning back. The car headlights were blinding. “Not what I'd guess, seeing your choices. Want to become one of Madame Tanaki's collection rugs? Let me go grab a fucking *van*.”

“Let go of me.”

“Fuck you.”

“Chuuya.”

“*Fuck you.*”

He was thrown into the car with the attention one might offer to a cursed doll. His limbs had a mind of their own, which Mori wouldn't have approved of, which meant next to nothing, next to *everything* — he slid into the driver seat before Chuuya could; stepping onto the ignition with a loose skeleton and shaking hands.

A heavy weight landed on the roof of the car, denting it, as he sped down the soaked road.

He paid no mind to street signals and other vehicles; he paid no mind to the body that sneaked inside the car from the car window he wasn't fast enough to shut.

“Dazai,” Chuuya snapped, fighting him for the steering wheel, “*Dazai*, stop it—” And they punched and pinched and left streets of their nails on each other, and they sprayed water around, skirting down the highway.

*Dear Odasaku*, he'd written, *however it goes, I wish to die fast, and I wish to die displeasing everyone around me.*

“You did this with those friends of yours, didn't you?” he mused, tasting the *mock*. His knuckles were white around the steering wheel, no matter the hands slamming his face against the window. “*Street race.*”

“Stop that,” Chuuya snarled, attempting to break the bones of his foot. “Don't fucking bring me into your *psychotic* —”

Cars swerved to miss them, horns and screams and bright lights. “Did anyone ever die during the races?”

“*Let go of the damn wheel!*”

“What, afraid to die?” Dazai felt his eyes widen, even the one that could not see a thing, welcoming the wet texture of the bandages. He wanted to laugh. He thought he might throw up if he did. “That must feel nice.”

The walls of some factory grew closer and closer. *A crumpled up car*, he thought. *A crumpled up skeleton*. Kazuko's body curled under his bed; his picture in the HQs' hallway. Mori would be disappointed. Wasn't that enough reason?

*I'm not the kid you found*, he would tell him, one day. *I know*, Mori would say, *I found no kid.*

Pain exploded in his face, flames so hot they felt freezing on his lips. He only saw white. His hands abandoned the wheel, raising to cup his shattered nose.

A body pressed against his, as Chuuya climbed out of his seat and fell upon him, pulling the wheel with all his strength. “*Fucking piece of shit!*” he snarled, as he turned them three hundred and sixty degrees, abandoning the trajectory that would have smashed them against the wall. “Fuck you, fuck you, why don't you *die*, fuck you —”

*Let me*, he thought, *why can't you let me* —

Dublin was rainy.

*No*, he corrected, tilting his head up. That was a shower head.

The shipping container had no access to running water — if he wanted to wash up after a mission, Dazai had to make his way to the communal bathrooms of the Headquarters and lock the door seven times. Not that anyone would enter, knowing he was there.

Little quirks. Little *forgetful* quirks; most days, he fell on his bed covered in the dirt from an ungrateful day, and he forgot. Most days, the feeling of his skin made him want to crawl out of it.

Motels had showers. *Showers*. Showers were nice, even when they were too wide.

He watched the rosy-red trails of water run to the drain, taking his blood with them. He'd have to put something on his nose, or it would never heal right. His face would be purple, soon. The three-nails scratches he'd left down Chuuya's cheek would probably get infected. They had access to doctors, now.

They had yet to use that access.

*All Mori's plan*, he considered. *Always him*.

Rudely, the curtain was pushed aside.

Scarred feet landed in his blood; overflowing eyes settled on his bandages, only for a moment. "Spread your gloomy fish smell somewhere else," Chuuya said, brusquely. "We don't have warm water to waste."

Dazai leaned back, curving his spine until it touched the cold surface of the wall. It should have made him flinch; he wasn't sure if it did. He wasn't sure if the boy cared about his insistent stare — he watched soap race down the planes of his abdomen; tangle in spiral scars he recalled stitching up, in bruises he had probably given him, in the cascade of red hair curling between his shoulders.

*You know*, he'd told him, *I don't dream*.

"Do you want me to tell you a story?"

No answer. Only that hum; that melody he didn't know, lined in unusual anger.

"Did you sign the lease on the new apartment?"

A squinting look. A hat of bubbles sat between the fingers Chuuya was scratching his scalp with. "Yeah."

"Was it the one I told you?" Dazai asked.

"I picked the one you hated."

He tilted his head back against the wall, pulling the sticky bandages.

How Chuuya had found time to go apartment hunting in the less than *three days* they'd spent in Yokohama, he wasn't quite sure. Perhaps he'd entrusted Kouyou, and asked her to send those pics he sometimes caught him browsing through, fingers intertwined with the mackerel-shaped phone charm. Dazai's commentary had been unrequested. He had offered it anyway.

"The *penthouse*?" He blinked. "You're too small for one of those. You'll get lost going to the bathroom."

He rinsed. He left hair everywhere he went; Dazai hated it. He'd started wearing a hair tie around his wrist, right where his bandages ended, just because Chuuya was stupid and lacked foresight — because he liked the snap of it against his skin when the boy ripped it off to use it. "It's an investment."

*As in, you won't spend a single night there?*

"Something to leave in your will?"

"My *will*," Chuuya scoffed. They'd first updated their own together. Dazai had never considered having something to leave behind; perhaps, Chuuya hadn't either. Their money would go to the organization; Chuuya might find a way to leave something to Yuan.

As it went whenever they sat on chairs that reminded them a bit too much of their growing bones, they'd gone for the childish route: left each other the wildest objects — from Hirose Fumiko's records they'd broken roughhousing, to the empty bottles abandoned under the desk of Dazai's container.

"You know," Chuuya started, "There are no stories to be told when you're dead."

He dangled his head back and forth, slow. "Mori wouldn't blame you for my demise."

"*Mori* isn't —" He bit his lips; fell into a raging sort of quiet, eyes stuck to the wall. "Whatever," Then: "Tell me."

"Just that," he answered, as disappointed as he felt. "Since last time."

Chuuya set his jaw.

Sometimes he wanted to *bite*. Taste blood. Taste flesh. *I don't dream*, he'd told him, no shorthands and no secret messages. *Whatever it is I am, I am different*. Dazai wanted to die. *That's yours to feel*, Odasaku had told him. *I cannot feel it for you*.

"Can I brush your ugly dog hair?" he called.

Suspicion tightened his face. Whatever Chuuya found on his own, painted him in a different shade of blue: one that would shoot Dazai to stop him from doing the exact same thing to himself.

*As long as I take it from you, he thought, mean. As long as I'm not blamed for your corpse.*

Chuuya offered him a hairbrush, decorated with small flowers that screamed Kouyou's name with gentle insistence. "Do *anything* suspicious and I'm shaving that mop on top of your thick skull while you sleep. Weirdo."

*He should waste less oxygen, Dazai thought. Talk less, when everything he did was a monologue. He was maturing quicker than Dazai was; harder lines and less pimples and less bared teeth when someone offered him a hand.*

He grabbed the brush and got to work.

"Are you growing them out?" he asked.

It was colder, without the water turned on; it was still. There was a reason — a reason why he'd asked to do this. He couldn't quite recall, even as he pointlessly counted each thread temporarily severed by the blunt teeth of the brush; reddish rivers rejoining down with the bluish veins and the violet bruises.

A curse was muttered with each knot he did not know how to untangle gently; Dazai's brows curled whenever he encountered objection to a section he'd already taken care of. *His hair would have made for good bandages*, he thought, nonsensically. Less itchy. More known. Attached to someone forced to stay close.

Chuuya shrugged. His back was one stubborn line of tension; his fingers kept clenching in the air — around invisible steering wheels. Dazai wasn't good enough to demand worry, and Chuuya wasn't good enough at being angry. "Think so."

"Why?"

"Because I like it. Moron."

He hummed. "You look like the frontman of one of those weird punk bands Madame Tanaki likes. Very much last century. Or like those dogs with the long ears."

The sound of his teeth gritting managed to fill the bathroom. He had freckles on every inch of his skin — a single black dot on his right shoulder; a mole no clone would have been decorated with. When he turned — just enough to show him one furrowed eye — a raindrop hurried down the bridge of his nose, landing on his lip.

Dazai's thumb spasmed. The brush fell.

"Hey."

He picked it up. "My bad."

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*[They overfilled their nostrils and mouths with liquid copper and rotten viscera — and sometimes, when it was dark, Dazai sat in front of a toilet and did nothing at all. They dug and they punched and they tortured and they killed and they played at the Arcade with blood on their teeth. He killed them all; they exchanged a glance when the latest tied up victim shrieked, because —*

*Desensitized, he thought. Not to death; he was too reverential of it to ever grow numb to its lightning strikes. Not to death; perhaps to the face men made as they died.*

*Perhaps to gloved fingers tight around his chin, one golden eye always bristling with intention; a threatening hold and a warm touch and fingers as red as his own. Sharing a cigarette, sharing a lifeline — sharing whatever after place would be reserved for the nastiest kids in the neighborhood.].*

For whichever of three possible reasons — necessity, teeth-chattering cold in dilapidated motels, or the jaw-clenched rage that took over Chuuya’s face when the scratches down his arms grew bloodied — they ended up sharing most of their beds.

“If you touch me,” Dazai warned, sinking under the blankets, “I’ll start screaming.”

“If you touch me, I’ll kill you,” Chuuya muttered, clearly disgusted. “Jackass.”

Hidden all the way to his chin under a blanket somewhere in Egypt, on a bed squishy to the point of swallowing them, Dazai pressed his cheek into the pillow and kept his eye — eyes; *except* it did not matter; *except* the bandages on the nightstand made him tilt his head whenever he thought about them — on the blurry canva of red in front of him.

And they did *not* touch. The beds were always infinite. Their bodies were small — with bruised calves playing footsie a tad too viciously to flawlessly mimic a childishness they’d long since tainted.

Their bodies were besmirched and scarred and irrevocably wrecked, unbelonging puzzle pieces someone had forced into each other. The jagged pieces would never fix themselves; the pieces were stuck where they were not meant to be. *You’ve wounded yourself and you’ll live with the scar.*

“Here’s a story,” Dazai would say.

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Not many knew, but *Corruption* began with the wet, sharp squelch of breaking bones.

It hardly seemed necessary — it was petty in every note and every crack, lined by Arahabaki's ephemeral unhappiness. Each time it was louder; each time it reminded the hisses in the air that the longer he spent in those bones — the better he knew them.

It was usually the spine — close enough to the tailbone to snap Chuuya's back backwards; a makeshift scream to the sky. When they were in a hurry, it had the decency to only crash the boy's skull against the nearest wall *once*.

"He does it less these days, though," Dazai commented, thirteen hours and a half later — an entire Korean neighborhood razed to the ground, and the small bathroom of the hotel they had slipped inside splattered in blood. It stuck to the walls and drooled down in fading droplets, landing on the dried puddles over the sink and the floor. Chuuya sat on the edge of the bathtub, expression far too open — despite it all, Dazai let the air dryer in his hands cover it.

*Be hungry when it's darker*, he told himself. The bathroom light was golden and blinding — he knew the bruise the forced nullification had left on his wrist was too visible. *Where he can't see*.

"Arahabaki?" Chuuya questioned, always in tune, too distracted by the *energy-drink-stained* crosswords puzzle to meet his eyes in the mirror. His left foot was outstretched — stuck to Dazai's naked calf. *Be mean about it*, he considered. *Or* — "What's a seven letters English word for *mean*?"

Dazai waved the hairdryer towards his head, lazy, doing his best to direct as much water towards the paper as possible. "Has he finally figured out that climbing his way out of your mauled throat might not be as successful of a plan as he believes?"

He made a face. Raising his voice to drown out the dryer, he said: "That's a mental image."

"Did you think he would come out of your womb like a newborn?"

His expression turned tentative. There were blood-stained bandages around his middle, where the scars had refused to close on their own; a long cut on his cheek had needed to be stitched up, and it shone a pale white against soaked hair.

There was no pain in his unmatching eyes; but Chuuya never seemed to feel any at all. "You — You do know that's not how childbirth works. You do, right?"

"Do you think he's become more tolerant?"

“Dude. Seriously. You *do* —“

“Because you figured him out?”

Chuuya huffed. He abandoned the sheet of crosswords onto the toilet, climbing to his feet — when his left heel touched the ground, his face was *carefully* blank. His fingers reached up to pull the burnt strand of hair rooted in his nape; the only pain indicator Dazai had learned to recognize.

He stole the dryer from his hands, shaking his head like the dog he was under its blow. “‘S nothing to figure out. The training pissed him off. Now we have an understanding.”

Dazai stole it back. “I didn’t think there was anything to understand. *He doesn’t want anything, shitty Dazai.* Are you changing the narrative?” He moved the dryer towards Chuuya’s mouth — a makeshift microphone.

It was pushed back by a gloveless hand. A new purplish bruise dotted the space between his right thumb and index — Dazai felt the need to pinch it, so he did.

“Listen,” Chuuya started, after an eternity. The mirror was all fogged up; their hair puffy and electric. “What does *No Longer Human* feel like?”

Dazai tilted his head. The dryer was a hum in between his ears — constant and buzzing, no more and no less familiar than the sound of his nails scratching his bandages. “I’m not telling.”

A nasty look. “Fuck off. I’m trying to —“

“Who says I care?”

“You keep *asking*. I’d assume —“

“Maybe I merely aim to be annoying.”

“You do that anyway,” Chuuya waved the matter away. “Humor me, you bastard.”

He whined, mostly to be obnoxious. He turned the dryer off; threw it into the faucet. “You know when you stare at a loading video game screen for too long and your eyes start to water?”

An unfriendly type of hesitance colored the boy’s face — like he wasn’t sure he wasn’t being made fun of again. “Sure.”

“Nothing like that.”

A vein in his temple pulsed. “Then —“

“You know when you step a toe into the bathtub, thinking that the water has warmed up, but it’s actually *freezing*? Nothing like that either.”

“Fine,” Chuuya snapped. “Whatever —”

Dazai’s hand sneaked up, clenching around his chin, until his cheeks were *almost* touching on the inside.

“*Y’ h’ve t’ree ‘econ’d’s*” the boy let him know, deadly serious. “*O’e I k’ll* — “

“You tell me,” he interrupted him, calmly, curious. “What do I feel like?”

Slowly, the murderous intent melted from the goldens and blues of his eyes. It settled on his scarred cheek in a complicated shape, carving his bones to give them a facade Dazai was not immediately privy to. The idea was irritating on its own. Chuuya, among it all — *despite* it all; because of it — was utterly simple.

“Quiet,” Chuuya offered. *That’s something to linger on later.* He tore himself off his grasp with ease; pinched his bicep, for good measure. “But I asked about you.”

“That’s the point, though,” he insisted. “It doesn’t really matter what it feels like to *me*, does it? It matters what it does. Otherwise, it would hardly be a weapon. Have you ever questioned the red glow *Tainted* gives you?” Dazai pulled the dryer cable out of the socket; he spun it around two fingers like a cowboy lasso. “But Arahabaki is different. Arahabaki is not *you*; you’re one of the *others* as much as everyone he’s a weapon against,” He tapped on the old bruise on his forehead. “Unless you can change that. Unless it’s *working*.”

The Hotel heating system turned on with a *beep*. It broke whatever stare off they had been locked in — Chuuya huffed again, extracting his feet from the curled up cable on the blood stained floor.

“You always make things more complicated than they need to be,” he said, finally. “There’s no point in reasons, outside of functionality.”

“*Murderous* functionality. How lovely.”

“Who, me?” Between overly vaporous strands of hair, even Chuuya’s fluttering, coy eyelashes had an attitude. “I’ve never killed anyone in my life. It was all gravity.”

“I’m sure,” Dazai squinted at the red water in the sink. “Boss called, while you were out.”

“And you didn’t hang up on him?” the boy yawned, brushing wet hair off his forehead.

“No, I did,” Dazai confirmed. “But on his seventh attempt, I granted him my attention.”

“*Mmh.*”

“He asked me to send you his *best* recovery wishes.”

“Very grateful.”

“Apparently, Elise is missing her favorite dress up playmate.”

“That was one time.”

He kicked the marble under his feet. “He said the mission is over.”

Silence choked him, only for a breath.

Chuuya straightened up. “You’re not bullshitting,” he dared, cautious. The glint in his eyes could have lit Yokohama up with no electricity. “Don’t tell me you’re bullshitting me, or so help me —“

“I only waste my time in useful endeavors, Hatrack,” he informed him. “I’m not kidding. The mission is over. You and I,” He stretched, obnoxiously so, raising his cigarette in a mocking toast, “Are free from this circus of a cooperation.”

Astonishment looked abnormal on him. Not quite *surprise*, because his small brain tended to be easily caught in similar results — but genuinely, blindingly speechlessness.

“Fucking —“ Chuuya concluded, voice so sagged up it was vacant, “*Finally*, ah?”

His laughter came out in huffs of breaths, despicable snorts that were amongst the most irritating sounds Dazai had ever willingly subjected himself to. With unexplainable energy, Chuuya jumped out of the bathroom, walking on wobbly legs to pace around, picking up his discarded choker and gloves, muttering something about a *hundred percent success rate*.

A cigarette had been forgotten on the floor of the bathtub. He picked it up.

“No more *motels*,” Chuuya was chanting, still, appearing and disappearing from the door frame. “No more damn *cockroaches*. Only the good old wannabe gangsters only Yokohama can make. Hikari is going to *kill me* for how long I’ve been away —“

“Ane-san’s demonic dog wouldn’t kill *you*,” he pointed out. “Me, on the other end — I’m pretty sure she tried. You know, there was this one time —“

“— and the *Arcade!*” His excitement put a crack on the floor; he swatted at his guilty feet, as if his limbs were to blame. “And my *motorcycle!* And the beach, and Japanese breakfast —“

“I thought you’d enjoyed the *tour de monde*. ”

He huffed. “I *did*,” And what else, for a brat from a seaside village, grown in one of the throats of the Earth? “Maybe I’m tired of your company. Your *sticky*, inevitable presence.”

“Apart from the obvious.” There wasn’t much to discuss on that. Dazai wasn’t sure he’d ever spent so many months talking. Dazai wasn’t sure of what to make out of it.

“It’s like — you know,” Chuuya shrugged. “It’s *Yokohama*. ”

*His favorite*, he thought, without a doubt. Chuuya had many favorites; Chuuya had never looked at anything dully. The color grey; dogs; the romantic soap operas he had once found stupid; peaches and *Miso soup* and the cloud-patterned shirt Kouyou had bought him; the face Dazai made when he was quiet; the *ding!* of a won game; a thousand things more he was

not stupid enough to leave in Dazai's hands. Chuuya had many favorites, but none like Yokohama.

*My debris belongs to the wind of my land, he remembered reading. Never to my father.*

"I know," he lied.

## Chapter End Notes

hirotsu: i have drawn up a power point presentation of the advantages of me getting actually paid for the shit i'm going through on the daily

skk: i like to draw and to play

hirotsu: this is social security business

skk: i like to draw and to play

"i'd like to die displeasing everyone around me" well dazai. do i have news about your future character development my buddy.

hi there! thank you so much for all your support until now, and for reading this monster of a fic, and indulging my silly hcs and even liking them! i re read all your comments on the daily, seriously, all of you will be getting a shootout in the ending notes i'm preparing lol.

we're finally starting ACT II, part three of this fic. seventeen skk is upon us and they are. well. i mean i hope you got the vibe change i'm trying to offer. i tried my hardest to make the three acts feel very different between them (sixteen - seventeen - eighteen) so i hope eventually you guys will feel it too!! this chapter was really funny to write; i feel like flows of chronologically confusing episodes are where my best efforts lay at lol.

i'm sure i'm forgetting to say something, but that will be a problem for future me. i hope you guys liked this chapter, and i'll see you soon!! <33

p.s. anybody got the yosano half cameo at the very start of the chapter? ;)

# SOMETHING

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xxii.*

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*Case number: 62770097*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black]  
returned to Yokohama, following a [...]*

---

He had searched for him on a whim.

The man who lived in the street no nerve fibre of the criminal system of Yokohama dared to approach had a too ordinary name — so Dazai had changed it for him. Generosity was as extraneous as the ether; but when Dazai thought back to those weeks, he found that every malicious thorn he'd dragged down his walls was framed by a much less sharp edge than he'd first believed — *genuinity*.

*There are men even dogs steer away from*, she had once told him. *If the water cannot catch their reflection, it means they were once ephemeral too. Familiar calls the familiar.*

No water was around to test that theory; Dazai drowned him in his most gleeful disgraces instead — with the traitorous tide of the wounds he scratched at night to reopen, and the debris he had diligently polluted his veins with.

The man who refused to let him die had no reflection — or maybe he did. Dazai wasn't quite sure. He'd been thoroughly distracted by all the card games.

Odasaku, as he made it to be, was Odasaku *precisely* because Dazai had decided so. Things of the world fell under his control with the ease of grains in an hourglass; of all of them — *that* was the most breathtakingly puzzling.

“Oh,” the man blinked. Odasaku was a sandcastle to the many winds of Dazai Osamu; he would survive the end of the world. “You're back.”

*In the flesh*, Dazai replied. Or, *with furor!*

It was out of his mouth before he could linger; it was smudged under his soles' barely restrained steps down the stairs of Bar Lupin. He spun on his seat right as Ango leaned down to study the cooking pan in his hands, and he *breathed*.

“The airport was so very crowded,” he justified, needlessly, unsure of which direction to twirl into, unsure of how to ask for another glass of whiskey without betraying excitement. They would think him too old for his age; they wouldn't mind. “Might have been the fake bomb emergency warning I sent out.”

Something between a sigh and the quicksand decision not to comment crossed Ango's face; at last, he nodded towards the barman, settling himself straighter in the last seat of that heart line of theirs.

*Months*, he thought, between stories — *lost Chuuya's baggage just to make him look for it and scribbled on the airplane windows just to draw horns on his wing-riding short rack body; jumped into a river and thought of Ango's soaked clothing when we pushed him in the bay; licked every spoon in the Royal Ambassery before killing the guards; played clapping games with a Turkish kid and thought of the mole on Odasaku's wrist; ran around and thought, thought, thought of* — it had been *months*.

“You haven't blinked once since you came in,” Odasaku noted, flat enough to appear unconcerned.



Ango cleared his throat. *Ango*, too, he thought — for good things came in pairs and down creaking wooden stairs. But Ango was no sandcastle and no dragon-slayer; still, cockroaches would survive the wind with ease.

Dazai, though. Dazai, he might not survive.

“I thought I was imagining the fanatic gaze,” Ango said.

“You’re also covered in ash. Is it a style thing?” Then, a bit hesitant, Odasaku added: “Won’t Boss ask for you, if you just returned?”

He had been covered in blood, the first time Odasaku had laid his eyes on him — as it was only fitting, he had been covered in mud, the first time Ango’s leery gaze had touched him. In a way, he liked to think that was what had bonded them together — a recurring tendency to drag pupils on his naked skin, and the things that truly made it.

*It took obstinacy*, he thought, *to exist near his hands*.

Dazai liked to tell himself he had been lucky enough to stumble on two interesting men instead of two interesting grasshoppers. Only two of those liked to drink Bar Lupin’s cheap alcohol; only two of those liked to listen when Dazai spoke. When he sat with them, he was nothing more than a man in a bar.

It took *something*, he thought — fallible prodigy — to make him ersatz real.

“Boss can wait,” Dazai said. “Tell me.”

They talked. He listened.

Ango’s job was the pinnacle of formality, and he was severely entertained by the sheer frustration it never failed to carve on his otherwise unperturbed face. Odasaku’s job was the epicenter of every inch of plainness any human being in the world might have ever felt, and Dazai would have thrown his coat in the flames to have it even just for a day.

An incident with the city sewers; a curious case regarding a peeved ex-general, convinced the Mafia owned him his grandma’s lost-at-sea jewel; the counter of Bar Lupin, and that one time it got stained by the cat that liked to hang around.

“It seemed too polite to defecate on the table,” Ango considered, clearly disappointed.

“You can say *shit*,” Dazai informed him.

“I really think the cat did it on purpose,” Odasaku mused, looking somewhere faraway.

“Looking me right in the eyes, too.”

A suicide joke got him the man’s genuine question regarding the technicalities of it, and Ango’s consequential smack in the nape, — *Odasaku, you need to start reprimanding him when he says stupid things; like this, look*. An intricate story he made sure made no sense at all got both men to hold their heads in their hands — *it happened in Portugal, I’m sure; but*

*when we were in Romania, that's when it got entertaining, around the time we reached Paris; no, we did not go to France.*

There was too much to say and not nearly enough blinks. Dazai webbed moments into existence with a franticness that gained him *that* observing look in Odasaku's eyes — running from one story to another anecdote; from Charlotte's lipstick kisses to the Korean grandmother he had abandoned in her daughter's blood; from insistent questions to wide eyed obnoxiousness.

"Let's play *Tragic or Comic*," he exclaimed, at the end of a deep breath he had forgotten to take.

"Cherry blossoms," Odasaku offered, immediately.

"Tragic," Ango shivered.

"What? Why!"

His glasses seemed to glisten. Some stories, Dazai would keep for winter days. "I *hate* cherry blossom trees."

"It's about the *word*, Ango."

"A horrible word, nonetheless. Peas."

"Comic," was the chorus.

"Anteater."

"Tragic."

"The New Year's Bell?"

"*108 rings to clean the year's sins*," Dazai recited. They had spent the holidays together, apart from Mori's obligatory victory banquet — he had jumped in the background of every picture Ango had tried to take of the firework show, and begged Odasaku on his knees and curry-offering hands to come up with a gift for him too — *how is it any different from those kids of yours?* "Tragic, isn't it? Although, *bell* is a very comic word."

Odasaku hummed. "What if it was the New Year's *Gong*?"

"Tragic, of course!"

"I don't agree," Ango downed his alcohol. "Isn't *New Year* a very comic set of words, anyway? What's new about years? You get one every twelve months."

"Same for birthdays. Is *birthday* comic?"

"Tragic, according to the poets," Odasaku replied.

“If the poets said it, it must be false.”

“If *you* said it, it must be a means to an end,” the archivist replied, skeptical.

Dazai laughed.

The clock ticked well after midnight; the barman was still cleaning glasses. At the end of the stairs was Yokohama, and Dazai could *taste* it all — couldn’t understand if it was joy in his lungs or a tickle just strong enough that he might convince said lungs not to protest his refusal to inhale.

With the collaboration of the barman, a bowl was placed in front of each of the three companions, and filled by the cooking pan Dazai had dragged all the way down there.

He dangled his legs, gleeful, watching them blink at the reddish-brown mush exhaling bubbles under their noses. “Well?” he incited.

“You,” Odasaku leaned down to sniff, “*Made* this?”

“Personally,”

“*This*, ” he continued, “Being...?”

“My *Peppy Hot Pop!*”

“Certainly a figure of speech of its own right.”

“Didn’t you once threaten to stab yourself with my glasses if we ever entertained the thought of you cooking?” Ango pointed out, daring to pinch a piece of unidentified meat with a single chopstick. Pale man as he already was, the sniffs he took only painted his cheeks whiter.

“Forgive me if I don’t believe your *tour de monde* developed a culinary sense in you.”

“Things change,” Dazai huffed. “You see, that annoying Slug of my partner got it into his head that he should learn survival skills. He’s been reading *cooking books*. How pathetic is that? I can hardly quantify my disappointment. Is it worse or better than the poetry? Than the *Physics textbooks*?”

A sigh. “You *stole* Vice-Executive Nakahara’s *Peppy Hot Pop*?”

“First of all, he’s not actually a *Vice-Executive*, ” he replied, nose scrunching up. “That’s just a consolation prize title everyone has decided to bestow him with.”

Odasaku blinked, again. “Doesn’t that make him a Vice-Executive?”

“Second, you two are to refer to him in the appropriate way. It’s only fair, being outranked by him. Talk about him as you would about my dog. Because that’s what he is,” In an effort to explain, he waved his chopsticks in the air, drawing schemes. “For example, you can ask — *Oh, hey, Dazai, how’s little Chuuya doing?* And see how I put the emphasis on *little*.”

Hands tight around his glass, Ango downed it again. “And third?”

“I didn’t *steal* his Peppy Hot Pop,” Dazai concluded, proudly, snapping the hair tie around his wrist. “I simply had to prove to him how much *superior* my own cooking would surely be. And this is the result! You will be the judges. Be careful in your verdict,” He smiled. “Should we draw straws to decide who eats first?”

“No,” came the immediate answer. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

Ango appeared a bit green; Odasaku squinted at the mahogany of the counter — as if focusing on remembering just *how* Dazai had managed to trap them into an enemy organization’s basement with no pants and a baby monkey from the Yokohama Zoo, the last time they’d dared to play that particular betting game with him.

“Well, then,” he huffed. “Enjoy your meal!”

Stars might have been one of Yokohama’s many lovers in some past life; pollution hardly managed to hide them from the tallest glass buildings. It was all but starry when their trio stumbled out of Bar Lupin — and yet, when Dazai tilted his chin and waited for the two men to finish emptying their stomachs on the sidewalk, he saw nothing but constellations.

*You know*, he recalled Ango saying, among their first instants spent together, *there’s no need to look for beauty in the garbage. Repugnance has its pros.*

“Come on!” he incited, draping his arms around his haze-eyed friends. It was strangely cold, the air seeping down his lungs. “We should go to the Zoo and break the glass of the snake pit, what do you say?”

“Snake,” Odasaku replied, sensibly. His voice was senselessly muffled; he tried to focus on the steps of his two left feet. “Snake. Ango, what about —“

“*Snake!*” the archivist cursed. “We forgot the funeral!”

Unexpectedly enough, Dazai ended up being the one dragged down the street.

A bouquet of yellow roses had been hastily left on top of a sewer grate near the suburbs — awkwardly leaned against a friendly snake-shaped stuffed toy with its fabric tongue hanging out. The plushie had clear signs of a child’s vicious affection all over it; he blinked at Odasaku and Ango’s discoordinated hurry to fix up that makeshift altar.

“Sit,” Ango ordered.

Entertained, he did.

The *Peppy Hot Pop* had been carefully studied, but even he couldn’t help but tilt his head to the side watching its effect come to life. Odasaku’s too-tall body stumbled disgracefully, destroying the bouquet as he did his best to find his mouth to cover as he cleared his throat.

Standing straight and serious next to him, Ango hummed a familiar tune: the Port Mafia’s funerary hymn.

“Kazuko,” the first man began, solemnly, “Was a queen among men.”

“A queen among snakes,” Ango agreed. “Constrictors. Is that the same?” His gaze blurred. “Are constrictors the same as constructors? Where do *boas* come into play?”

“Executive Kouyou’s closet,” he answered, helpfully.

Odasaku burped. He insisted: “She deserved to bite many more calves.”

He nodded, serious. “*Endlessly* more. Is *boa* comic or tragic?”

“Tragic,” Ango replied, easily, right as the other man deadpanned: “Comic, of course.”

Dazai recalled a day of almost a year ago, emerging from those same sewers with an overcoat of mud, hands tight around the latest shimmering jewel in the dirt under his nails. *Just what I need to die*, he’d said. But stubbornness followed every creature that dared to meet his eyes — and as every story went, there was a doctor, and there was a dying being, and there was nothing to be done about the pain he did not feel.

He leaned on his palms, legs crossed like a child, and offered his widest grin to the two men’s composed faces. “Let’s see who can give her the best requiem, and the winner gets to jump off the nearest bridge!”

Much was done in that single night. Cages were opened and cars were bumped; organizations were infiltrated and various petty crimes were committed.

He abandoned the duo to their drunk-like ballet some time after the sun begun to climb the sky, watching them stumble mindlessly; he laughed in the silence of a nearby alley with no sharp enough metal to slit his throat open, reading the endless telegram Ango offered him days later *demanding recollection of those days, for he had absolutely none of it*, and Odasaku’s single ? mail.

Dazai never answered, and they stopped wondering out loud.

He did not ask if they remembered the makeshift funeral; if Ango recalled spilling tears for a snake he’d spent months bad-mouthing the safety and health hazards of, and if Odasaku remembered accepting Sakura’s favorite stuffed toy with the seriousness he dedicated to his every other mission.

It wasn’t his, that beggarly grave. As far as rehearsal went, he was satisfied all the same.

*Be as good*, he prayed. *Be just as good to me, when it’s me who’s underground.*

*Yokohama*. Distraught and relieved, envious and nothing, nothing at all, nothing that ever lasted enough — he breathed. *Welcome home.*

“Seriously,” Odasaku questioned, as Ango lost his mind in the nearby seat. “What did you even put in that *Peppy Hot Pop* of yours?”

A Chevrolet Corvette — C1, black, a convertible from 1962, in the name of accuracy — had been parked right outside the *Brick Wall*; one of the most famous underground-fighting bars in the Port Mafia territory.

*He wants a car*, he had heard Kouyou tell Tanaki, before they had left — she had sounded particularly victorious. *He'll get a car*.

“Excuse me,” Dazai said, waving to the bet gatherer slithering amongst the cheering crowd. The ring was a slightly elevated podium with no railing of any sorts; when Chuuya slammed a six foot tall guy down, his teeth landed mere inches from his shoe. “I’d like to bet twenty thousand yen on whoever the redhead slug will be fighting. Make it a weekly thing.”

The man blinked, confusedly. Right then, Chuuya threw his adversary over his shoulder, and crashed him against the ground again.

“Uh,” he said, studying the crowd as it lost its mind at his clear victory. “Your loss, sir.”

It took some wiggling to get close enough to the stage without the crowd crashing him. His newfound height gave him a perfect visual of the moment Chuuya trapped his adversary’s head in between his legs — laying on the podium as if no more vexed than before falling asleep.

Chuuya had been recently figuring out how to snap necks with his thighs. Dazai was sort of obsessed with him — which was normal. Sheer disgust was bound to do as much.

“Have you already forgotten what Madame Tanaki said about fighting rings?” Dazai asked, as he laid his elbows on either side of Chuuya’s head.

Mostly unconcerned, the boy arched his back enough to meet his eyes.

“Ain’t you too posh for these places?” His red-faced opponent gasped for air, contorting on the ground. The crowd chanted for Chuuya while calling him by name; clearly, these were the men he was so insistent Dazai shouldn’t treat like dirt. “Ah — has Gramps filled your inbox with *When will you re-enter society, Boss is getting annoyed* texts too?”

“Probably,” Dazai tapped his fingers on the podium, stretching them until they could brush the naked mountains of Chuuya’s shoulders. The nullification changed nothing; he huffed.

“Are *you* ready to re-enter society?”

“I’m not stalling,” he corrected, frowning with effort. Sweaty strands of hair were stuck to his lips; Dazai moved just to *pull*. “I just had — shit to deal with.”

*Graves*, he guessed. Graves needed flowers, and flowers needed water, and water needed gloved hands. Gods were nothing but persistent; Chuuya was nothing but *just* — enough not to deny mourning to anyone. Even in a graveless syndicate. “Don’t you have a penthouse to get lost in, now?”

A complicated expression filtered through curtains Dazai had never quite deemed thick enough.

His adversary attempted to sneak his hands under Chuuya’s hips and take advantage; the boy signaled a *wait* to Dazai with one hand, and stood — dragging the man by the calf and twisting his leg just enough to make him scream. Then, easily, he returned them to their starting position — this time, cushioning his head on Dazai’s crossed arms instead, for sadistic comfort.

“Sure,” Chuuya said, carefully. “Need to furnish it and whatever.”

Dazai hummed. “Oh, you will actually *do it* this time around?”

“You have no place to talk.”

*Touché*, he conceded.

The crowd roared; he blinked, and realized he had missed the man’s surrender. Chuuya’s still gloved hand reached up, pinching the skin between his eyebrows; even upside down, his gaze seemed too inquisitive.

“Wanna know what you and this trash have in common?” he offered, chest raising back and forth in strangely hypnotic motions. Dazai had slept in his own bed yesterday — hadn’t traced that same movement until his eyelids had given up, lulling him into slumber.

“Do tell.”

“All pieces of shit need to go home, at some point.”

*What is home*, he wondered, *What is home to the unneeded?* Pointless questions. “Domesticated dogs would know.”

Kouyou’s birthday present for her dearest knife up her sleeve was sleek and bright underneath the moonlight, and the most tasteless thing he had witnessed in a long time.

Clearly, given all these circumstances, Chuuya had vibrated with barely contained ecstasy the moment he’d been offered the keys. Dazai had mostly been surprised his ideal car wasn’t some ten feet tall monster truck — all in the name of overcompensation and general need to *disrupt*.

“No funny tricks,” the boy warned him, as he opened his car door for him — unwilling to risk him breaking the window and sliding in, as he’d taken up to do with hotwired cars at their disposals. Slamming it on his face, he leaned into the square. “No cutting off brakes, no neon spray painting, no key lines, no fucking up the leather — no *anything*. If I find you’ve done shit to my car, I’m reproducing the damage on your bandaged corpse. Clear?”

“You *truly* need to stop assuming the worst whenever I’m concerned,” Dazai sighed, fluttering eyelids up at him, because it tightened his jaw and it tickled against the bandages. “I’m in the habit of steering away from tackiness. Wouldn’t want it to be contagious.”

Genuinely good driver as he was, Chuuya’s choices to surf the streets like a madman were exactly that — purposeful, willing *choices*, who he very much doubted were ever taken when his passenger seat was occupied by anyone but Dazai. His fingers tapped relentlessly on the gear shift; if it was a message, it wasn’t his to disclose. He drove tucking his unused foot behind the driving one; he always stopped at every unnecessary red light, and it was pathetic, and Dazai hated it in the way of selfishness.

He met passing eyes from darkened alleys, from sidewalks littered in puddles; filled his cheek to make a kid giggle on his father’s shoulders at a stop — held the gaze of a woman in a barely-there skirt as she tiredly accepted money from lingering hands.

He breathed. Fixed his jacket; unfixed it again. Longed for his console; longed for the river under the bridge.

“Shitty carpets,” were Chuuya’s words, upon entering the newly rebuilt *Building One*. “Did they add *more* chandeliers? I thought the roof would fall. Is that a *crystal ashtray*? Shut up.”

His commentary didn’t stop him from striding across the mostly empty halls; swift motions that betrayed his eagerness, knuckles rapping on the walls that betrayed his thirst to relearn every corner of those roots of theirs. Dazai moved every piece of furniture slightly to the left; the boy fixed it without blinking.

“Ten that Ane-wan chokes the moment she sees you,” Chuuya bet, uncaring of the whispers growing louder the more men they encountered.

The meeting room doors stared at them. “Twenty that Ace starts muttering under his breath the moment he sees *you*,” he replied, eyes forward, pulling on the chain of his hat to make it dangle correctly; tapping his thumb on the small of his back to fix his slumped spine.

Two fingers hooked themselves onto the knot of his tie, tightening it. Lighter than air, they tucked unruly strands of hair behind his ear. “Two lives in *Apocalypse VII* that Boss says something about us being an example.”

The doors were opened. “*Three* lives in *Motor Race* that Elise tries to hang off your arms like a monkey.”

Mori was the first thing he saw.

His mind was quick to place him in some quiet corner. Instinct and gut were tools, but far too untrustable in nature — despite the nails he had hammered to the edges of his mind to keep it where it *should* have been. No cell bars could hold the amused *something* in the gaze Mori reserved for him. Dazai wouldn’t humor his psyche’s insistence to seize the most dangerous thing around.



Instead, they strided down the aisle made by two rows of Executive guards, their chins raised and their eyes furtively darting their way; towards the blood-light washed table at the center of the room. Under the obscurity of the shut windows, the men dropped to their knees at their passage.

It opened no cracks on that newly carved floor; it did not muffle the breaths cut short. Dazai didn't know *what* about authority demanded silence — all he knew was that no one had spoken to him in eons.

“Oh,” Mori said, bleeding a grin on their bowed frames, from the other end of the table. “You’re back, then. Please, do sit.”

Ace hid a cough. The Colonel’s death had freed a chair on Kouyou’s right; the hesitancy that slowed Chuuya’s steps allowed Dazai to speed up to drop on its velvet cushions — but the moment his thighs landed, the muscle-sharp texture of his seat made him pause.

“Too slow,” Chuuya informed, extremely satisfied, fingers twitching towards the hand Kouyou was subtly reaching in his direction under the table.

They met — the grip was short, but more intense than most things Dazai ever felt.

“I’m the Executive here,” he reminded the boy, as clearly as possible. His temple was already pounding. “In case you forgot. You can stand three steps to my left, if you want. Or outside the room! That would be even better.” Hadn’t the point of returning been *some distance*, anyway?

Chuuya looked around, pretending not to hear. Ace cleared his throat again.

“Fine,” Dazai said, teeth gritted. He kicked until his hips were screaming for mercy; under the stable flood of the other boy’s warning hisses, he pushed until the two of them were painfully squeezed between the armrests of the chair. “Have it your sticky slug way.”

Kouyou coughed. Chuuya’s spine stood a bit straighter on reflex; there wasn’t much space to accommodate the urge, though.

The chair creaked.

“Well,” Mori’s smile could have burned the city behind the shut windows walls. “Things have certainly been quiet, without you two. Maybe we could bring another chair?”

“I’m not standing up,” Chuuya declared.

“Me neither.”

The chair creaked again.

He felt his shoulder stiffen almost against his skeleton. “I was literally here first.”

“I’m literally an Executive.”

“You’re a quota hire.”

“Oh, yeah? *What* quota? The *short and mentally challenged*, like yours?”

“Boys,” Kouyou called.

Murmurs climbed the air — confusion mixed with something else; easily intertwining through each kneeling body, sticking to their clothes in the way of raindrops, of particularly *insistent* bullets, sunk to the bone, stuck through the viscera, *it’ll end quicker if you stop moving, asshole*. Water to Chuuya’s flowerless dirt, he knew. One more painting on Dazai’s walls.

“Unfortunately,” Dazai concluded. “We’re back.”

From the other side of the table, one of Ace’s eyes ticked. “Successfully,” Mori corrected. Warmth rejected every thread of his very being; the sheer affability of the smile he offered them both was doing its best to prove him wrong. “Truly an example for the entire syndicate.”

Chuuya kicked the side of his shoe.

Whatever the meeting had been about before their entrance, Dazai wasted no time trying to understand. Summer had just begun — it could have been transportation for the season; a small group causing troubles; the ever present *Ability Permit*. One of the dossiers passed around the table caught his attention; on it, in capital letters, was the word *WHISPERS*.

Mori didn’t meet his eyes.

Words curled in the sweaty air, the red lights on the ceiling a match to the print under his eyelids. It wasn’t his first Executive meeting — like all the others, though, he only lasted seven minutes before he began tearing slices out of the relevant documents, boredly singing child chants; and nursing his bent fingers when he dedicated some long minutes nautical-knotting the shoelaces of a very interested Chuuya.

It came to the end without a sigh. Dazai missed Ace standing; he yawned, hanging off his armrest like a corpse.

“*Little god*,” Kouyou breathed out, in front of them out of nowhere — she pulled Chuuya out of that painful bundle, and held his cheeks like a blooming tree branch in her garden.

Eons and miles away, a hand laid on his shoulder.

“Dazai,” Mori said. He was less tall these days — as imposing as ever. Imperceptibly, the grip dragged him even further away from what he was not allowed to enter. “Welcome home.”

Pale features and combed hair; the blooming red fabric pooling down his chest — the only blood he might ever bleed. Dazai felt the urge to ask him for an injection; he felt the urge to propose a chess game. Instead, he shrugged. “Home’s as boring as ever, correct?”

The man's smile only widened. "Might have something to change that."

He led him out of the room. Dazai didn't turn, no matter the eyes he could feel pierce his back — didn't speak a word until the doors were closed behind them, inevitable and quiet, and a hand suddenly gripped his sleeve.

"*You*," Elise's high-pitched tone demanded, as her hair plashed the air enough to fool even a walking nullifier, "Owe me *so many* games, Dazai, you can't even *imagine*. And you'll dress up for *all of them*!"

There wasn't much to say; under the door guards' pitying gazes, he huffed, "Maybe, if you're not *too* annoying."

Pettily enough, she attempted to reach for his fingers, possibly intending to pull him towards her room before Mori could come closer. Dazai didn't know — what he *did* know, intimately and somewhat in wonder, was the way Mori's shoulders suddenly stiffened, and the rush of deafening silence that filled his veins.

For some impossibly long seconds, all they did was stand in front of the *nullified*, empty air that had once been Elise — and breathe.

It was quiet.

Mori recovered fast. "Dazai."

Before his name could be entirely out of his mouth, the trigger of his gun was already tickling the underside of his forefinger; Dazai set his eyes on the two guards' faces with little attention, and fired two quick bullets in succession. Their bodies landed to the ground with a heavy *thud*!, spraying the wooden doors in blood.

"Sorry," he attempted, then. Uncertain.

It was too late; there was a thirsty interest in the lighter corners of Mori's eyes — they studied his hands with more hunger than Dazai had ever felt for anything the worms wouldn't devour. "Not a matter for apologies," he replied, as deceitful as ever, "Getting stronger never is."

"I didn't know that could happen."

"Who knows," the man shrugged. *It can't be this easy*. He had yet to look at his face. Dazai's fingers twitched; it got him to smile a bit wider. "Oh, how petty she will be about this," he sighed. It wasn't a question — still, Dazai thought, *however petty you wish her to be*. "Come on, then."

"Mori," he tried, again.

"Come on," the former insisted, before his mouth could close. There was something between his teeth Dazai hadn't seen in too long.

Dazai scrubbed his shoes over where Elise's had been. *He'd have to warn her about sitting on him*, he found himself thinking, watching as the two guards' blood reached the spot. Then, more rationally: *Mori will never let her touch me again.*

The floors were different.

They'd been rebuilt with careful intention, hardwood mahogany dark enough to hide any blood stain. Not a step could be taken without every soul inside the rooms hearing; not a soul could take a step near Mori's office and not be announced by a trustworthy home-ground.

A security device — all of it. Everything. Every corner of every part of Yokohama.

The *Haunted Floors*, he'd taken to call them — because naming meant attaching, and he knew which beasts he was allowed to collar. As it wasn't requested, but Dazai still *knew* was demanded — he studied Mori's steps, evidently calculated, and set to memorize the silent path only they were allowed to walk.

“Passcode of the Port Mafia's emergency armed vault?”

His tongue was concrete against his teeth. “B3560982.”

“Number of cameras in Chuuya's office?”

“Seven.”

“What's your name?”

“Search it yourself.”

The man hummed. He smiled, and Dazai wished it didn't feel familiarly warm. “It's good to have you back.”

*[There had been a day of winter — when he was still fourteen and handcuffed to various pieces of furniture, all to be sure he couldn't reach his neck with both hands — when it had rained, incessantly, for a little more than a week.*

*Dazai never felt much physical; the bad weather, though, always felt too similar. Always resourceful, Mori had taken advantage of the free time to teach him how to stitch himself up. Luck has been on their side; in an effort to grab some toxic solution off the table with his teeth, given his stuck hands, Dazai had managed to slash his shin open against the edge of the table.*

*“I had this friend, once,” the doctor had told him, from the other end of the Hospital bed. Whenever Dazai's fingers trembled a tad too hard for the needle, the man's gloved ones wrapped around his own, forcing them to stillness. Not skin contact — but contact.*

No use for a scar you can't tell a story for, *he would remind him.*

*“You don't have friends,” he had interrupted him.*

*His offense had been fabricated, but somewhat entertaining. “Aren’t you and dear Elise my friends?”*

*“Don’t be embarrassing.”*

*“Still,” he’d insisted, peeved. “This friend of mine collected stones. Gems, rocks, debris — whichever the earth would deem him worthy of finding. I remember he had an entire room dedicated to his treasures; when the lights were all out, it had nothing to envy a small galaxy.”*

*“There was this one time — He found a precious gem. A beautiful thing, bluer than the sky, sculpted by nature. It had a rough sort of beauty, untouched by those tools he collected,” He’d tapped his needle, pushing it deeper into one side of the wound. Dazai hadn’t flinched. “A buyer of his encouraged him to sculpt it into some type of jewelry. Cut it, polish it. Few legal markets were interested in pure gems, back then; he would have had greater luck selling jewelry.”*

*“Pure gems are worth a lot on the Black Market,” he’d pointed out. He’d needed to make himself useful from the moment he’d crossed the threshold of that clinic.*

*“Not everyone is as ready and willing to choose — ah, unconventional ways, as we are,” Mori had replied, awkwardly. “His buyer insisted and persisted that he would lose earnings. But my friend refused to touch the gem. He was enamoured with what nature had managed to do. Tainting it with my hands would be nothing but a disservice, he told me. Why should I touch what’s lucky enough to exist purely?”*

*Dazai had dragged his finger up and down his bleeding gash, well aware that the doctor would slap his unsanitary hands away as soon as he noticed. Behind his white shoulders, rain had dug holes in the windows, uncomprehendingly gentle in its ferocity. Each stain it had left on the glass was gone a moment later — too evanescent to stick.*

*I know, he would have told it. I understand.*

*“And then?” he’d asked.*

*Mori had made a face. “Then?”]*

*“Because I’m easier to find?” Dazai asked.*

*“Among other reasons,” Mori paused in front of the second-to-last doors of the last floor. He pushed the doors to Dazai’s office open. “We have many matters to deal with. *No rest for the wicked*, isn’t that Ace says? Have you noticed how strangely cold it is, these days? After you.”*

*Cold, Dazai frowned. What about —*

*The room was as plain as it had been from his very first steps inside — undecorated, because it wasn’t a shipping container. Small knick-knacks Madame Tanaki had brought him from her*

travels were the only stains of color; in a drawer of his desk, he knew, was a lucky coin Odasaku had once picked from a fountain.

*They're the ones who threw it*, he'd told him, shrugging, wiping his hand on his coat to dry it. *Here. Have it.*

Spread and tied on his desk was a man.

Tears streamed down bruised cheeks, uninterrupted by desperate gasps for air — by his chest rising and falling voraciously; the skin of his wrists and calves tearing itself apart to fight the restraints. *One of theirs*, he immediately knew — for when he managed to raise his head enough to meet Dazai's eyes, his shrieks could have razed the tower to the ground again.

*"No,"* he begged, shaking the whole desk; the carefully planned floors. *"No, no, no — anyone but — no, please, I beg, kill me, kill me, kill me, if you have — I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I beg, I beg, I —"*

*"We've been having some troubles with our friend. A pain resistant Ability,"* Mori explained. The corner of his mouth brushed his earlobe; there was no smile in sight. Only the deep inhales from his nose, as the mafioso's screams got more frantic; savoring — not caring a bit. *"Here's your welcome party. Shall we get to it?"*

*["Yes," he'd insisted. "What happened then?"]*.

*"Suppose,"* Dazai concluded. Elise's skin was stuck to his fingers; he stared at them until the bandages felt less transparent.

The man choked on a scream.

Peacefully, Mori locked the door behind them.

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Had Gin Akutagawa been an Ability User, Dazai would have probably shot her brother and abandoned him in the woods.

*"That's the voice I want you to spread, at the very least,"* he explained to Hirotsu, leading him through the rows of mostly vacant beds. There had been talks to shut the makeshift Infirmary down, once the Hospital had been regained — in the end, in the name of urgency, it

had been left exactly where it was. “Your *Lizards* are more gossipy than old aunties; I’m sure you can figure it out.”

“Is that the phrasing you wish for?” the man demanded, polished and polite.

“You can work on it,” He shrugged. “But make sure it sounds mean. I’m hoping all the attention will get her out of that shyness,” Playing *Hopscotch* between the beds, he sighed, “Poor health conditions and a clear lack of support to her pre-existing issues made her particularly sensitive to wounds — One of the recruits managed to hit an old scar. It’ll take her a week to get up.”

“But?” the man asked.

“Who says there’s a *but*?”

“You wouldn’t have dragged me here if there wasn’t.”

Hirotsu, as reliable as ever, was the one thing in Yokohama to truly appear untouched, following months of absence. Wrinkles were either too smart or too irrelevant to increase on his permanently too attentive features. When they’d met again, he’d bowed. *Welcome back, sir.*

“True,” Dazai hummed. “You know, she’s training with the secret Executive.”

The man’s eyes widened — as one of Mori’s most trusted, he knew all too well. He was quick to regain composure. “Did you bring her to him?”

“I haven’t met him, if that’s what you want to know,” he replied, paying no mind when the other cleared his throat, awkward. “Boss won’t let me. However, I’ve heard enough. Gin needs someone to break her into her full potential — she’s clearly not a *front row fighter*, and I’m not fit to train an assassin.”

Hirotsu kept quiet for a few steps, walking a polite distance from him. He wondered if the man would be willing to manhandle him and Chuuya, still — if his respect for hierarchy would keep him proper and impersonal.

*He has our drawings on the fridge,* Chuuya whispered, somewhere in his brain.

*Stupid,* Dazai thought — if true.

“That’s good,” Hirotsu said. “But, sir — why are you telling *me*?”

With a shrug, Dazai frog-jumped over the kneeling body of a nurse, who’d dropped to the ground in her haste to bow to him. “In spite of the *astonishing* number of times both her and her brother have ended up in the Infirmary, I believe in their strength,” He paused in front of the last curtain of the room. “They’ll get used to a — *finer* lifestyle, at some point. I hope. They kinda smell. I thought I would make you a gift.”

The Akutagawa siblings shared a cruel fate: resemblance, in vastly opposite ways.

Snowflakes dipped in ink, stuck so tightly to each other nothing but violence could have made them the duo they were — Gin's flustered silences and infallible aim, and Ryunosuke's unfit arrogance and distaste for bloodlessness. Improper to define either miserable half of that embrace as *bright*; improper to deny the timid sunlight overflowing from their hunched spines when they shared air.

Dazai had never had anything resembling whatever their bloodied nails liked to cling to. Two heads of dirty black strands mixed and knotted and *stuck*. When Akutagawa had dragged her to him, the grip around her wrist had been the first act of delicacy he'd seen him carve in existence.

A dying man's first intake of air; a child's eyes found him. "Executive Dazai, sir," he breathed.

There was always an *eagerness* of sort in the pools of frantic onyx he would set on him — a desperation Dazai had watched keep rats alive in the sewers.

It *would*, he knew, reduce him to ash, inevitably. Nothing that devoted could survive in the hands of a meticulously picky believer.

Akutagawa left Gin's sleeping body to the machines hooked to her skin — fingers only hesitating *slightly* before abandoning her hand. From the other side of the bed, he bowed. "You're — back."

*[“Alright,” Mori said, eyes on the kneeling piece of meat he'd thrown at his feet. He wondered if it meant something — that every point of interest he'd ever had in that organization had been caged inside its rusted, golden bars by his own hands. Childish, perhaps. Selfish. If no one was around to sell toys, he would carve them himself. “Alright, then. If you can keep him alive.”].*

Ratty clothes had long since been thrown into the flames, replaced by Dazai's suffocating coat and some white neck-handkerchief he would cough blood into when he thought he couldn't see him. These days, he thought Akutagawa mostly resembled — not a person, not quite. A vengeful ghost, perhaps.

*A foolish one, he considered, not to haunt him.*

"Clearly," Dazai replied, widening his hands. "Have you been hallucinating me?"

He grew tenser. "Forgive the impatience."

"Ah, that's what it is. Why, anyway?"

A glimpse of eyes appeared. In the way he sometimes wondered if Mori had ever felt — being looked at by him was nauseating.

Lips tight, he risked: "I thought — that we could start *real* training, once you came back. That's what you told me, sir."

*Ah, Dazai thought, endlessly weary. That.*



“Asking whenever I make the mistake of stumbling upon you won’t fasten the process, I assure you,” he concluded, and it wasn’t as sharp as it could have been. The Devil’s dog had less of a bite than what the shadows of a forest had let him believe; he’d had months to accept that truth.

“But,” Akutagawa attempted, fuming. Less of a bite, but still *some*. “But I —“

“Seniority is still reason enough to show respect, Akutagawa.”

Startled enough — *anger*, he saw, lining every inch; *anger*, but not one he would ever show, blind to true survival as he was — the boy turned his bow to Hirotsu’s direction, deepening it by a single inch. “Commander.”

“At rest,” the man said. His eyes had yet to abandon Gin’s face, half hidden by her oxygen mask. “I shall hope her recovery is going well?”

“According to the doctors,” Akutagawa confirmed, unconcerned with offering his gaze to anything but his target. “Executive Dazai, you — why are you here?”

He curled an eyebrow. “Was I meant to book a meeting?”

“I meant —“ A frown. “You don’t usually visit the Infirmary.”

“Not when *you’re* hurt, no,” he confirmed, distractedly, brushing a strand of hair off Gin’s clammy forehead. Nodding towards Hirotsu, he explained: “You’ve been looking for recruits to fill in the Commander positions, haven’t you?”

Skepticism curled on his face, unmindful of Akutagawa’s surprised intake of breath. “She doesn’t look older than twelve.”

“We’ve come to the conclusion that she should be around thirteen, actually,” he corrected. The boy made a face; perhaps recalling how Dazai had dragged him to a *Game Stop* and had him buy him one more game on *his* pay whenever he guessed an age different from the one Dazai was ninety five percent sure of. “*Almost* fourteen. Our Akutagawa here recalls her birth, but only barely. He promises he’s newly fifteen,” Dazai shrugged, “I’m sixteen.”

“Training for the *Black Lizard* is the most torturous — *career path* in the Mafia,” the man reminded him. “Most are rejected before they can even reach a quarter of the process.”

“You were ready to offer one of the three seats to Chuuya, weren’t you?”

He blinked at him. “Chuuya is *Chuuya*.”

“The annoyance is incomparable, yes,” he scoffed. “Quit it with the defensiveness — the Chibi *does* like you, I promise. I’m just saying — you believe *someone* must be capable of filling those positions. Gin is a worthy candidate for that belief. Some female touch to your *Lizards*, ah?”

Hirotsu hesitated. “Why not her brother, then?”

He felt Akutagawa's back straighten before the sentence was over. A part of him considered suppressing the snort that left his mouth; it was a considerably small part. "Gin is being trained by a professional assassin — someone good enough to gain both the Executive seat and absolute secrecy — and she's reportedly amongst the best students he's ever had. Young and new as she is, I already hear people mutter about her abilities."

"But Akutagawa here is being trained by you," Hirotsu pointed out. "And he's got an Ability, doesn't he? It's rare for Commanders of the *Black Lizards* not to have one. You've been teaching him, haven't you?"

"Attempts are being made, yes," he sighed, slightly hopelessly. "Akutagawa, why don't you explain to Hirotsu why your dear sister would be a valid recruit?"

While unbearably *stupid*, at times — no starved dog who the slums had not munched and spit back in pieces would ever be blind to threats. Dazai did nothing more than blink at him. He knew Akutagawa heard, all the same.

*[“Taking care of your sister is a valiant task,” he told the boy, the first time he pushed him against a wall, gun in hand. “Rather admirable. Respectable, even. Do you take me for a fool?”*

*Horror filtered through thin traits. “No, sir “*

*“Do you take me for someone easy to fool?”*

*“No, sir — No, I thought —“*

*“You thought I wouldn't know your darling Gin hasn't held a knife once, her whole life, the moment I gave her one?” he insisted, undeterred. “You thought I wouldn't know you'd do anything so I wouldn't leave her in the slums? You thought I wouldn't send her where powerless girls like her end up in organizations like this, if I believed she could pull her weight in a fight — if she could give me even a quarter of your disappointing performance?”*

*“Sir —“*

*“Lie to me again,” he dared. Few things as familiar as the weight of a gun; few things as joyously petty as solving problems without the mind that had made Mori so proud. “Do it.”*

*His gulp rattled his whole body; Dazai's own, too, inevitably, pressed together as they were. There was urgency in the unstoppable dance of his eyes; he thought his victims should show some gratefulness, once in a while, for how easy his single eye made it to stare into the void before the end. He thought powerful people should stop believing themselves powerful. He thought Mori wouldn't accept another recruit who refused to do what mafiosi did.*

*“Here's your first lesson,” Dazai offered, generously. “Make yourself a valid piece, or you'll be discarded. That's all there is to it.”]*

“She's quick,” Akutagawa hurried to say, faster than his lungs would allow. “Faster than all the other recruits. She's told me — the Executive told her. Her learning curve is enviable.

He's thinking of sending her on her first mission, as a support to *Battalion 05* — she's small enough to sneak almost everywhere, and she's fierce enough not to mind most wounds."

"Sure doesn't seem," Dazai intervened, cheerfully, tapping her forehead. It did not stir her; it hardened *something* behind the glass of her brother's eyes.

"Nothing escapes Gin," he insisted, adamant, daring to meet Hirotsu's eyes. "She used to be able to hear *spiders*, when they crawled in our refuge. Insects, mosquitoes — people are too loud for her senses. She never lost a single chase we were involved in, and she's spent the last few months learning blades. She could kill me in her sleep."

"Because that would be hard?"

"I'm getting better too," Akutagawa snapped, *finally* offering Dazai some fire. "Just because you refuse to directly train me until I reach *impossible* standards, it doesn't mean —"

Silence fell.

Dazai didn't watch his lips cling to each other. Regret didn't need to be seen; not when the air creaked so desperately with it.

He hummed. "Alright, then."

"Sir," the other attempted.

"You're getting better. Alright," He crossed his arms. He leaned on the steadily beeping heart monitor next to him, feigning confusion. "Why don't you tell me the success rate of the missions I've demanded of you, while I was overseas?"

Akutagawa's eyes tickled the floor.

"Well?"

He muttered.

"Enunciate your words clearly," Dazai snapped. At his tone, even Hirotsu turned. *No one will obey what they cannot understand*, they'd told him, before and after — a dirty apartment and a mansion and a doctor's clinic. *Stand straighter. Speak clearly. Stop stuttering. I know you're making it up*. "If you've got something to say, say it. I have no time for mumbles."

Teeth gritted, Akutagawa offered: "Forty seven percent."

"See? That was easy," Dazai complimented. "Hey, I never asked you. What do you think of my bandages?"

Lost, he echoed: "*Think?*"

"You'll need to form an opinion. Chances of you ending up without one or two eyes are always high, with those kinds of results."

Though untouched, Akutagawa flinched.

“That’s what happens with a forty seven percent of success rate,” he continued, bored and intent, uncaring of Hirotsu’s frown — of the boy’s shoulders brushing the wall a bit more with each word. “*Forty-seven percent* is the reason why half of my shipments will need to be sent out again —“

“I — There were some complications with the men you — I’m not —“

“ — *Forty-seven percent*, ” he insisted, raising his voice, “Is the reason why you’re still stuck in a basement, training with some desperate lowlifes who’ve never tasted a *inch* of an Ability as flashy as yours — why you haven’t trained with *me*, and why your sister would manage to kill you, if she ever decided to take pity on our souls and *do it*. ”

“Dazai,” the Commander called.

“Silence. Forty seven percent is exactly why your sister needs to be able to protect herself,” He tapped her oxygen mask with two fingers. With each touch, Akutagawa’s shoulders stiffened a bit more. “Because *you* can’t. In fact —“

A blink.

Dazai was used to gaudy Abilities — had grown familiar with the scarlet glow surrounding Chuuya’s silhouette as he stepped across the ceiling in irritation; had sat on the ground and watched Elise’s rosey light paint wounded shadows on the floor of Mori’s clinic for countless nights.

Akutagawa’s ink-and-ruby’s scorpion tails were nothing new — if anything, they were slightly *cheap*, in the hands of someone who had never considered using them for anything but their effortlessly served poison. One of *Rashomon*’s claws wrapped around his wrist — a vicious attempt to rip his hand off Gin’s mask before he could touch it. Hirotsu’s Ability came alive at his shoulders, ready to defend — uselessly, given the mere seconds it took for the contact with his skin to nullify that foolish venture.

*Rashomon* slid down, tearing a bloodied line on an unmasked portion of the girl’s cheek.

“Oh, oh,” Dazai said.

A choked gasp abandoned the boy’s throat as he threw himself on his sister, frantic hands unable to stop the bleeding. Dazai thought, a bit frivolously, that perhaps they’d ended up sharing flesh as well.

“*Hush*, ” He clicked his tongue. “Try not to infect her as well. She’s so weak already. Hey.”

He settled his elbows on the bed, leaning close enough to freeze Akutagawa in his motions. His handkerchief was stained crimson — blood new enough to be his sister’s; dirty enough to be his own. In the desperation of his spasming fingers, he saw youth itself.

*Unnecessarily heavy*, he considered; perhaps recalled. *As such, to be removed*.

“Hey,” Dazai repeated, “That’s the second time you try to use your Ability on me. Two times too many, but I’ll let it go. Normally, I’d welcome any and all attempts on my life — unfortunately, your possibilities of success are low,” He dangled closer; saw the drool of a hungry beast upon the meal he refused to feast on.

*Hate me, he thought. Hate me, if you dare.*

*[With Elise gone, Mori had looked afraid — for a single moment. Perhaps, he’d considered, munching on his blood, on his flesh — perhaps he’d feared she wouldn’t come back.*

*Perhaps —].*

He warned, encouragingly: “Do it a third time, and I’ll break every bone in your hand. Yes?”

Blood seeped from Gin’s cut, staining her pillow. Teeth gritting, too unhealthy and small to fill the shoulders of that coat — the boy nodded.

“*Words*, Akutagawa.”

“Yes,” he seethed. “Yes, sir. I apologize.”

He straightened. “Well, then,” Hirotsu welcomed his smile with a sharp line of shoulders, and an ever sharper edge in his gaze — one of years ago. “How about we give Gin here some more time to train, and then we let you evaluate her?”

“Evaluate her,” the man echoed, finally.

Dazai shrugged. “She can fight whatever busybody you put in front of her. Should she be worthy, you can mold her into your little Commander,” He sighed, patting her unmarked cheek. “What a darling. So, what do you say? No, wait,” He backtracked. “I’ve got a better idea. How about we let her fight her brother, to prove her worth? Should she lose, who knows — I could be persuaded to *actually* begin my lessons with our newest boy. Two birds with one stone.”

Akutagawa stilled.

Hirotsu’s expression was familiar. It didn’t matter much. Dazai had been watered by people with slightly perturbed features — a *cowardly* accusation of having done something not quite human enough; not enough to pass the test with flying marks.

The test was always happening and always graded; Dazai thought it aimlessly exhausting, keeping up with this one subject he was born to fail.

It wasn’t Hirotsu’s failure to grade, still. It was no one’s. He would bring it to his grave, and let the dirt judge him where it simply wouldn’t matter.

The man bowed his head. “As you wish, Executive.”

“Oh, how formal,” He batted the words away. “Pass me some gauze. We’ll have no competition if Akutagawa bleeds poor Gin out, will we?”

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*[“And then?” he asked.*

*Mori made a face. “Then?”*

*“Yes,” he insisted. “And then?”*

*“And then he wanted the money, so he did as he was told,” the doctor shrugged, perplexed at his confusion. “What else?”]*

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Summer made everything *scratchy*.

Bandages on skin and pens on paper; triggers under his forefinger and hot concrete under his shoes; the roof of his under-desk hiding place and Elise’s satin — away from his hands. He spun on his office desk and relearned his duties and downed one pill for every sleepless hour.

Everyone swore it was several degrees colder than it usually was. He paid no attention to it.

The Executive position was a frame on an abandoned painting — drooling undried gold on unfinished sketches of a lifetime he hadn’t quite asked for. “There’s been a surge of men who have convinced themselves the Port Mafia can be forsaken,” the Boss told him. “Chase them like those fireflies of yours, yes?”

*I was young, then*, he didn’t reply. He used to escape the clinic in the middle of the night — wander through the city to learn its roads; capture grasshoppers and fireflies to put in those medicine containers Mori never left in his hands when filled.

Kouyou had a hand in everything the organization reckoned worthy of spilling blood; Ace controlled every border and entertainment of their territory; the secret Executive trained promising assets. The Colonel had organized troops. Dazai, the youngest of them, was offered the priciest column of all — manage *everything*, and some more.

*Exploit the fire while it's still burning*, Mori used to say, as they played pharmacist, *or you'll lose money on the ashes*.

Every movement the syndicate did on the Black Market ended up on his desk, at some point; every bloodshed the smaller gangs would mutter about, he'd dip his hands into at least once; every defense system built had been inked on blue paper by his hands — childish enough to still use that hair tie around his wrist to keep still.

"There's no escaping him," he heard a member of the *Secret Force Unit* mutter, as they cleaned off an execution. "He's got his hands in *everything*. Is Boss trying to build an heir from scratch, or is he just lazy?"

As it went, Dazai had to blow his head off.

"You used to be a shadow," Madame Tanaki explained, ever so quietly observant of it all, offering some sweets off the box on her desk. She had dyed her hair a warm shade of golden, just different enough from her old silver to make it entrancing. "Everyone is in fearful awe of the person behind our efficiency. It's not an insult to Boss — having found you is his merit."

*Only had himself to blame*, he thought.

"Oh, but I'm still a shadow," He smiled. "Hasn't our local dog told you all about it?"

She rolled her eyes, fondly.

The sweets she'd been devouring were undoubtedly his habitual morning treat; it was the most Dazai had seen of Chuuya since that day in the meeting room. Last he'd heard, he was juggling the *Guerrilla* squad Mori had put under his command — the second largest in the organization.

How unusual it felt; these days, no flashes of red appeared in the corner of his sagacious gaze.

But *use* denounced *need*, and he had nothing of the sorts; when the itch in his nape started — when the melting oil colors on the roof of his containers blinked with more insistence than slumber — he snapped the hair tie against his wrist, and relished in one more hidden blue unbelonging to a god's eyes.

"How are you, Tanaki?" he would ask, sometimes. Dazai wasn't sure he cared about the answer, but he thought Odasaku might approve of him asking.

Her eyes always clouded the same way. She hadn't touched her ribs in a long time. He knew she'd taken to going to the cemetery with Chuuya — could imagine her fingers around his arm, her crisscross scars a match to the silver *kanjis* on her child's grave.

“I’m breathing,” she would say, “I’m growing.”

Grief was too tricky of a job, even for the man with the most responsibilities in the syndicate. He thought perhaps that was why Mori never asked him to deal with the corpses he left behind; thought it both an act of understanding and a lesson on its own.

*Nothing for you to learn; nothing I need you to be human about.*

Dazai would lament his paperwork under distraught subordinates’ desks; play Hopscotch in the hallways he was slowly relearning; scribble on the paintings and the stained glass windows; steal Mori’s stuff from under his nose and hang papers of the *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter where he could only hope the elusive redhead would find them.

“That’s an ugly picture,” Elise made sure to tell him, the first time they found themselves in the hallway where the *Higher Floors*’ photographs were framed. “You’re lucky Chuuya is there to save it.”

It was, objectively, a terrible picture.

Mori had made sure to click the camera right when the astonishment from the New Year party’s revelation had tightened their lungs; a tad too close to each other in overgrown kimonos, surrounded by the blurred motions of the horrified acclamations they’d received — their eyes dug holes in the camera, a bit too young.

He wondered if that had been the intention; huffed, at himself, for even *daring* to consider something out of Mori’s hands hadn’t been planned.

“Maybe you should ask Mori to let me set it on fire,” he proposed, moving to pat her curls — stopping. “And then *you* can take the new one. And let me cut the Hatrack’s face out with some blunt scissors of yours.”

“Mm,” She sniffed. “Don’t play *smart*.”

“I would never,” He crouched down, removing the halvened pieces of her doll from her unresisting hands, careful not to touch. The genuine rage in her glass eyes was overshadowed by a curious enough sadness; he hadn’t thought her capable of something so brittle.

Another thread to Mori’s mind tapestry — why curse her with dejection, when he could have not? Was it an effort to make her realer, or easier to control?

“Do warn me if you’re about to cry,” he told her. “I don’t want snot on my pants.”

“I don’t *cry*!” Elise yelled, kicking him in the side. “Rintarou *hates* crybabies. Have you been away so long you’ve forgotten?”

*How could he.*

“He’ll try to put me in those ugly maid dresses again, if I do,” she sighed — because Mori liked them *bratty*, and liked them unreal, and weren’t the two of them a nice picture, huddled



together on the floor? *There were probably cameras on them*, he considered. Mori wouldn't leave them alone again. "And those are *ugly*."

"Mori is a weirdo," Dazai pointed out. "*You*, according to your endless soliloquies, are a *princess*. Wail to your heart's content."

Despite that — either a defect of production or a doctor's sadism — she blew blond locks off her nose, and didn't.

Visiting one of the Mafia's honorary children left him not choice but to visit the other; but apart from wide, untrusting eyes and a demand to be picked up — *only to look through the window*, they assured him; and how pathetic it was, he considered, that they'd put them in a cell with too tall windows? — Q had nothing to offer him.

The *Dragon Head Conflict* had left them more vacant than before; a distant gaze framed the curious shapes of their pupils, as they dragged small fingers up and down the blades in their arms, tempted to press.

"I promise to be good, if you let me out," Q swore, hands clenched around his coat. "Boss said — I was good, last year. Boss said I was *forgiven*."

"You are," he assured them, because many had killed more than they had and were *not* locked in a cage with too tall windows. "Somewhat unwisely. But you're also an incomparable scoundrel, and we need to make sure you won't release a metaphorical plague the moment we let you back into society."

Too difficult words; he abandoned them to munch over them, kicking their feet. Dazai had nothing else to offer them.

*You're caged because cages were made, and someone has to fill them. You're caged because paperwork is tedious and the Mafia wasn't made for children, but Mori is too greedy to understand* — but what was the point? Dazai thought they believed it all genuinely entertaining.

Being known and being feared came with boring consequences; there was no need to pick locks, when no one would have dared to close a door to his face.

"And what if someday you lose the key?" Mori asked, when he whined about it on a monthly check-up. Boxers and bandages and bruises; he dangled his legs from the hospital bed of his never-dusty clinic. "What if you find a door you can't break your bones to go through?"

"That kind of hypothetical is next to impossible," he reminded him, drowsy. "Look."

The dislocated shoulder he gave himself didn't manage to make him pass out; the merrily laughing way he attempted to stick the corner of the bed through his skull did, though.

He woke to handcuffs and Mori's exasperated sighs, and blamed the heat for the disappointment he couldn't gulp down. "Do you never get tired of pretending?"

Lights swarm on the familiar ceiling; he was fourteen, he was ten. "Pretending?"

“That you would ever end your life so deplorably,” Mori pushed sweaty hair off his forehead; no reservations to touch him when he couldn’t take advantage of the caution always lingering in the man’s eyes. “We both know you would not dare. We both know it’s not what you want.”

*You don’t know a thing*, he didn’t tell, or perhaps he did. Mori was everywhere in every instant of every day. Caring for circumstances — caring for *aesthetics*, even — who had time to pause decay?

“Lessons are the weapon of the most capable warriors,” he let him know. Perhaps, if it hadn’t been Mori — perhaps, if *Kouyou* had been to one to take him in — there would have been no reason to.

He did not roam through the *Pomegranate* to let her know; neither did he do it to exist in the same place as her — to mock those drugged-drunk thoughts he hadn’t been quick enough to suffocate. But the night was deep and the silence shattered by her women’s melodies, and he twirled around the pavilion with the most charming smile he would ever be able to carve on his face.

“*Daa-azai!*” the women from the balconies teased, as they waved enthusiastically, “I can hardly believe my eyes. Did the Executive finally grace us with his presence again?”

He bowed too deep — made a show of clenching his hands on his chest. “If you will have me, my ladies! May you forgive the endless wars that keep us divided, and may we celebrate happier times!”

They laughed.

They called him — sang his name along to those old hymns, masquerading every sound of flesh and pain coming from behind the locked doors.

He danced with the older women; accepted flowers from the amused onlookers from the balconies and gifted them to newcomers; kept his smile right where it was whenever affectionate hands from dead eyed women dragged down his bandaged skin.

Glee was a play pretend they all shared; the ease with which they worn their mask had been why he’d wandered in that place more and more nights — kneeling on the pebbled ground to attempt his very best proposal for a double suicide, allowing them too coo all over the most feared man in the syndicate that held them in their first.

He thought of Yoko, and the man she had loved — the man who had sold her to Dante’s waiting hands, Beatrice’s puppeteer fingers. She’d become a bedtime story — one the women would sometimes giggle about, as they laid their heads on his shoulder.

“Foolish,” She was young, or she looked so; when she sunk a finger on his chin and parted his lips, her curtain of wooden curls rained upon them with the delicacy of snow. He would have granted her anything, if she could have torn his skeleton out of its pocket and *wrung it out*. “There is no escape. Only shackled life or empty death.”

“You sound sure,” he considered.

Her grin was a cat’s. “I don’t need to see a corpse to smell it,” she promised him.

*Can you smell me?*, he didn’t ask.

She kissed him with tired sensuality, worn out and desperate for a last show, spider-web fingers barely brushing his jaw. Pressed herself against a column sturdier than he was; pressed him against her clothed skeleton, as every inch of him wished for more bandages, more *warmth*, the loudness of a rose-scented room where all eyes knew he could touched.

“Now, don’t be so *passionate*, Mimi!” some girls hollered, raising chuckles. “If you get attached, what will you ever do when our Demon ends up bewitched by some mobster madame?”

“An unlikely possibility,” Mimi — he learned — scoffed. She snapped her teeth mere inches from his mouth. “How is he meant to find someone, when he and the Madame’s boy are constantly with one hand down each other’s pants?”

Roars of laughter erupted; Dazai protested loudly, singing tales of dogs and slugs and necessary partnership.

Chuuya was well beloved anywhere Kouyou was worshipped; although he doubted his visits ever looked like his own. The women twirled and sang — some soft-spoken poem on a warrior with hair of fire and *long* virtues; Mimi set two fingers on each side of his jaw, enclosing him in the putrid warmth of her mouth again.

“No need to be jealous, anyway,” she whispered, pulling his lip between her teeth. Her hands were electric shocks down the length of his sides, tapping the metal frame of his belt.

There existed a bridge, he knew, between enjoyment and a brain pleurably shut down; he tip-toed, too old for his age, too young for his skin.

“We’re *debauched* here, are we not? Just bring him around with an open mind...” She dragged those last words; in the time it took a petal to dissolve, he saw sapphire and gold, unmatching eyes dragging across him like bloodied wheels on scorching asphalt, gloved hands pulling his hair — and it burned his tongue, that he did not need to *imagine* what scarred skin would feel under his fingers. “...and you can have us taking care of your burdened shoulders, *ah?*”

A familiar grip enclosed his cloat; he was pulled out of that lungs-constructing embrace, and the word was tinted in shades of pink — startlingly, through the cold air of the night and the open sky upon him, the women straightened.

“Back to work,” Kouyou’s words were a breath; he couldn’t see her paper-thin smile, couldn’t see a thing but the wrinkles of her kimono. “*Immediately*, girls.”

He recalled the dried blood on her hairpieces, as she ripped a man’s teeth out. “Madame,” Mimi dared, hesitantly, “Madame, I —“

“Back to *work*, ” she spelled out, still pleasant, still gentle. “Do remember your place. He’s not even *seventeen yet*, Minami —“

Dazai froze. He pushed Kouyou away; a move that would have granted him bleeding craters all over his chest, had she not been too surprised. He laughed.

“Don’t be such a prude, Ane-san,” he huffed. “There, there. Leave poor Mimi alone. She’s done nothing wrong. Ah, look. You made her run away. Dear, how is one supposed to make friends with you around?”

“*You* aren’t even *allowed* to be here,” the woman snapped, all pleasantries vanishing from her features. Dazai would have judged her willingness to genuinely show herself to him a victory, had it not been born out of disinterest to make him believe in her good heart. “And anyway, this is a *service*. You can’t just come around and throw yourself into their waiting hands —“

“I’m an *Executive*, though,” he reminded her, lashes fluttering. “No *High-Floors* discount? Where will our corrupted empire end up, with you acting like this?”

Balance once again restored, she looked at him with lazy disdain.

“Where will it end up with your hellish lack of manners?” She replied, scoffing. “You’ve been back for weeks, and you haven’t even brought your regards to me yet. The old Boss would roll in his grave, if he knew.”

*Aim*, he thought, entertained, *and shoot*.

“Neither did I bring them to Ace,” he reassured her. “I’ve been just too busy, you see. I’m sure your pupil must have told you all about our *tour de monde*, though, did he not?”

Kouyou made a face. “You must have had fun.”

“Fun?”

“Demonic contamination takes time and isolation.”

He laughed again. His lips were tingling. “Ask me when I kill him.”

“My doubt will remain forevermore, then,” she concluded, smile sharp.

From opposite sides of a sword no one had unshied, they kept their eyes on the other. *Don’t touch me again*, he did not say. She hadn’t touched him at all. These days, she was older, and he had never been young at all.

“Alright, then,” She offered him her arm, and it was not a question, because the Mafia had no dusty corners left for those. “Come. I have something to give you.”

Dazai grinned in that way she would know was synthetic, and hung off of her like a child, loudly recounting Chuuya’s most embarrassing tales from their months away in the tone of voice she would hate the most. Her posed contempt had never been sour on his tongue; he

had known from the beginning he would receive nothing else. A dangerous woman for a dangerous boy; in another life, they might have met at the ricochet.

“Here,” Kouyou said, at last, extracting some dusty object from one of the lockboxes at the entrance of the *Pomegranate*. She blew the dirt off and handed him the camera. “I finally sorted out my first living quarters, and this came out. I offered it to Chuuya, but, well — ”

“Our loyal dog is not very fond of pictures,” Dazai concluded, distractedly, turning the offer in his hands. A nearly invisible crack ran down the lens; a star-shaped sticker still decorated the far end of the other side, slightly more yellow at the corners. “Not anymore, at least.”

He had been a personal witness of the wall of photos in Albatross’ old apartment, and of the sheer number of faces a single person could make when made the unwilling subject of a camera. Even since *Corruption* had brought side effects along, though, Chuuya had soundly been refusing to be involved.

“Why am I the next candidate?” Dazai asked, as he watched the Executive through the lens. “You don’t even like me.”

“I never went anywhere without it, when I was you boys’ age,” She shrugged. “Try not to break that brain of yours upon it. You’re the only other seventeen year old I know.”

He blinked, owlish. “I thought I, *wasn’t even seventeen yet?* ”

Whatever her furious answer was, he paid it no mind, too busy studying the saved pictures on the ancient display. Most portrayed Yokohama, or the skyline of some European city; the latest ones, could not be older than one or two years ago.

Her devil dog, Hikari, was the main subject of the vast majority of them. Occasionally, Hirotsu or some subordinate of hers appeared. He was stunned to meet Arthur Rimbaud’s face, his frame blurred from how violently he was shaking; and then Chuuya, with short hair and a green leather jacket on.

“Oh,” He blinked. “That’s me.”

Barely less rare than Randou, and so little into frame it wasn’t a surprise he had never noticed — but there, all the same, pulling Chuuya’s hair as he screamed in his face; standing uninterested next to Mori’s never unspeaking mouth; carrying Q through the *Hall of Light and Darkness*.

“Delete those, if you’d like,” Kouyou said. “They’re somewhere in my office. As for the camera — throw it away, if you don’t want it. No one else to give it to.”

He took a picture.

Once it developed — her lips half-stuck, eyes looking in opposite directions, hands blurred — he hummed, amused.

She crossed her arms. “Great. One trinket less. You’re free to leave, Demon Executive.”

“Did I update?” He tilted his head to the side. “That’s nice. I appreciate the initiative.”

“Dazai,” she called, once he was halfway out the door. Under the gentle moonlight and the muffled hymns of her women, he thought he might have dreamed of her — only once. A younger, more tired version of him.

“You’re not allowed in here,” she repeated. Too cowardly to look at him; too sumptuous to be touched by it all. “If I see you around, Boss will be informed.”

His smile was bitten down. He wanted to laugh; give her something true to be horrified by. *Hypocrite. Blind. Unwanted. Late, late, always too late.* “And what,” He yawned, “He’ll be mad because you have no little girls around?”

She stilled. “Dazai —“

“But it’s fine if I go anywhere else, I bet?” His head hung loosely off his neck; whatever the flash in her eyes was meant to signify, he had no time to waste with it. “I really didn’t think you so prudish, Kouyou. You always manage to surprise me. It would be interesting, if it wasn’t so tedious. Let me tell you,” He leaned closer, “I’m not *you*, alright?”

Regret pooled down her ceramic face in waves. “Will not make the same mistake again.”

“Whatever, whatever,” He brushed the matter away, so bored it might kill him, so decomposed it wouldn’t matter. He bowed. “Thank you for the camera, Ane-san. I’ll let you know if I take any *boudoir* photography, ah?”

He was gone before she could ask *Golden Demon* to chase after him. He got the feeling, as he roamed up and down the echoes of the women’s funerary hums, that she was right where he had left her, with her eyes on the floor.

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In his oldest memories were hands on his shoulders, pushing him to break the surface of a rusty bathtub.

The rush of water in his ears was a sweeter lullaby than most would believe, intrusive enough to sneak in through the cracks of his teeth. No soap and no bubbles — only a tinge of alcohol in the little air he could steal, dizzying and days old, sagging his nostrils.

But when his eyes burned and his lungs constricted, all he could think was: *at last.*

It took him a moment to recognize the arms under his armpits, dragging him up until he shattered the surface of the river. His mouth gasped more air than his lungs could reasonably do anything with, greedy things he had not learned to control; he choked, spitting as his unwanted savior swam them towards the closest bank.

Back on the concrete, eyes set on the afternoon sun, Dazai groaned out a, “Truly unnecessary, Odasaku, I will say.”

The man hummed, wringing out one of the sleeves of his coat, before sneaking his arm in again. The wrinkles on his face were not deep and old enough to make him — not *mad*, no. But Dazai knew he sometimes felt the instinct to wring him out like his clothes. Everyone who spent too much time with him ended up soaked.

“Why did it look nice?”

“*Huh?*”

“You said, *this river looks nice*,” the man explained, not blinking. He had settled next to him — the concrete was all but comfortable; so that was nice of him. “Before you jumped in. Why did it look nice?”

The words hung there, along to the birds on the wires, somewhat unnecessary. Odasaku did sometimes give out the impression that, if no one in the world were to speak to him again — he would be more than content in his silence.

“If you had to pick your executioner,” Dazai asked, spreading out in a star shape. “Would you choose a man in a mantle carrying an axe, or the last sunset on Earth?”

“Eight minutes to die,” Odasaku considered, because he always caught up quickly. “Isn’t a quick death most people’s preferred option?”

“I’m not most people,” He shrugged, laying his cheek on the blistering road. He smiled up at him; grinned until it dried the water out of his cheeks. “Neither are you.”

His eyes were lost in thought. Fate seemed to rest on his next inhale; when he spoke, Dazai thought he sounded like waves.

“Anyway,” he said, logically, “Barely anyone uses axes anymore,” A pause. “Apart from that guy I met in Osaka.”

Dazai sat up, eyes wide. “*Who?*”

They walked where the sidewalk was sunnier, to dry their clothes, as the man offered his tales. Twirling around and climbing upon stone railings, Dazai studied their matching footprints until the water faded away from their soles, *oooh*-ing and *aaah*-ing all in the right places, as true as he could push his limbs to be.

If he straightened his shoulders just enough — pushed his chin back, stood just a *bit* on his tip toes, and pushed his hands into his coat pockets — they were almost the same height.

“It doesn’t make sense to me,” Dazai insisted, between one mouthful of ramen and the other, leaning against the window of their destination — a konbini. “When they’re so scared — it doesn’t make sense to me.”

Odasaku’s chopsticks were frayed at the edges; he always carried a pair in his pockets. Cars passed them mere steps from his still-soaked pants, honking with the breeze. “I don’t think true acceptance can be reached before the moment people are asked for it.”

“But most people have *years* to come to terms with it,” he replied, pressing all the noodles until they were a mush. He was eating too fast, he knew; he would be sick by the evening. “Boss read me this book, back when I was younger — A fairytale of sorts. No one, apart from the heads of the kingdom, was informed of the existence of death. People were only explained what it was mere minutes before being executed.”

“That sounds gruesome.”

“I *know*. And I could understand it, then — the terror I always see in their eyes,” Dazai huffed. He had spent the whole morning conducting executions; the sound of jaws splitting open against a sidewalk was familiar, at that point. “Minutes to understand the concept of fatality? Of course people would go insane. But that was just a book. This is real life.”

“Books *are* about real life,” Odasaku pointed out. “No one can come up with anything they haven’t seen at least once. Perhaps that was what the author was implying — that none of us knows the *true* essence of death, until it comes.”

“Death is death. What is there to understand?”

“Life is life,” he proposed, then, shrugging. “Does that make it easier to understand?”

Dazai hummed. “Synonyms.”

His arm appeared in front of him; not touching his chest directly, but pushing him back from a passing bicycle all the same. “Is *synonym* tragic or comic?”

“*Tragic*. Of course.”

“How come?”

“Too many repetitive syllables. Say, Odasaku,” He slurped the last of his ramen, throwing the package into a nearby can. His hands settled upon two sides of the parking rack, pressing to separate his feet from the ground. He swung: “If we cannot change the verity of death, then, are we all not dead — from the moment we open our eyes, until we close them?”

Odasaku seldom said what he did not believe to be true; though he would have insisted his word wasn’t unshakable honestly, Dazai had yet not to take something he said as such.

Dazai was all but blind to trust; someone so eerily amusing, simply, could never be *wrong* in any ways that mattered.

“I don’t think so, no,” he said, eons later.



Disappointment crowded in his chest. “No? Why not?”

“Well, there *is* something in the middle, isn’t there?” He spoke as if unfamiliar with the concept; watching it all from some rain-wet rooftop. Odasaku knew all about humanity; it wasn’t a matter of feeling it on his skin, though. “That’s what makes them so afraid, I believe. What they will *lose*. No one would be scared to lose death, so there must be something else.”

“Something else?”

“You wail and you die,” he said, and his tone said he was quoting something. “These are two things no one needs to be taught. But many more need time to be learned, so there’s the *in between*. And however bad it might be, I don’t know if it deserves to be revered as a simple *and*.”

“Oh,” Dazai blinked. “That’s interesting.”

A car came to a stop right in front of their soaked silhouettes, wheels splashing puddles on their shoes. Same old dent near the left light — where Dazai had grabbed the wheel from its owner’s hands just to crash it against a stall — same old *two-masks-shaped thingy* dangling from the rear view mirror, when the driver window was rolled down.

“Great,” Ango said, running unimpressed eyes up and down their muddy exterior. “Did you two have another job in the sewers?”

They exchanged a glance.

“Shotgun!” Dazai concluded.

“No,” His eyes widened. “Wait, *no*, what —“

Despite all the whining, Ango did end up allowing them to enter his car, attempting to make Dazai stop fidgeting with every button and radio station in existence. Hirotsu Fumiko’s *Photograph* played from the old stereos as Odasaku leaned between their seats, his seatbelt dutifully on, and offered unnecessary directions.

He talked about it all, leaning out of his window to wave at every bored passerby, repeating the action whenever their stressed driver’s fist closed around the back of his coat to *pull him* back in.

“I’m still practicing my cooking,” he let them know, “And you *will* be the first to taste it, won’t you?”

“That’s debatable,” Odasaku said.

“I would rather die from strangulation,” Ango added, swatting his hand off the dashboard lighter.

“Rude,” he replied. “Ango, what’s this I hear about some pretty colleague of yours making moves on you?”

“How do you hear about *everything* —“

“I’m an *Executive*! I need to *execute* things!”

“Congratulations,” Odasaku offered, honestly. “I have experience with being a best man. Should you ever need it.”

Dazai blinked. “From *where*?”

“This job I did North Korea, I had to —“

“The only marriage that might ever happen is with my work,” Ango constantly sported eyebags and slightly ruffled hair; insomniac as Dazai was, even he had to concede that the man’s exhaustion might just beat his own. “I don’t know who is spreading these *rumors*, but rest assured that I have no time for —“

“You should direct her to *me*, then,” He clasped his hands under his chin, begging. “If she is suicidal enough to ask *you* for a date —“

“What is *that* supposed to mean —“

“ — then, she might just accept to commit a double suicide with —“

“And how are the kids, Odasaku?” the man asked, his voice even higher than Hirose’s last drawn out notes. “You said two of them have been protesting your offer to get them enrolled in school?”

“We might as well check in together,” he answered, nodding towards the esplanade in front of them. Delighted, Dazai began to open his door, ready to jump out — quickly stopped by the *click* of Ango’s finger locking them all in. At the edge of their vision appeared the building Dazai himself had bought, all those months ago, out of some curious, *detached* desire to make sure the kids would be safe. “Park there. *No*, not there. Here. Yes. Pops might just murder me if I get the van scratched.”

A borderline overwhelming fragrance enveloped them the moment they stepped inside the *Freedom Restaurant*, rusty bell chiming along to their squashing shoes — warm curry and old soup, accompanied by some economic tea and cheap beer.

A chubby man raised his spatula in a debonair wave, smiling at Odasaku in the way most people tended to smile at him — slightly perplexed, but much too amused to pay any mind to it.

“There you are,” the owner said, either not noticing or just not caring about the wide-eyed glance Ango was directing to his once-white shirt — seemingly mauled, splattered in some red substance that looked too much like blood. “Here for another cooking lesson for that birthday gift of yours, or for the kids?”

Dazai perched up. “Cooking lessons?”

“The latter,” Odasaku replied, gladly accepting the spoon the man offered him, right out of his curry pan. “This is perfect, Pops.”

Dazai and Ango exchanged a glance. If that curry was *perfect* for his standards, then most men would have caught fire just attempting to smell it too closely.

They took a step back.

*Pops* finally seemed to notice them. He grinned. “*That* must be the birthday boy, correct? Or did you find some new orphans?”

“I’m not seventeen yet,” Dazai informed him, pretending not to notice his friends’ raised ears — hoping for a slip up and a date. “But I’m assuming I’m the one all these *cooking lessons* are for, then? Odasaku, you shouldn’t have! Do you even know what my favorite dish is?”

Ever-knowing, ever-moondust Odasaku offered him a curled eyebrow. “That’s a trick question.”

His smile burned with unbridled joy. “Of course.”

“You know,” Ango intervened, as the man dragged them out and up the wooden stairs of the restaurant, “Crab would taste *much* better if you did tell Odasaku *when* he should bring it to you —“

“How do you know it’s crab?” the other two asked, with matching bewildered expressions.

He stared at them. “What, was I supposed to *forget* the hours he spent classifying every type of canned crab he has ever eaten in his life?”

“I don’t eat that much crab,” Dazai mumbled. “Do *I*? It’s very cheap. It does taste good. I did say I would pick it as my favorite.”

“You don’t *pick* a favorite,” Ango pointed out, fixing their three pairs of shoes tidily on the floor. “You just *have* one. And you’re *obsessed* with crab, so —“

“Technically, you *do* pick everything,” Odasaku said, with little concern. “Included your least favorites. If you don’t, you might end up in awkward silences with other people.”

“You would know about awkward silences.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do *I* — Odasaku.”

“It should definitely be crab,” Dazai muttered, making the mistake of pushing the door open. “I need to pick a brand, though. There’s *so many*. There’s no way I —“

A shrilling shriek pierced the air, mere pitches from cracking Ango’s glasses; three weights in total threw themselves at the man, without a care for any laws of gravity — burying him into the floor under a mess of flower-patterned shirts and gaping tooth-holes.

“*Glasses-Niisan!*”

“Kill him now!”

“Katsumi, his arms! *His arms, dummy!*”

“I *am* — “

“*Oh,*” Shinji gaped, mesmerized, waddling across the mafioso’s chest. He stole his glasses, and perched them on his too-small face. “*Oh, Glasses-Niisan* sees like when it rains!”

Ango’s screams were pointless; Odasaku did nothing more than step over that messy bundle of limbs and into the room, reaching the furthest bunk bed. Careful not to jolt her too harshly, he picked up a peacefully sleeping Sakura up in his arms.

Leaning his side on the doorframe, Dazai watched him lay scarred knuckles on her forehead, taking her temperature. Unworried and untouched — but the grip around her body was a doctor’s tool on the severed vein of some patient, laying chest open on his table. He had never seen raindrops as delicate.

“*Dazai!*” Ango cried out, hooking one freed hand around his ankle. Katsumi, Kousuke and Shinji were slamming their little fists on his back with vigor. “*Do something*, for the love of —“

“*Dazai!*” the trio shrieked, abruptly realizing his presence.

They didn’t dare to tackle him — they never had. They didn’t call him *Niisan*; nor did they reach out to pull his hair, when his tales took too long to get to the point. If coaxed with all but words, though, they would sit on his lap and teach him intricate hand-clapping games. On a good day, they would ask if they could draw on his bandages.

It was, it seemed, a good day. “I have a dragon design! A new one!” Kousuke begged. “Please, please, *please*, can I —“

Sun broke through, painting squares on the moquette and the scribbled pieces of paper abandoned all over the bedroom. They settled on the floor. Ango was plagued by Shinji and Katsumi, one on each leg, loudly discussing how to best disassemble and reassemble the man’s stolen watch; Dazai *ooh-ed* and *aah-ed* in all the right moments as Kousuke dragged some maker down his bandages, sitting on his calf.

The kids seemed to know enough about their sister’s recovery not to throw themselves at Odasaku; only Shinji whined until he was allowed to lay against his side, playing with the console he had begged Dazai to let him borrow.

“Of course,” he told him, patting his head, the way Mori did. Then, because Odasaku would have, he added: “But if you delete my savings, I will torture you. Mafia style.”

His eyes widened. “Not the tickles,” he whispered, unexplainably.

They talked. Odasaku rarely justified bringing them to visit the kids with him; it wasn't a recurring occasion, but Dazai had studied him enough to be familiar with the *content* curve of his shoulders. For some reason, though, he found joy in showing them off.

Not the right term. It was a cruel way of seeing the world, one that no one would call Dazai out for — an unfair stain on the best man he knew. *Perhaps*, he considered. Perhaps Odasaku just liked sitting in a room full of people he tolerated.

“Hey,” Dazai asked Kousuke, after finishing pointing out every wrong detail on the drawing on his arm. “What’s wrong with Yu-Yu? Did Sakura pass her fairy germs to him?”

The child was too close to tears to muster up a word — head lowered to study his markers with the same doubt he had seen on men walking to their end. He tried to make him jump on his lap, tickling his undersides, to no avail.

Shinji pulled his sleeve.

“Yu hid under the covers when we heard you three come up,” he explained, one hand stuck in the knot of Ango’s tie — uncaring of the man’s symphony of *ouch*. “The kids at school have been telling him *stories*. Now he’s always scared.”

“Just tell him other stories. A lot of them,” Odasaku brushed the matter away. “Dazai, if you could? He likes yours the most.”

“That’s why I’m *not* returning to school,” Katsume declared, one foot stepping right between Ango’s legs.

Odasaku’s features stayed unchanged, playing with one of Sakura’s chubby arms. “It’s been five months. Pops has already enrolled you for the next semester —“

“*What?* No, I’m not —“

“— He has enrolled *all* of you, actually, and Sakura will start too, as soon as she —“

“*That’s not fair!*”

“Instruction is fundamental,” Ango wheezed, holding his hands discretely over his hurt parts. “If any of you brats want to amount to anything in life, you should definitely —“

“Shut *up*, Glasses-Niisan!”

Dazai took advantage of the mess to put Kousuke on the ground. He made his way to the further corner of the room — the one bunk-bed only half occupied.

*Yu is kind of shy*, he had seen Pops try to explain to the other kids, when a fight had arisen about their sleeping arrangement. *Be nice to your brother; or he will not be nice to you*. A mafioso’s way of thinking — no matter if he was only so by association and protection. Poison spread far and always too efficiently.

Dazai settled on the floor, right in front of the evident bump underneath the superhero-adorned sheets. Because he had been raised by a doctor in all ways that mattered, he saw the hand half appearing from the edge of the blanket, and knew he wasn't sick.

He immediately saw him stiffen.

"I've checked the archives, like you asked me," Dazai said, laying his chin on his hands. "To complete that story I was telling you? I got it wrong — you were right. It wasn't *four* blown up corpses, it was actually five. I applaud your memory."

"Go away."

He stared. "What, did my story give you nightmares? Is that it? *Please*, don't tell Odasaku. He might make me eat his extra spicy curry again, and my stomach can't take it."

Yu turned around, offering him his shoulders. He was shaking from head to toe.

"Is it bullies?" he sighed, eventually. "I had those too, you know. They didn't tell me stories, though. Yours seem well educated. That's nice. It means the school your Pops chose for you is a good one. Odasaku will be pleased," He hummed. "I have it on very good authority, though, that bullies dislike yellow things. There's this colleague of mine who makes lemon shaped bombs. I could ask him if —"

"Demon Prodigy."

Downstairs, some truck driver paid for his meal and made his way to his vehicle. It roared to life with uncomfortable loudness, through the peaceful the afternoon; behind the sunlight peeking through the window — Dazai would get all burned up *again*, he knew; he got burned every summer season — it drove out of the parking lot.

He ripped the brightest of his band-aids off, sticking it to a column of the bed, blood and all. "Oh," he said. "Those kinds of stories."

It wasn't all that surprising. Pops was tight on money and schedule; that meant a school in the area had been the only possible choice. But the *Freedom Restaurant* was right at the edge of the Port Mafia territory — much too close to the borders of some other smaller gangs.

Every kid in the neighborhood had to have been warned about the dangers of the night.

*They tell bedtime about us, you know*, Chuuya had told him, once, in another bunk bed. Seemingly uncaring. He was, Dazai assumed; tales about the one *King* in Suribachi City had reached Mori's ears before any professional report. Maybe that habit was exactly what had painted his voice bitter.

"They told me you killed their dads," Gone was Yu's dangling head; the first rule every kid learned was — *the monster won't reach under the blanket*. "Saw when you and Oda came to pick us up, and — they told me you killed *my* dad, too."

"I didn't," Dazai told him, easily. "Theirs — I might have, yes. I might need to see a picture, to confirm. I killed a lot of people. *That's what shadows do* — they must have told you."

His flinch was an answer enough.

“Did they tell you the shadows’ name, too?”

He had yet to hear someone so young breathe out the unutterable. *Double Black* was a name for older lips. He assumed bedtime stories worked better without names, anyway.

He tied bunny-ears on his shoelaces. Yu gulped. “Was it the god, then? Did *he* kill my dad?”

“It’s *dog*, not *god*,” he corrected. “And dogs don’t kill parents. Unless they’re ordered to. Plus, want to know something cool?” He pulled on his blanket; Yu whined. “They don’t leave anyone alive, when they *do* kill. Take it as a reassurance, wouldn’t you?”

*A friend from work*, he had been introduced as. The children were well aware of the Port Mafia. The kids at school were probably just as aware; taunting someone under the Mafia protection was the most lowly gang members could do.

Yu’s shaking got worse. Odasaku would certainly notice soon — would walk there, smiling child still in his arms, and look down at him with —

*(Not mad, no. But Dazai knew he sometimes felt the instinct to wring him out like his clothes.*

*Everyone who spent too much time with him ended up calling him a prodigy, at least once. If not that, then — certainly a demon).*

He sighed, climbing to his feet.

Somberly, he patted the child’s head, because Mori used to do the same. “Rest assured,” he offered, because Odasaku would have soothed a crying child. He always fixed Dazai’s messes, when he let him see them. “Had it been us, you would not be alive.”

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Elise found out he had discovered some new hand-clapping games, and she got mad when he couldn’t teach her. Hirotsu stood a reasonable, polite distance from him, at all times.

One evening, he strolled around *Building Two* with Madame Tanaki’s hand around his arm, as she recounted every inch of gossip he might have missed before his return. He counted the tattoos on her arms, wondering about most of their meanings.

“— which makes no sense, truly,” she insisted, leading him towards the Infirmary. “He should know better than to believe these voices. Look at Miranda — Hirotsu is always away for work, but *she* doesn’t complain, does she?”

“Maybe Gramps is hiding his marital problems from us,” Dazai noted. “Though, from how he’s described her, I don’t think she’s prone to jealousy. Apart from the rage fits.”

“The ones where she destroys his clothes?” Tanaki nodded in understanding. “It’s just — it’s those ditzy women my dear works with. I *know* they’re filling his head with rumors about me. See what a modern woman has to withstand for the sake of working? I’m his *fiancé*. He could stand having some more faith in me.”

“Do you want me to kill him?”

She paused. “Not yet.”

He hummed. “Shame. I *really* don’t like how he says *r* words.” Though he had only met him once — the man had brought Tanaki lunch, which had certainly been a point in his favor; and he hadn’t even blinked all that much when he had found her, Chuuya and Dazai holed up under his desk, catching up with *Spider Eyes*.

“What’s wrong with his *r*?” she asked.

“Are the *ditzy women* Momo and Kaneshiro?”

“You remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Dazai huffed, “You called them *tentacles-vomiting backstabbing sluts*.”

Her hand swatted at him. “No, I *didn’t*.”

“I recall that very vividly —“

“You know,” Tanaki muttered, “For two teenagers who swear and *swear again* that they have no care at *all* for all the gossip I offer, you and Chuuya certainly do print every detail of my stories under those naughty eyes of yours —“

Dazai whined, “Blackmailing material!”

“Oh, yes,” Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, disbelieving, “Just like arguing about the current plotlines of my soap operas — which you *so despise* — is purely a study on — how did you put it? *The foolishness of human creativity* —“

“Everyone with eyes can see that Uchida is the personification of plague,” he replied. He and Chuuya had thrown popcorn at each other for that discussion, Tanaki’s frame *always* between them. “If the Hatrack is too blind to see it, I *must* get worried. He might need glasses. We can’t have him shoot at the wrong people.”

She laughed. He stood straighter; kind of longed for a cigarette, just for the good job done.



“I haven’t seen you around each other much,” she said. “I mean, you’ve been attached to the hip for *months*. I had expected you to be each other’s shadows.”

“Mori is, sometimes, generous in nature,” Dazai was keen to explain, nodding obnoxiously down at her. She had always been short — even more than Chuuya — but he had not noticed how much he towered on her these days. “For a gain, of course. I get it. The constant mutter about *Double Black this* and *Soukoku that* — It started to bore me too. Perhaps he will be merciful enough to put an end to it.”

It was a hope dead from birth, and Tanaki’s glance said that she knew it. “You know, he’s asked about you.”

He snorted. “That’s a *lie*.”

“Alright,” she admitted. “But he *asked* in all but words. And *you* did too.”

That was presumptuous — particularly from the Slug’s side. *He* was prone to obsession and unwanted thoughts; but Chuuya was as free as the summer wind. As endlessly unconcerned with his fate as the necessity of Dazai staying alive — for *his* sake; forevermore a martyr’s only scapegoat of selfishness — would allow him to be. “You watch too many soap operas.”

“You two watch them with me!” Tanaki smiled. “I’m just *saying* — I know you have this whole gig of truly despising the utter of the other’s name —“

Dazai’s jaw fell. “*Gig?*”

“There’s nothing bad about being used to each other,” she insisted. “You can dislike someone and still feel their absence in a room, you know?”

He blinked.

*Makes sense*, he thought, reasonably. Habit created expectations. Cold toes bumping against the unbandaged corners of his legs — always, *always* careful not to touch; *always* hooking two little fingers if the scratches down his arms were *too* vivid; *always* waking up back against back, *no one else to entrust it to, ever and ever* — created a hollow sort of hiss in his skeleton, asking him to turn on his side and study a darkened silhouette that had grown to be as familiar as his burned-off fingertips.

“How boring,” Dazai lamented, instead. “Tanaki. Don’t bore me.”

Gin had recovered completely. She shyly allowed him to clasp her thin hands in his, as he sat at the edge of her hospital bed.

“A little miracle from the sewers,” he told Tanaki, much to the contempt of the girl’s blushing cheeks. “A little killer! Isn’t she just precious?” She was a pale thing, smaller than a petal; the bony fingers between around his had the careful grasp of someone who was learning how to choke the life out of a giant.

*Astonishing results*, Mori had said, after one of his consultations with the secret Executive. *One would dare call her a child prodigy, if not in fear of offending you.*

*No offense*, he had replied, as it was scripted. *I take no pride in it.*

“I’ll be up by morning, sir,” she assured him, with a small voice. Liquid ink strands rained down the sides of her face; certainly more cured than it had been when Dazai had found them. “I,” A flash of stubbornness brightened her eyes, before subduing. “I will start training soon.”

“Good,” Dazai nodded. “Your Executive has already taken in a few more students. All male, once again. You don’t want to lose your streak of difference, do you?”

Vacant determination filled her hollow cheeks, tightening her grip around his fingers. She *would* survive, he knew — she also would have put a knife in his chest and run into the darkness, if allowed.

Akutagawa had been the one to run into the woods looking for the escaped criminals. But Gin — healing from the uncertain bandages her brother had wrapped around her with vacant eyes — had been the one to sink her stolen kitchen knife in the few corpses her brother had managed to leave on the floor.

A pointless show of violence.

Corpses couldn’t die, and children like her couldn’t cry. But she had dragged herself by the elbows, dirt against her wounds, and held a knife in all the wrong ways. *Port Mafia black*, from the first glance Dazai had set on her.

Akutagawa had signed both of their fates away. He had seen her lips grow blue with the knowledge.

“They’re boys,” Gin said. “It’s the only reason why they think they’re better than me.”

Madame Tanaki caressed her hair. “Never heard truer words, sweetheart.”

“There’s a solution for every problem,” Dazai said, offering her a gift from his pocket. She blinked down at one of Hirotsu’s stolen lighters, tracing the print of a lizard on its front. “Well — I can’t solve unfairness. But when you begin training with the *Black Lizards*, you *could* present yourself however you prefer.”

Her eyes widened. There was nothing desperate in the way they settled upon him. Nothing *begging*; nothing starved. If she had met him in the woods, he thought — they wouldn’t have been here, now.

Cautious, she dared: “They don’t have to know I’m a girl?”

“As much as it pains me to say it,” Tanaki intervened, “The *Lizards* aren’t the best place to be a woman in. Things are better, ever since Hirotsu took over — but the previous Boss was not particularly keen on the idea of allowing women in the Mafia. *Especially* when they had no Abilities to offer,” She frowned; was quick to wipe it off. “Still, you *could* represent a good change.”

“Unless,” Dazai pushed her chin up with a knuckle, winking. Her cheeks were too hollow to blush; she despised him as respectfully as possible. “*Unless*, of course, you have other reasons to be known as something different.”

She gulped. The flicker of *something* in her eyes wasn’t entirely unfamiliar; the Mafia did have a thing for the outcasted. “I — can?”

“I don’t see why not, little spider,” He booped her nose. “Just win that duel of yours against your brother, and I’ll spread the voice of the *Akutagawa brothers* myself.”

The web tore at the seams.

She was fast to hide it, but her grasp around her sheets was not quite controlled enough yet. Tanaki made a face. “Sir,” Gin said, undeterred, “I was — thinking.”

Dazai leaned against the feet of the bed, curling an eyebrow.

“I am — *honored*,” Gin said, decisive even in the little hesitation she showed to look him in the eyes. “To have the occasion to compete for such an important rank. However, I don’t think mine and my brother’s fates should depend on each other.”

“You don’t think?”

Something in his voice shook her fingers; still, she insisted: “They have, our entire life. It’s a childish request, but — I don’t want things between us to turn sour. Ryuu, he is — Trying. Sir, he *really* is trying.”

“I know he is.”

Startled, both women snapped their eyes in his direction.

A short time to be known as the personification of any and all frustrating failures Akutagawa Ryunosuke couldn’t quite avoid; Dazai supposed there wasn’t much to do about it.

He sighed. Crunching down to allow Gin the higher point of view, he explained: “Let me be very frank with you, little spider. If I didn’t see any minimal effort from your brother, I would simply kill him.”

She didn’t flinch; didn’t protest. Only set her jaw.

“And if I didn’t think a fight between you two could show me *useful* results,” he added, just blank enough to turn Tanaki’s surprise into a frown. “I wouldn’t have proposed it. I’m not trying to punish either one of you. I don’t do things that won’t benefit the Mafia. It would do you two well to remember that, yes?”

Gin lowered her eyes.

“Should either of you *not* give their all during this trial, though,” Dazai sighed, again. “Well. That would be very annoying. And a direct show of disobedience. Unlike my ideas — *those* do warrant a punishment.”

“I —“ Her lips trembled; she pressed them tight. *Good*, he thought, *good, good; what are you teaching her, old bastard?* “We wouldn’t dare, sir.”

“I want to be clear, Gin,” He searched her eyes; dug as deep as one was allowed and then *lower*, where men would not attempt to avoid his gaze any longer. “If you lose on purpose, I’ll know. And when I know, I *will* kill him.”

A bone deep terror veiled her eyes, sticking ruined eyelashes together — terror and *rage*, never ending and aimless. The day he had brought a car to the slums to take them away, she had kept her eyes on the rear view mirror the whole time — holding her brother’s wrist like his bones might at least *listen to her*.

“I won’t, sir,” she promised — bloodied teeth in his throat. “I won’t. He — He would hate me for it. I would despise myself.”

*For him*, he thought. *For him, you’ll do worse.*

*Would he?*

“Wonderful,” He ruffled her hair; traced the almost erased mark Rashomon had left on her cheek. “Seeing your clear understanding, I trust you won’t say a word to your brother about this conversation. I hope you won’t prove me wrong.”

Spider-eyed Gin set her jaw. “No, sir.”

“Wonderful. You’ve got time. Rest a bit more, would you? Nights are always longer in Yokohama,” Dazai winked again. “You’ve got some boys to *out-man*, don’t you?”

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Via some unspoken agreement, Dazai was not allowed in the *Old World*.

*It’s a goddamn bar*, Chuuya would have argued, unimpressed, had he been confronted with that staple of truth — because he was flippant where it mattered and he had too many things that mattered to be flippant — *do whatever the hell you want*. Dazai had it on good authority that his seat never changed — right by the pool table the Flags had preferred. Dazai had it on good authority that sometimes he scratched his pricey shoes against the too-new tiles, unmindful of how Kouyou would tut at the ruined leather.

Now, she would say, *this is no Suribachi*.

He had it on good authority that he wasn't allowed in the *Old World*.

"Alright," Aki Haruka — some *Lizard* in a pink ribbon and a particular interest in the *curve of Dazai's eyeballs*, as *per* her own words — dared, a bit lost. "But — wait. Was this before or after Vice Executive Nakahara locked you in the vents?"

"Pay attention," Dazai reprimanded. "*I'm* the one who locked *him* in the vents. You think I'd ever give my back to him in a secluded space? What if tried to sniff my backside like the dog he is?"

The mental image caused her a flinch. "And then he demanded you stay out of the bar because of that?"

"No. That was before, "He tapped the brim of his glass, spinning around on his stool. Through his turning vision, she was a rather pretty speck of full lips and the same apathetically murderous eyes the *Black Lizards* shared, dressed in green. When he dragged his vowels out, she blushed. "Around the time he got that ugly new eye color? I told you about that."

"You told me all about a lot," Aki replied, cheerfully tight. "I'm still trying to place the hat controversy."

"The less you think about it, the better," he advised. He pinched the space between her thumb and forefinger, gently, startlingly a nerve that raised her hand — grabbing ahold of it, he kissed her knuckles. "Such disheartening visions could fade that beautiful color in your eyes."

She nodded, seemingly amused. "Beautiful things should only look at beautiful things."

"Oh?" He grinned. There was a vitality in her eye-wrinkles that pulsed like blood out of a dying severed limb. "Should I look at you, then?"

She huffed. He squeezed his heart through the jacket, recalling the way the men at Ace's Casino tables treated the girls about to win them a fortune. He leaned in to stage-whisper: "Though, *my* colors might fade from the intensity."

"Might they?"

"It's bound to be an equal exchange. The horrid and the marvelous aren't all that different — most small-minded people mistake one for the other with ease," Dazai confirmed. Bitterness scrunched up his face. "That despicable hatrack would know all about it."

The curve of Aki's eyes turned pained.

Whatever that poison was, it didn't manage to sour her enough not to let out a giggle when Dazai grabbed the base of her stool and spun her around, swapping their drinks to leave her with the fuller one.

"How gentlemanly," she complimented, elbowing him. "Going straight for a girl's heart?"

“Always,” he assured, earnestly. “In the most literal, vividly flesh-like sense. In fact — how would you feel about a double —“

Behind a monocle, a grey eye started ticking the moment it met Dazai’s own.

His smile fell.

“You calling me to come here — it *must* be a ploy to show off how vengeful slugs can be,” he loudly whined, stomping, as Hirotsu dragged him away from Aki’s startled floor-deep bow. “Forgive me if I was trying to enjoy my time before my death sentence. Did I make a mistake by giving you my number, Hirotsu? Did I? I was on a *date* you know —“

“Why *Slug*, anyway?” the man wondered, undeterred, as he led him through the red brick walls and the tobacco-scented round tables.

“Once, I tried to lean my back on him, and instead of sitting up like any other human would have — he did a full split,” Dazai replied, stealing a glass from a crying man flat against the counter. “Like — a *full* split. Chin and chest to the ground. He didn’t even stop writing his reports,” He shuddered. “Do you think that’s why Kouyou likes him? Because he’s literally *spineless*? I know she likes that in a man, but —“

“Executive!” With little care for those in nearby tables he accidentally smacked in the face, Kajii Motojiro waved his arms. “*Here!* Here, Executive! Hey, waiter — do we get any discounts if an Executive buys us drinks?”

Dazai’s visits to the *Old World* had been occasional — *before*. It hadn’t taken anyone in the Mafia much to understand that finding Chuuya was a matter of stepping through those doors and having the admirable courage to interrupt one of the Flags’ pool games.

The place hadn’t changed much. It didn’t even smell of blood; he wondered what Verlaine would have thought of it — if *inconsequential* would have been too gentle of a definition.

“You don’t *need* discounts,” Hirotsu said, as he straightened the man’s stool before he could fall. One of his lighters had been abandoned mere inches from Kajii’s green scarf; Dazai’s fingers subtly snuck forward to steal it. “You get paid an obscene amount just to tool away —“

“Not nearly enough for all of my efforts!” he snapped. “I’ve been spending night and day studying those *boring* Ability-bullets — Sergeant Maresuke’s ones? The Senator? They’re — *hic!* — not even lemon shaped! Not even scholarly enough to wonder about their own annihilation — they just want to kill!”

“I assume that’s the point of death.”

“*No!*” Kajii snapped, wildly enough for the lemon bombs hanging from his coat to dangle in the open. Subtly, people from nearby tables moved their seats further away. “No, you heathen, *listen to me* —“

The scientist's loud protests — and the old man's attempt to divert the attention from it — did nothing to pull the gazes of the entire bar away from Dazai.

The attention had stopped being intriguing some time after the third occasion of him peeking from behind Mori's back during a meeting. What it had never stopped being, though, was useful; when he sighed, and took advantage of Hirotsu's curved back — looking for his lighter on the floor — to step onto one of the shaking seats, he didn't even have to click a spoon against his drink to call for attention.

"Good evening!" Dazai waved. The gesture seemed to horrify part of the crowd, as the voices grew lower and lower over the music. "Forgive the interruption. Do pile up your order on Chuuya's tab as a reward. Miraculously, did any of you see where the resident Hatrack might have gone when he left? *Drunken than a sailor*, I was told?"

Glances were exchanged.

Dazai's arms fell. "Seriously? He's *that* tiny you didn't see him?"

"Sir, can you get your foot off my back?" Hirotsu questioned, still bent in a half.

"You better start remembering," he let the crowd know, frowning. "Executions are anything but far and within these days, don't you know?"

The crowd stood so fast the lights trembled along.

"I was joking," he said, blank faced.

They were slow to sit down again.

He sighed again, jumping down to land on his seat, head tilted back against the headrest. "He's small, vibrant like a fire alarm and louder than the trumpets of Judgement Day," he noted, scrubbing his forehead, "*How* did you lose him."

"We didn't *lose him*," Kajii whined, words slurring as he drowned against the table. "He just set off. Good luck catching the — *hic!* — the guy who can walk on the roof. Too hard! Too hard!"

Murmurs surrounded them. No one could truly *whisper* in a bar. *Nothing better than being looked at*, Kouyou used to say, wiping blood prints off the floor — from shoes of men willing to die for her approval. *In our line of work?* Dazai would question.

*Of course*, she'd huff. *We must hide under the sunlight. At the very least, let us be seen when it's dark.*

*What are we*, he hadn't told her — because she wouldn't have laughed, and there was no other reason to speak — *What are we, vampires?*

"Executives don't get discounts," Dazai let Kajii know. Some low ranked punk had fallen to the ground in his haste to offer his seat to him — he juggled with the idea of taking his gun out, just to watch him pale. "Ane-san said so."

“Women and drinks aren’t the same thing,” Kajii made him notice.

“She has boys, too,” Dazai shrugged.

Murmurs raised, minimally.

Hirotsu cleared his throat, directing him a glance — ruff and exasperated. “I apologize for the late summoning, Executive. I wasn’t quite sure of who else to call.”

He cringed. “Don’t *ever* say those words in regard to the Slug *to me* ever again, would you?

Reaching out to slap Dazai’s shoulder amiably, Kajii ignored Hirotsu’s aborted attempt to cut his hand off. “Why don’t you catch him? *You* can do it. *Y’two*, always — *hic!* — always in each others’ shoes, aren’t you!”

Horried glances gathered at their feet; Hirotsu stared at the ceiling. Dazai turned his head to stare at the sweaty hand hooked on his coat.

“Kajii,” he called.

“*Yesss* — Yes, sir, Executive sir, sir Executive, yes.”

“Do you think you could lend me some lemon bombs? There’s this kid I know who might be interested.”

“At a *price*, certainly!” the man roared, immediately standing to open his coat. The nearby patrons flew their chairs in a haste; Hirotsu pulled him back into his own by the scarf, choking him. “How about you find a way to convince Madame Tanaki to give a chance to *slightly* younger —“

“You’re Dazai, right?”

The man was tall, and sporting eyebags a shade darker than the violet of bruises. A smaller man was half hiding behind his frame; when Dazai opened his eye to confirm, he squeaked.

“As in *Chuuya*’s Dazai?” he hissed, not low enough, to his makeshift wall.

“As in *Executive* Dazai, you moron.”

“Hamamoto, you *know* I don’t get how this whole hierarchy thing works —“

*Chuuya*’s —

The crests in Dazai’s brain had paused a few steps behind. He thought he should have been surprised by the way Hirotsu caught the slightest stiffening of his abandoned leg; he thought maybe that might have been asking too much.

A mixture of offense and hesitation had his fingers spasming. He tapped them on the table instead; jumped to his feet so fast, both the men in front of him lowered in a bow. *Chuuya* is



*one of the shadows, too*, he thought about saying, pointlessly, as he recognized their faces. *You play pool with him, though.*

“You spilled your drink on you,” he let the taller one — Hamamoto; rancid street kid, second in command of the *Guerrilla* squad; and whether the two were connected, only Chuuya’s settlement scars knew — know.

“I’ll get another,” the man reassured. He had a debonair air to himself, lined by something that told him he had heard *all* of Dazai’s stories. “Since Chuuya is paying.”

“Quite,” He closed his eyes again, bored, vaguely agitating his arm in his direction. “Any idea of where he might have wandered off? Boss will be on my tail if he drunkenly takes down the Ferris Wheel. Imagine the *paperwork*.”

“Madame Tanaki likes paperwork,” Kajii sighed, positively enamoured.

“She’s engaged,” Hirotsu informed.

“I have bombs,” he reminded him. “Many of them.”

Dazai traced the cracked lines of his wrist watch. The display had never been repaired after Hirotsu’s accident during the *Dragon Head Conflict* — for unexplainable reasons, instead of just throwing it away, the man had given it to him.

*Saw you look at it, when* — he had said. And nothing else. *When*, he had thought, *when* — and sentimentalism made sense in some corner of his mind; it was merely untouchable.

He had kept the watch, though.

“Not if you give them to me. Well?” he insisted, obnoxiously twirling his arm again. “If you don’t have anything to say, I’ll just go see if Aki can still be amenable to duel midnight drowning.”

The two *Guerrilla* exchanged a glance.

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Apart from the gravity-mauled grab handlers on the train to Tokyo, the congestion of police cars parked around the French Embassy had been all the giveaway Dazai had needed.

“A pigeon attack?” he guessed, jumping to walk across the hood of one of the blaring vehicles — landing a step from Officer Matsuda, braced by the dirty looks of the other officers. “No, no, wait, don’t tell me — it was raccoons.”

“Why raccoons?” the man questioned, just seasoned enough not to do more than glance a bit surprisedly in his direction.

“Pseudo opposable thumbs,” he replied, nodding towards the vandalized, vaguely shattered frontal wall of the building. The blue and red lights of the far painted the glass panels in purpleish shades; the crowd of police officers seemed more perplexed than concerned. “It’s actually a rotating system, but — well. How else would they have written that adorable,” Dazai tilted his head to the side, squinting, “*Fock de Francais spyeyes graffiti*.”

“Maybe it’s monkeys,” Matsuda theorized. “If monkeys know how to write checks, now.”

Dazai curled an eyebrow.

He handed him an evidence bag. Inside was a crumbled bank check — amounting for a sum much, *much* larger (???? *add 0s on need*, it said, *too many fuckin’ zeros*) than what the building would need to rebuild the broken glass panels, fallen walls and badly spelled out graffiti.

Scribbled on the back, as brusque as sincere, was, *m’fault*.

“Charming monkeys,” he concluded.

Matsuda yawned, tapping his bald head with the pen he kept in his pocket — *never the same one the day after*, according to Chuuya. “What brings you here?”

He studied the police tape, jumping from one leg to the other to keep warm. *The road of smashed street lights led to the station*, he could have said. *And he left checks for that too*. Or — “Why did they send you here? Yokohama is in shambles. The Ferris Wheel was *mysteriously* pushed into the Bay by unknown forces.”

“Low on staff. There’s a summer parade in the city,” Matsuda darted a glance his way; leaning on the car, he lowered himself just enough to get on Dazai’s level. “And I’ve got some experience with the kind of destruction that was described in this report. ‘Thought it’d be better if I was here.’”

“To lie to the State,” he nodded.

Matsuda flinched. “To keep an eye open.”

“And your mouth closed. How honorable,” A group of officers exiting the building dangled some new evidence bags. Chuuya’s handwriting was too polished — too familiarly unsure in the starting strokes — not to recognize. “Hey. Can you get me those?”

“I don’t know,” the man muttered some numbers on his radio; a tad too casually, he added: “Can you get Chuuya out of the Mafia?”

He paused.

“The Hatrack likes his shiny jewels so much he’s willing to bleed for them,” he replied, easily, studying the gathering crowd behind the cars. The amusement stuck between his teeth tilted his lips up just *so*; he bit them. “What makes you think I could unemploy him at will?”

“Don’t know, kid. I get the feeling that if anyone could —” Matsuda declared, his eyes on the building, “You’d have a good shot.”

The *Old World’s* lights; the pool balls on that green coverage, rolling aimlessly. The earnest look in subordinates who didn’t fear Chuuya at all and who ought to have learned his name from bloodier roads. *Chuuya’s Dazai*.

“I would have had him fired day one if it was that easy,” Dazai chanted, chin high. “Mutts stick like the plague, haven’t you heard? Smell the same, too.”

“He’s got you on a leash,” the man scoffed.

He snorted — something inside his brain started creaking in a completely different taste; a bitterness that almost had his fingers twitch for a gun. *Chuuya’s, Chuuya’s, Chuuya’s* —

“You would know,” he landed on, with the childish smile that always got his men to straighten up.

The apartment complex where Chuuya had lived before the *Dragon Head Conflict* was still an official Port Mafia possession; ever since the boy’s position had been revealed, though, only the lower ranks had been allowed to fill in its corridors.

The *WORKS IN PROCESS* sign was still hanging from the door of Chuuya’s original place; Dazai tapped two knuckles on it on his way up the stairs, picturing white sheets hanging over the old walls and abandoned French textbooks on the one piece of furniture. An eerie sort of nightly silence pierced the halls; not a trace of the neighbors Dazai had once gone around leaving flour bombs with Chuuya’s name on them under the doors of.

He tore the evidence bag apart with his teeth right as he pushed Albatross’ apartment door open with his shoulders.

“What’s this I read about a ‘*they’ll blame it on us*’ business, Chibi?” he asked, words muffled, reading the messy note he had left on the paper inside the bag. “If you wanted a rematch for my *crushing* victory in that Serbian Arcade —“

The *ding!* of an email came from behind the counter.

Hair a mess and cheeks an unmistakable shade of scarlet, Chuuya was huddled by the wall of pictures attached to the kitchenette, computer in his lap. The sole light of the kitchen hood gave the room a strange tinge — the sepia texture of an old photograph, faded where the mirrorball had been smashed and left with its sharp edges, and the colorful couches had been pushed around to hide the holes the aggressor and Chuuya’s fight had left in the tiles.

Hirotsu had mentioned something about helping Chuuya clean around — getting rid of Ōmu's feathery body, too. It was a sufficient job — he supposed the nape-cold discomfort was his own issue.

Dazai had it on good authority that he wasn't allowed at the *Old World*. But new ownership or not, he *knew* — in the way a less skeptical devil stepping through a haunted house would have escaped from — that he wasn't welcomed in that apartment.

“So,” he started — like he hadn't known that was an order Chuuya wouldn't listen to. “No penthouse, then?”

Chuuya grunted. His eyes were lidded; lines over lines of work reports succeeded each other on the computer, painting his face in cobalt shades.

“Who starts doing their job when they're hammered,” Dazai muttered, sinking to the floor.

The pictures got slightly crushed against his back, when he leaned on the kitchen drawers — all Chuuya did was growl some vague treat, and sit close enough for the naked skin of his hand to touch his knuckles. *You've got to break them in*, Mori had said, about the first pair of shoes he'd gifted him. *What's a bit of blood?*

“Seriously,” he insisted. “Who's coming for the Mafia? Is the French Prime Minister angry that we killed his top spies or something?”

“Cold,” Chuuya replied, nonsensically.

“It's summer.”

“Yes,” he insisted. He squinted at him very hard; the fatigue in his distracted breathing pattern pressed from his shoulder against Dazai's own. On his computer, emails regarding the graves property for the victims of the *Wild Geese Orphanage* were blinking impatiently, waiting for a response Dazai probably shouldn't have let him come up with while drunk. “So why is it cold?”

“Global warming,” he offered. “Did Ane-san insert anything about the Industrial Revolution in those catch-up studies of yours?”

“You,” Chuuya started, clearly irritated. He started drooling shortly after — cleaning it off with the back of his glove, he let his head fall back against the kitchen with a *thud!*.

“Streetlights,” he insisted, at last.

“You really do have a vendetta against those,” Dazai concurred. “Is it a complex? Height issues? Was there not enough electricity in dear old Suribachi?”

He didn't answer. His fingers ran across the emails, spouting badly spelled nonsense. Dazai let him, extracting his console from his coat to settle in.

Some distant pipes hummed over the click of the keyboard and the joystick buttons; an electric sort of buzz came from inside the sharp edges of the broken mirrorball, filling the silence with a gentleness that was weirdly familiar. Dazai thought of Romania, and of Korea,

and of Canada — of bandaging their wounds in silence once it had gotten too cold to freeze their tongues arguing, and sleeping on the same bed.

*An error in the system*, he thought. Nothing more. A fluke that felt like a heartbeat.

Sometimes around his thirteenth round, a head of damp hair — *Rin taught me*, Chuuya had said, the first time Dazai had watched him stick his entire head under the faucet to get sober — dropped on his shoulder, clanking against his bones. The echo traveled all the way to the smallest moles on his feet — it reverberated quietly.

In barely intelligible words, cheek squished against his good cashmere, Chuuya muttered: “My stupid head hurts.”

“Must be your brain rattling around all the empty space. How bad?”

“Y’know,” His tongue plastered itself to the roof of his mouth for several seconds, “Budapest, when — Got caught in that shitty shootout — It took them fourteen hours to extract us.”

The memory made him wince. Rarely had he felt his limbs as unwilling to cooperate; a living bruise with no hope of ever standing, hidden behind a white van carved in bullets.

“Now you’re exaggerating,” He shivered. “Might have something to do with you drinking yourself to stupor on a Wednesday night.”

His fingers offered their best attempt at obstructing the screen from his eyes; his hand, uncoordinated and sluggish, fell somewhere near his elbow instead. “Hamamoto offered. I wasn’t,” A hiccup, “Gonna refuse.”

“Careful now,” Dazai pressed; the princess on his screen decapitated the nearest enemy. *Pot, kettle* — or however it went. “They might start fearing your aim will be worsened by something other than your offensive height.”

Mid that humming melody of his — a tad too drunken, and almost too confused to be recognized — Chuuya huffed. “I could shoot you with my eyes closed.”

“With an actual, legitimate gun or with your caveman hands?”

“Can’t I have fun with the actual decent people in this syndicate?”

He tilted his head to the side. “And mourn French secret agents?”

“Nothing to mourn,” His legs spread on the ground; he dangled his ankles back and forth, watching the silver edges of his combat boots shine under the mirrorball shards. “A whole lot to be pissed about.”

“As long as you don’t throw up on that piece of rock you call Rimbaud’s grave,” Dazai paused. “Actually, that might just be *very* fun. We should go. Now. Immediately.”

His punch was stronger than it should have been, but weaker than norm. “You’re not funny,” Chuuya announced, going cross-eyed, trying to wiggle a finger in his face. “Only the Jiggly-Man is.”

He blinked. “Who?”

“*Shhh*,” He squished his cheeks between his fingers, staring at some indistinct part of his face with serious eyes. Chuuya didn’t drink to mourn — that would have implied he mourned at all. He knew he had taken up drinking because Mori had told him smoking was bad for him. He smoked, still — but he bought Beatrice’s favorite wine and kept it sealed. “He hears. *Everything*.”

Dazai hadn’t scribbled the date of Kazuko’s demise anywhere. He was sure to forget it, give it a few months more. Dazai never remembered the irrelevant, and Mori never forgot a thing.

He stuck a finger under his choker, and *pulled*.

“Tell me,” the boy insisted.

“River,” he said. “Car. Roof,” And then he got graphic — and he got vacantly inspired to a heavenly extent, out of pointless pettiness and illuminated boredom, talking of currents against old bruises and waters down protesting lungs — and how it *felt* to breathe with worms in his ears and earth in his pockets. “And this strange box method — I’ve been reading about it.”

“I can’t wait for you to succeed,” Chuuya said. His head sank deeper against his shoulder, and if Dazai could have hammered his bones open and fit him there — where he couldn’t blind his days and haunt his nights; where he would have to keep quiet, no *Chuuya’s Dazai* and no *he’s got you on a leash* — he would have. “I should burn that book of yours.”

“Conflicting statements,” he noted.

“At least it’s summer,” Chuuya yawned. Dogs knew better than to bite the blade out of the master’s hand. Dazai knew Rimbaud had died a year ago, and he knew the Flags had planned a party for Chuuya’s six months in the Mafia, and he knew they had died, and he knew nothing of the utterly human ache in Chuuya’s bad-omen eyes. “I can jump in rivers. Try and stick to that.”

Dazai paused.

He had no time to add anything to it — by the time the videogame level got unbeatable enough to be pointless, Chuuya was snoring with his fingers stuck to the ? on the keyboard, leaving an email draft full of questions on the screen.

After some inner discussion, Dazai pressed send.

“You’re stickier than a slug,” he concluded, annoyed. “And you’ll get mad at *me* about it by the time you’re sober, won’t you? Hypocrite.”

There was nothing to think about but the rush of wind through the windows; a ghost's petty insistence that he shouldn't have been let in.

He let Chuuya drop to the floor, gingerly settling one of the half torn blankets over his strange sleeping pose and the illuminated laptop. *Steal his bed*, the more childish part of him ordered — so he stretched, satisfied, and dragged himself to his futon, next to Albatross' untouched bed.

*People could not be owned*, he considered, as he pulled the futon where Chuuya's freckled face appeared in the doorframe — people could only exist. *Odasaku would agree*. Would wring him out with all his dirty laundry, and never hate him enough. And yet, *Dazai, Dazai as in Chuuya's* —

"*Shit*," the boy murmured, in his sleep. It was quiet; it was loud enough to rattle the barely repaired windows. He slurred: "I hate your fucking face *so much*, man."

"You're a person-adjacent manifestation of hemorrhoids yourself," he called, over the horridly loud snoring coming, once again, from the boy's mouth. As he fell asleep, Chuuya began to hum. "Night, night," he chanted, too, because Chuuya would get mad the moment he woke up with back pains — and that ought to be enough reason to reject his own, free, sea-wind fresh bed.

*If it wasn't*, Dazai considered, snuggling just close enough to steal some warmth. Dazai was seventeen, at last, and no one needed to know. He fell asleep to the sound of that melody he really, sort of, *almost*, wanted to know where Chuuya had stolen. *It would just be a means to an end instead*.

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Quiet and unnoticed, a snowflake floated down the sultry air, landing inside the remains of a muddy puddle.

## Chapter End Notes

dazai: i love being an executive

dazai: i do, however, miss the feeling of being happy,

“tragic or comic?” — fun fact! this game was taken from irl Dazai Osamu’s “no longer human”

“eight minutes to die” — fun fact! if the sun exploded, it would take roughly 7-8 minutes for the damage to reach the earth and destroy us.

hey there! as they kind of late upload might have let you notice, i’m currently in Work Hell, which means i do have to run immediately. as always, i hope you enjoyed this chapter, and thank you so so so much for all the kindness on the last one and the one before. thank you so much, seriously. i hope to see you next time (so we can figure out what the hell is it about snow flakes... anyway)

keep warm and have a wonderful day <3 see you soon!!



# LIKE

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xxiii.*

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*Case number: 62770097*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] dealt with the business upon the [...]*

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“You,” The photographer’s shoulders were sprinkled in fresh, unexplainable snow. Someone would probably be sent to clean the carpets soon enough, if Akutagawa’s withering look didn’t take his head off with the snow first. “Stand straighter, please.”

Tactile indignation wrinkled his forehead, right under the atrocious tufts someone kinder might have called *bangs*. “I *am* standing straight.”

“*Ryuu*,” his sister hissed, blankly, from the other end of the gold-lined chair placed between them. “Please.”

Small, pale limbs drowning in that velvet — and the unchanging knowledge of being the one subject who would not appear more grown from the last Hallway picture — Elise huffed. “Not this again.”

“We’ve been here for *hours*,” Akutagawa insisted. The nurses had made Gin promise not to exert herself; acutely, Dazai knew that the boy would have rather died than admit the problem. “There’s no way it’s supposed to take —“

“He does have a point.”

Silence crawled down from the crimson curtains, parted over a summer sky plump and soft with snow. It lowered every shoulder in the room by a different notch, settling with insistence on the photographer’s curved spine.

“The hours of the day are truly never enough,” Mori continued, nonchalantly, as if he hadn’t noticed the communal frostbite. “And our Executive does have to deal with a certain business, does he not? Let’s speed up the process. What was it again, Dazai?”

“A traitor,” he offered, boredly. “You *know* that. I left you a report on that.”

“One that *I* wrote, jackass,” the stiffened frame next to him muttered.

The first flash went off.

Mori met Dazai’s eyes. Wordlessly vacant, face as contrite as those portraits had taught him — he settled his hands on Akutagawa’s shoulders before the second flash could.

It went off right as the boy’s skeleton crumpled up under his grasp. *Hunger* was an adjective that fit him too well for Dazai to bother searching for something more precise — Akutagawa curled his spine, as if he could have branded his fingertips through that coat of his and directly on his viscera. He bowed, as if managing to escape him would be graded, too.

*Not stupid*, he considered, unimpressed with that conclusion. Someone *genuinely* stupid wouldn’t have taken a pair of hands as a warning.

“There we go,” the photographer said, a tad nervously. “Just a few more.”

The Akutagawa siblings had clearly never been subjected to a similar parade; bodily flinches took over whenever the *click!* went off, squinting at the sudden light. Dazai had never blinked as a picture was taken — not for as long as he could remember. In his memories was the

brush of kimonos against wooden floors; a hand covered in rings. *If you close your eyes, I'll know.*

Last year's portrait session had wiped the habit off Chuuya's mismatched eyes. Elise, were one to humanize the wind, had spent too many nights staring straight into the lightbulbs of Mori's clinic — her head of golden silk in Dazai's lap, like he might just make her the favor of snapping her neck.

*I'll do you if you do me*, he had offered her. But she was plastic and a man's desires, and she hadn't said a thing.

The shined tip of a brand new shoe nudged the side of his own.

"Executive," the photographer called. "Less — ah, *bored*, if you could?"

"How impossible," he sighed.

Chuuya's hair was tied in the way Kouyou liked. One of his gloved hands was secretly pressed against the small of Gin's back — a cheap excuse for help to her exhausted frame; a jarring, and yet *not*, intervention at the hands of someone who had never even *seen* the Akutagawa siblings before that morning.

*Jarring*, he mused, composed as the picture demanded. The boy had been holding his breath since he'd come in. *And yet not.*

Most knew that the local god despised photographs. Whatever Mori had told him, before the photographer arrived — *if he sees anything, perhaps, we will get rid of him*. Or maybe, *we can paint it over, and make you as human as you need*. Or maybe nothing of the sorts, because stubborn, *uncertain* Chuuya would not want his Boss to know that he feared remembrance of a reflection that wasn't his — had achieved the nod the man had wanted in response.

It hadn't chased the haunted look out of his unmatching eyes.

*One shadow got sewed up*, he considered, *and the other got spread open*. It was control all the same.

"Miss Elise," the photograph called, with a careful glance to Mori's direction. "Less smile."

Doctors knew needles, but not designs — *there were other concerns*, the man had shrugged, *when a man was bleeding out on your table*. But Mori lacked in all but weaving techniques; in all but his variety of threads and yarn, to wrap around a throat and to choke the failing cells out. Collars and hangman knots were merely rewarded differently.

The Akutagawa siblings flinched, again, pressed too hard against the side of the seats, forever matched.

He stepped on the shoe pressed against his, careful not to move a single muscle Elise's throne wouldn't obstruct.

“We should hang this up in the Hallway by tonight,” the Boss considered, with a pleased grin. “Let everyone know our boys aren’t the youngests around any longer, right?”

A fit went through Chuuya’s frame.

*Ah*, he thought, watching him start humming his mysterious melody. Dazai didn’t feel anything in particular about it. He wondered if he should have — eerie prodigy who hung around the Boss too much, scratching his nails on every meeting room’s door; local mauled black cat that he was; and then Executive, and then a whisper through the streets, and then alive, *alive*, alive long enough not to be called a child any longer.

The back of Akutagawa’s neck was bruised; it was, he noted, a strange spot to bruise.

Steadfast, with no message in mind and no ache in his chest, Dazai tapped his blood stained shoe against Chuuya’s own.

In the blink of another flash, Mori’s eyes had fallen on the joint line of the two chairs — the point of contact he could not see. He raised them to Dazai’s face — he smiled. He knew, acutely, that the man would keep that one picture for himself.

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### **[Camera 7.8.III — Interrupted]**

There was a saying in the Port Mafia.

Yasunari did not know it.

There were *many* sayings in the Port Mafia. Most of them would spread through the ley lines of the underworld of Yokohama, brittle and hissing, tracing the paths left behind by the crimson moonlight.

Of the lower gangs who had somehow survived the *Dragon Head Conflict* — not much crowded, nor efficient; not nearly intrepid enough to do more than taunt the Mafia — most fought for the scraps of it all. Black market deals, unwanted territory, unprotected businesses. Dutifully, they learned all the sayings, and behaved accordingly.

*If rose-petal silk fills your vision*, they said, with glazed eyes, *a demon is soon to follow*.

*Where gems go without any glimmer, they slugged, dribbling card games and bad luck, soon another life is to be enslaved.*

*Day has its eyes, night has its ears, they whispered, glancing to the shadows with their fingers on the trigger, the Mafia has its Soukoku.*

There was another saying — one more recent — but Yasunari didn't know it. All he knew was that it belonged to the Demon Executive.

"Keep up," a short, glass-wearing woman — a senior member of the Demon Prodigy's *Secret Unit* — hissed. Yasunari tried to remember her name, and failed. "You can make yourself tea later. He's waiting for us."

Sending one last glance to the red stains on his handkerchief, tasting the texture of the fabric against his cold-chapped lips, he hurried up the stairs of *Building One*.

Warmth engulfed his rain-soaked suit the moment the sliding doors closed behind them; abruptly, they were welcomed by an unexplainable *uproar*, sagging the vacant *Entrance Hall* — not quite an unusual background noise, considering most of the Mafia's activities took place at night.

Every single one of the TV screens hooked on the walls was broadcasting the same emergency edition of the local weather segment — an eerily echoing cacophony born out of the meteorologist's high-pitched timbre.

"— *is still uncertain,*" the chorus was saying, bumping against the walls with the same efficiency of the pouring rain outside. "*There is no doubt that this is set to be one of Yokohama's least usual summers since the Great War; temperatures have dropped inconsistently over the last three weeks, reaching longtime unseen records. Storms have been registering all over the Kantō region, and I regret to say — It is predicted it might snow, by —*"

Almost pointedly, thunder lit up the sky, rattling the chandeliers with crystal glee.

Yasunari exhaled.

"Yes, yes, he did leave it here," Madame Tanaki was saying, half hidden under her desk, rummaging around. "But you'll have to tell him the Archivists couldn't find everything he needed. They're still working on the digital transcription of files from before the War."

"We'll tell him," his companion replied, instinctively frowning. Handing the Demon Prodigy bad news was not a particularly rewarding job.

Her fingers tapped on the marble, as impatient as she would allow herself to be. There wasn't a man in the Mafia — as far as he had seen in his six months long stay — who would have dared to outwardly insult Madame Tanaki to her face.

Yasunari knew they talked about her endlessly — about her shaking fingers and uncertain past, and the way no story to walk through the Port Mafia hadn't reached her ears at least

once. She knew every member by name, no matter how new; she showed off the tattoos on her wrinkled skin with some sort of *glint* in her eyes — hiding a story so obvious, she couldn't believe they hadn't learned it yet.

*She was*, Yasunari had thought, after their first meeting, *an evidently anguished woman*.

“Here you go,” Tanaki offered them the envelope; before she could add anything else, the deafening chorus started again.

“— *urge all citizens to stay inside*,” the reporter was screaming, fighting the destructive aim of his umbrella. “*The storm is predicted to last until next Wednesday, at least, and the wind is only set to grow more vicious. An emergency system might be put in place, after the accident on the Tsurumi Tsubasa Bridge, this morning, whose victims are still* —“

“Dear,” Tanaki sighed, changing the channel. Some Japanese drama began playing on the screens, blasting the female lead's gasp all the way to his pounding skull. “Be careful outside, yes?”

Yasunari watched raindrops stain the glass doors. *Executions*, he knew, *would not be paused for the bad weather*. “We'll try.”

Before he could follow his senior into that wet devastation, she chirped, “*Ah* — Yasunari?”

*Knows everybody's name*, he recalled. “Yes?”

“Dazai asked me to tell you something, if I happened to see you.”

The roar of the storm, mere inches from the uncertain doors — sliding open and close more insistently with each second he spent right in their middle, petrified — breached through his ears, causing a jolt of pain.

Speechless, he asked: “To me?”

*Managing to join the Port Mafia*, Yasunari sometimes considered, at the end of a glass in some hole-in-the-wall bar; with some comrades whose name he wouldn't learn, lest it made for a duty to visit their graves — *had been a miracle on its own*. But managing to join the Demon Prodigy's *Unit* had been pathetically *unreal* enough, that he had walked to the first day of his job with an old rosary, certain that he would be executed.

After that, months got blurred.

The most on-field of the Executives was the Lady of the Port Mafia, he knew; but the Demon, strategist and shooter and *not older than seventeen*, *he could bet*, seemed to have his hands in every single blood deal the Mafia had ever made.

Yasunari had worked his first week as one of the suited shadows behind his unmistakable coat, sending quiet glances to those strange bandages of his, and being hissed at by his colleagues — *do not look him in the eye*. He had come to the conclusion that he would never manage to wash that much blood away from the very marrow of his bones.

*How does he do it?*, he had dared to ask, only once, to some good-willed senior.

Bile was stuck under his tongue; a group of them had left the premise of their latest mission in a hurry, spitting and throwing up and cursing out *that devil incarnate* — the result of a particularly gruesome massacre.

The boy had stood, watching them shoot with that vacant voice of his, surrounded by floods of viscera — and he had only played with some charm attached to his phone. Yasunari had thought he looked bored. Then, once the vomit was out — he had thought he looked *envious*.

*Who cares*, his senior had answered, studying a strand of hair stuck to the blood on his knuckles. *Better him going to Hell than me*.

“Yes, to you, I’m sure,” Madame Tanaki said. “Ah, he said to tell you — *Your father knows*,” She tilted her head to the side; on the endless screens, a gun was pointed to the woman’s chest, and fired in devastatingly fake slow motion. “A weird message to pass on, isn’t it, though? Dazai can be so enigmatic, sometimes, it’s really — Yasunari, are you alright?”

Outside, it thundered. Gently, finally aided by his indecisive silhouette moving forward to drop to his knees — the doors slipped closed.

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“You should think about it twice, before opening your mouth in the presence of the Boss,” Dazai said, like an afterthought.

The sound of Akutagawa’s wet, cracking coughs didn’t quite muffle his words; neither did the rustling and murmurs of the *Secret Unit* around the destroyed flower shop. The street had been shut down a little after dinner; every body that was not bloodied and in pieces on the concrete or in the middle of fallen camellias had already run.

“Most of the Mafia spend their whole life not knowing what his face even looks like,” he continued, gingerly patting the boy’s back with the edge of a broken broom. “You’re not allowed to waste the opportunity.”

There was a red stain between his feet. It could have sprayed from the old man whose face they had cracked against the concrete; it could have fallen from his lips.

Staring at the head of once-silver hair peeking from behind the counter floor, Akutagawa asked: “Why are we allowed?”

His voice sounded like a nightmare. Some of the men hurrying around — looking for clues of the recent missed payment — threw him a half concerned look; Akutagawa answered with a chin too high for his obsession with warm baths.

*Or the sugar packets*, Dazai considered. He knew he collected them, for some reason. *And the notebooks he doesn't write on.*

“That wasn’t a starting point for a conversation,” he informed him. He sent a short glance to the gun in his hands, before going back to lazily studying the shelves of destroyed flower vases, bathed in moonlight. “Not enough cartridges, and you weren’t nearly fast enough. Do it again.”

The boy stared at the magazines Dazai had thrown to his face, along with the empty revolver. “What do *I* need guns for?”

Executions for failed payments were the most elementary job a new grunt could be given. The thin, wide eyed children the Mafia didn’t quite take in were paid to keep an ear out for them — then, usually as a training ground, the newbies would be sent to make heads bite the curb and leave the neighborhood as haunted as possible.

Akutagawa did *not*, Dazai had discovered, know what to do with a gun. He was rather great at the curb stomping, though.

“Still not a conversation,” he tutted.

“But —“

He met his eyes, unimpressed.

Frustrated, the boy attempted to slip the magazine in again, swiftly moving them from the wrist bracelet Dazai had swept off Odasaku’s arm a week ago. It was slightly too big on his bony joint; stretched by long-forgotten constant use. He was still waiting for him to realize it.

Dazai dragged two fingers down a petal — it had been red even before he had blown one of the workers’ brains off. Akutagawa’s coat was tight around his shoulders; he wondered, vaguely, if he slept in that thing.

*You lose sight of it*, Chuuya had told him, once, as they skirted past the edge of Suribachi City, *and it’s not yours anymore. It’s either the other kids’, or the street’s.*

*Are you talking about an object or something else?*, he hadn’t asked.

Akutagawa was certainly *slums*, from head to toe. It had been in the first step he had taken in his direction — in his lethal reflexes, just the kind of *too quick* to become a disadvantage. Rage and hunger were diesel in all ways: sparks to useful fire and slippery under dirty soles. Dazai had no time for aborted fireworks.

There was a little bonsai tree on the nearest window seal.



“How do you feel about plants?” Dazai asked, over a bubbling idea.

Silence stretched out, uninterrupted; only mocked by the distant traffic outside, and the sound of the *Secret Unit* fixing up the bodies in a way that would send a message.

Yokohama did always grow worse when it rained. Most of them did. Akutagawa didn’t answer.

“I asked a question,” he sing-sang.

A magazine was pushed into the gun; somewhat bitterly, Akutagawa muttered: “*That* was a starting point for a conversation?”

He blew dust off the bonsai’s window seal, watching it stick to the fogged up window. On the other side of the glass, actual, unexplainable snow framed the buildings.

Dazai extracted his own gun, and he fired.

One — two, three, five — seven. They echoed off the wall with a rumble, shutting every talking mouth from the *Unit* up with a swiftness that was vertiginous. Stillness followed with punctuality; the ricochet made a vein pulse in his cheek, plastering the sound of his heartbeat between his eyelids.

The men were left petrified, staring at the spot where Akutagawa was still standing, fingers white around his gun — caged in a wide circle by a half moon of bullet marks.

Some fragments of a vase fell to the floor.

It was awfully loud.

Dazai didn’t look at his squad; they started caring for their own business again on their own. Lowering his gun, eyes on Hirotsu’s cracked wrist watch, he offered: “You and your sister are allowed because *I* brought you in.”

Akutagawa didn’t move.

“Which means, of course, that I found something the Boss needs. Pictures can be retaken very easily, though,” He shrugged, tilting his head to study fallen decorative light bulbs. “That little photoshoot of ours? We did it many times. Should you and your sister prove yourself worthless, we would simply do another one.”

*Here’s rule number one*, he had told him, on their first day in a bloodbath. *No one is listening.*

Never an answer; they all kept looking at him for answers, and Dazai was all crammed up, all occupied, never spitting blood and never freeing his questions with it. No one would dare to make him bleed. He only had a doctor’s wisdom. *Who knows*, Mori would say, stitching up sticking cotton in the leaking abysses of his very being. *Who knows, maybe this will teach you not to do it again.*

*Not everything is a lesson*, Dazai would note. His lab coat was the dirtiest thing between those walls. He'd hang himself with that thing, one day. He had promised it to every inch of his bitten cheeks.

*No point in bleeding, if you have nowhere to put it*, the doctor would reply.

"The reason you need a gun," he concluded, offering him an unimpressed gaze, "Is exactly the one you just showcased to me. That you have been steadily, *punctually* demonstrating just how *useless* that pathetic Ability of yours is."

He took the hit in silence.

"And these are the answers to every question you have asked me today," Dazai added, eventually, taking advantage of the dust on the floor to do a spin. "I would *beg* you to take a look at the circumstances and consider two things: if asking any more of them is a wise decision, and if answering *my* single one is such a hard chore."

Akutagawa didn't speak.

"That *is* a starting point."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded, turning around. Picking up the fallen bullets was a boring task — and yet he did it every time, always cursed by the manners printed into his flesh. *No one likes a mess, do they?*

"Bonsais are fine," Akutagawa added, a tad quieter than before.

He never truly sounded afraid; he only ever sounded angry. *Lost*, maybe — a last survivor shooting the waves that had devoured his most precious possessions. Dazai had no use for a scared student; the last thing he needed, though, was one that couldn't walk if unblinded by the sun of *something to avenge*.

He picked up his fallen bullets. *I'm not a god*, he wanted to tell him — as if a starved, irate child had ever needed any deity that could do more than put bread on his plate and attainment in his future.

Akutagawa extracted the magazine from his gun, and put it back in.

Curtains of black rained on his pale, scarred face, hiding it from sight. The snowing ends only made him look sicker; a boy turning into a statue. Dazai wondered if the blood in his mouth or the marble would get him first.

"My last mission," he spoke up, eyes on the ground. "The one at Section 3, at the Port."

He curled an eyebrow. "What about it?"

"Fifty-six percent success rate."

Dazai hummed. “And you think it will be enough to be alive by next year's portrait session?”

“I’ll make it,” He raised his chin; met his eyes with something too electric to be stubborn, and too cautious to be insolent. “I’ll make sure it is.”

“How proactive,” he said, distractedly. The bonsai was well cured. Dazai didn’t know much about plants, but he remembered Kouyou’s garden at her lake house too well. *You can abandon a plant*, the Executive had told him, once, surprisingly willing to stand next to him in that garden. *Or you can let it die. They are very different things. The unkilld will always thrive.*

“See this?” Dazai nodded towards the little plant. He grabbed it from the shelf, kicking one foot to reach it — under Akutagawa’s skeptical gaze, he handed it to him. “This is yours now. Put it in that dingy closet you and Gin call a room. I want you to keep it alive.”

The boy still hadn’t moved from the cage of the bullet marks. His eyes were sagged in careful questions; a bit naively, Dazai wondered if that was where all the blood he coughed all day long came from — the overflowing curiosity for the universe inside a single, useless ant.

“Alive,” he spelled out, as if unfamiliar with the concept. He reached out to take the vase, and didn’t touch Dazai as he did. “Just alive?”

“If you want to teach yourself to garden, I certainly will not stop you,” He shrugged. “As long as it doesn’t take time from your occupations, obviously. They’re already as unsuccessful as I can take,” He flinched; raged about it. “But all I need is to see it alive. Let’s settle a date, yes? Six months. Keep it alive for six months, and we’ll see.”

He frowned. “*What* will we see?”

*That was exactly where all that blood he coughed all day long came from*, he noted. *A misused tongue*. Dazai’s fatigued bones — the skin-thin certainty that Mori wouldn’t have let it slide. The soul-deep knowledge that he had brought a dead bird to the doorstep for no proven reason, and it *would* be thrown away with finicky fingers, if he couldn’t breathe life into it again.

“I don’t know if I can get more bored than this about what you and your Ability are unable to kill,” He shrugged. “Let’s see what you can keep alive.”

Something like ice-cold rage settled over the starvation-wrinkles on Akutagawa’s cheeks. *Chuuya had them too*, Kouyou had muttered.

For a moment — a blink tense enough even the men of his *Unit* threw them a glance, hands sliding to their weapons — Dazai thought he might just try to kill him for it.

*Akutagawa wouldn’t dare*, he considered, sometimes. The boy had carved a portion of the skin of his back out, and at some point — between the coat he had laid on his cold-bitten shoulders, and the one time he had sat on the ground with him, eating the figs he had hastily been offered by a genuinely content face — he had settled whatever kaleidoscopic version of Dazai his shattered mind had created right between his viscera.

*He wouldn't dare*, he considered. Or maybe he would; perhaps only that much adoration could transform into the right amount of hatred to rip his flesh out with bare teeth.

Akutagawa's fingers tightened around the vase. He opened his mouth to talk.

The ringing shrill of police sirens cut him right off, painting the ruined shop and the hunger in the boy's eyes in crimson and cobalt shades.

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**[Camera 7.8.III — Interrupted]**

His home rested three grain fields away from the local *onsen* town, Yuzawa.

They called the area a *snow country*. When candor filled the streets and the trees, it did so with overwhelming intensity, and it lasted much longer. Because of it, Yasunari had grown up with an ever present scarf around his neck, and the sound of frozen train tracks under his soles.

“You could just rent a place in Yokohama, Yu,” his father called, from the living room. “I keep telling you — Two hours of travel ain't worth it. You could wake up after dawn, for a change — go to sleep at a reasonable time.”

“Don't be stupid, Dad,” he replied, busying himself in every room of the house that wouldn't subject him to the man's eyes. Yasunari had always been a good vocal liar; *your lip trembles like crazy, though*, his father would tell him. He always knew.

*Your father knows.*

He was all a tremor, these days. Had been even before haunted words — when coughing blood in his sleeves, losing enough weight for his skeleton to be rattled as soon as he breathed. But sickness was human; terror was a privilege.

“I can't just leave you here, can I?”

“Is your old man a child?” came the offended shout. Yasunari leaned on the doorframe, holding onto two glasses of water.

In his oldest memories, the Kawabata household had never been anything but the paragon of essentialism: furniture was there for a *reason*, un-decorated and pushed as close as possible.

The one exception were the paintings: his father's life work, plastered on every inch of their wooden walls, streaming shards of a kaleidoscope all over the tiles of that dusty place. His father had been a music teacher; in his soul, though, he had never laid a single paintbrush down.

"You know that's not what I mean," Yasunari told him, offering him one of the glasses. He fixed his blankets around his frail body; pressed his lips together tightly, until they could not move. "My job isn't that hard, Dad. Photocopies have hardly ever tired any bones. I can sit on a train for a few hours."

He waited for him to speak up. Something more tragic than that, maybe — for the roof to fall under the weight of that absurd season; for his wrinkled finger to raise and aim and *shoot*; for the old, familiar stage to appear behind the curtains of his white eyelids.

Always, *always* disappointed.

He did nothing but hum. "There are things more dangerous than me asking for help from someone who isn't you, Yasunari."

*Your father knows.*

His glass slipped from his hands.

"Oh," his father blinked. "Are you —"

His eyes settled on his hands; Yasunari wasn't present enough to hide them under his scarf. Slower than the shrilling teapot in the kitchen, his expression grew cautious.

"Yasunari," he called, warmth personified. "Are you sick again?"

*[The first lesson Yasunari learned, when he was too young to gather knowledge from any means but attempt, was: when you hurt, the puppets will make it stop.*

*He did not share this secret. His classmates were full of words to say, and full of stories to scream in their parents' ears at the end of the lessons — but he wanted nothing more than to hold his father's hand, and listen to what painting he had worked on while he was away.*

*"Make an image in your mind," he would tell him. "And when we get home, I will show you what it actually looks like."*

*"And what about my painting?"*

*"Oh," He'd blink. "Well. Do what you want with it."*

*Yasunari was silent when there was something to be heard — and so he grew silent about the screams, too.*

*There existed theories — his teachers had explained — that Abilities could speak. It was a language no one but them and their User knew; something that guided them towards the right thread to pull to activate it for the first time. It was a weak theory. Most Users would have*

*advocated for it, thought — would have sworn to feel their Abilities like a soul, and not like a limb.*

*But Ability Users weren't quite there with their minds.*

*"Everyone knows that," his teachers assured.*

*Yasunari, who always listened, had never cared for calls and souls. Until pneumonia had struck, and his father had sold his mother's dusty wedding dress to pay for useless medicines, and he had escaped from his window — bumping against a local hunter.*

*The next day, he was cured.*

*The puppets, he knew, were to thank. He made more of them. At his very root — no matter the medicines, the sold utilities, his father's warm hands — Yasunari was a sickly boy.*

*Puppets sprouted, following the rushing rivers of the nearby bathing facilities. He grew, and they didn't. He got sick enough to be on the verge of death, and then he healed; he was cursed with a small, irrelevant cold — and he thought puppets wouldn't have been worth it, had they not been infinite.*

*Infinite and silent. All Yasunari had ever wanted: something like him, only — useful. All Yasunari had ever wanted: not to be sick.*

*The one price he had to pay was his father.]*

*"Don't be stupid," he echoed, settling his eyes on the closest painting. Sunrise, he thought; or maybe a landscape of grain. His father could never go too far from home. "I haven't gotten sick in years, Dad."*

*He seemed unconvinced. "Everyone gets sick, Nari."*

*"Pharmacies are a thing," Yasunari grinned. "In here and in Yokohama, Dad. I'll take care of it, if it happens."*

*Endlessness stretched between them, as cold as the fog leaving both of their mouths. Too cold for the summer. From the kitchen, the teapot screeched.*

*"I trust you," the man said, matching his smile. Your father knows. Your father knows. "You know I trust you."*

*The water in his glass seemed to solidify. Kneeling to gather the shards of his dropped one, Yasunari played the good son and the grown up mafioso, and pretended not to see his lip tremble.*

The bottles of Temazepam and Xanax chirped a plastic-y *clank!* when Mori's hands threw them in his trash bag.

"And you're certain no one apart from your squad was informed of the execution list?" the man wondered, after a long silence — moments of analysis over that night's sudden retreat Dazai and the *Secret Force Unit* had been obliged to put in place. The memory of *Rashomon's* claws through a police car window replayed in Dazai's mind — he knew he had to figure that trigger out.

"No one else," he echoed, on his back on his bed in the shipping container. He had tried to slam the door in Mori's face, and close his fingers in between when he had *persisted* — it had been more than unsuccessful.

"That's odd. We haven't had the police on our traces in a while," Mori frowned at the blister pack abandoned next to an old whiskey bottle. "Two different muscle relaxants in one go? You're lucky Elise can't ask you to piggy back carry her anymore."

*Would Mori be Mori if he wasn't a doctor?*, he had once entertained, talking with Elise. *And would doctors be doctors, if Mori wasn't one, too?*

An entirely too complex conversation for her short attention span and the sheer number of hide and seek games they still hadn't played; stomping her feet, the bundle of all of the man's warped ivy had scoffed, *why are you always talking about things that won't happen?*

"This is unnecessary," Dazai commented.

Maybe a mistake. Being affected by things was the key to Mori's interest; the pills helped keep his eyes closed for a bit longer than an hour every three days, but they weren't worth Mori's belief that he had stopped thinking. *Tell me*, Chuuya would have said. And Dazai *would have*, because it was a sick kind of entertainment — watching him *struggle* with the notion of not wanting him alive but not wanting him to die.

*I know I lie*, he would tell them all, once springs came to an end. *I know I lie*.

The man's subtle smile said it all. "You're an Executive, now, Dazai." Holding strands of hair cut off in a rebellious streak, holding blades and holding him by his nape.

*You kept the cabinet open*, he wanted to tease, smiling until the stretch went all the way to his muscles, expanding him until he ripped. *You told me not to die and promised me you'd help*. "I'm no junkie."

"I never called you one," he replied — with a tone that said the mere idea was laughable. "You won't mind if I take these with me."

Dazai kicked his feet, just whiny enough he *knew* the man would lower his guard. “I know about thirty people in the near vicinity who could refill me by evening.”

“Ah, yes,” Mori closed the bag with a knot, swift and efficient. He knew Dazai wouldn’t do it — why not be cheerful? “But that *would* make you a junkie,” He pinched his nose; brushed dirt off his chin. “Wouldn’t it?”

The trash was thrown out of the ajar door, landing in the teeth-chattering snow. *We need to talk about the snow*, he thought. He snapped Chuuya’s hair tie against his wrist; dropped on his bed, huffing and lying through his teeth, as if it would get the rising sleeplessness out of his system.

White filled his vision.

The broken lightbulb hanging from his thirteen panels wasn’t that bright; the sound of Mori’s steps on his floor familiar as a few stars. He had stared at both with insistence — his savior and his sky. Disheartening, to say the least. Both too vast and vacant to leave his corpse to.

*You were supposed to help me*, he thought.

Mori crouched down in front of him.

It aligned his eyes with the cut a broken flower vase on the back exit had left on his chin — Dazai was unsurprised when he tapped two gloved fingers upon it. Anyway, all his wounds were meant to scar. “Report.”

“You already know,” he noted. “I just told you. I think we either have a mole, or the police are *incredibly* more interested in us out of nowhere.”

“You’re a mind before you are a gun, Dazai,” the Boss replied. “Pick one.”

He shrugged. “Both, I think.”

“Both?”

“The mole has contacts with the police. They — the entire city — have decided a second *Dragon Head Conflict* could be stopped by some alleged tighter guard. We’re the only ones left.”

“I suppose.”

Mori’s fingers tapped the rusty edges of his bed. He had sat on the floor, at some point; crossed his legs like a child. Elise was nowhere to be found — Dazai knew to expect it.

“Chuuya told me something similar,” the man offered. “His *Guerrilla* had the same accident two days ago. There was a secret meet up with one of your Government contacts — the police came by. And my spies tell me there’s been double the number of police cars around the Headquarters.”

Dazai shrugged, kicking his legs until the bed began to creak in that annoyed manner.



“Chuuya,” Mori repeated.

“What about him?”

“Have you come to trust him, at last?”

He groaned. “I don’t have time for this.”

“You’re right,” Mori studied the broken lightbulb. He was aiming for something; Dazai traced his scythe scar through the dress shirt, and tried to find it. “He had your trust from the first moment. Your loyalty, then?”

“That’s his job,” Dazai reminded him. “I can’t decide if he does it poorly, or too flawlessly. It’s certainly convenient for you. *Will* be, as long as he remains as he is.”

“Do you not believe he will?”

*Yes*, he thought. Yes, but Mori didn’t deserve to sleep easy nights. He deserved to wonder — to hesitate in closing the door behind him, when Chuuya fiddled with his gloves.

“No dog will accept to get kicked forever,” he offered. “No matter the treats.”

Mori smiled, indulgently. Unprovoked, he set to tying Dazai’s loose shoelaces; tightened them too much around the ankles, like he always did. “Didn’t you?”

“Chuuya will live a millenium,” Dazai brushed the matter away. He thought of his hum of stranger notes; the blood under his nails. “He’s too short to be killed in any solar burst. And I can’t imagine what else might put an end to him. But *me*?” He put a hand on his chest, honorable and proud. “Give me the time to finish that suicide book of mine, and then I’m gone.”

Mori’s backside had to be hurting, at that point. There was *intention* in all he did; intention in putting himself where he had to look down to meet his eyes. “You already finished it, technically.”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Dazai replied.

“Would your Oda-saku care, if you died?”

His fingers twitched against the sheets.

*I know I lie*, he swore.

“Don’t worry,” he said, bored. Something about names slithering through the doctor’s teeth; about Kazuko’s neck under his sole. *What did you do, Dazai?* “You can still give the eulogy.”

His eyes searched. He sighed. “Lay down. I’ll patch up the wound.”

He did.

Obedience, in a way; inevitability, in many, many other. Joined by untucked flesh tissues, the two of them. *You will let them scar, yes?* “How did you know I had a wound?”

“I don’t know,” Mori shrugged. They shrugged the same way, he thought; too much shoulders and too little chin. He would grow taller than him, one day, and crunching would be one of the few things he couldn’t do with *meaning*. “You always have a wound, don’t you?”

He didn’t take his gloves off to patch his scratched chest up.

Dazai did not sleep. Mori talked, mindlessly. He was never quiet when they were sharing air — there was always a deal he wanted his opinion on, a prisoner only his prodigious hands could coax open, a chess tactic he wanted to try.

*They won’t get rid of you*, Dazai would tell him, one day, as the last of him pooled out in polluted remnants. *They’re loyal*. If an altar were to be made, mafiosi would break their heads over how to make a statue for blood. They were loyal to it first; *then*, to their Boss. They would die for him; for the first of them to do what every creature in the ether must have wished for, at some point.

*Mori’s no devil*, he told himself. *And all doctors must be a little bloodthirsty*.

*You are halved*, Modi had said, once, one finger dragging down one side of his ribs. *Halved things are not made for survival. Your wishes are natural. Inevitability is still to be earned*.

“Tell me,” Mori said, eventually, when the last of the burning antiseptic disappeared. “Do you already know what’s coming?”

Eyes on the grey sky in the slot of the door, Dazai let his fingers trace his vertebrae. “Nothing blood won’t warm up.”

*I know I lie*, he would tell him, *I know I lie, but don’t you lie too?*

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**[Camera 7.8.III — Interrupted]**

The Demon Prodigy was everywhere.

Factually untrue. Voices around the Mafia reported his disappearance more often than they did his presence; the Executive liked to disappear for days at the time — God knew *where* — leaving precise orders to the *Unit* on what to do during his absence.

“He’s probably with that partner of his,” the seniors told him. “*Double Black* missions are unpredictable. They might be in France, or just be downstairs kicking some poor asshole’s skull in.”

“It actually got better, after he became an Executive,” another chimed in. “You guys didn’t witness him in his first year with the *Unit*. When he disappeared, it was *purely* for his own entertainment. Apparently, the Commander once found him inside a storage closet at the Mall — He had been locked in there for *four days*.”

A third one grunted. “*Entertainment*. If that’s what you call it when a psychotic son of a bitch throws himself off bridges for fun.”

“Shut your mouth,” the woman sunk her nails in his wrist, keeping her eyes on a black-and-red silhouette passing by their corner. *I don’t care how friendly he is*, they had told him, and their voice had overflowed with a respect that always lacked in their discussions about the Demon. *You don’t look a god in the eyes*. “Nakahara will rip you apart if he hears you.”

Yasunari was a low rank among the low ranks of a high *Unit*; he stuck to the last rows. The Demon Prodigy had yet to tell him more than three words.

Visions of black haunted the corners of his retinas; a coat and a single eye, the glistening onyx of his borderline *too* precise calligraphy. He was always too far for him to see clearly; *bored*, he thought, when it happened. And then — *Envious*.

*Your father knows*, he said, in the mirror. *Your father knows, and I know*.

He wasn’t used to the idea of a secret kept by more than two people. He wasn’t sure it could work. He wasn’t sure his father *knew*, and *yet* —

*If the Demon Prodigy wasn’t everywhere, though*, he considered, fingers on his trigger. *Then his father was*.

He grew restless with each sunrise.

He rose before it, everyday — watched his father sleep in the creaking bed on the other side of their one room. Constant fevers were a symptom he had been dealing with since that last, fateful diagnosis; a mixture of night sweats and chills, the impending doom of the train doors slipping closed right when his shoelaces untied.

*Don’t you wish me healthy?*, he recalled asking, once. *Don’t you wish me here?*

Sickness was human; humanity was inexorable. Fearing your father, he assumed — had to be, too.

Madame Tanaki nodded good morning to him. He dreamed of merging his fingers with the ink on her throat, of *pressing*, of carrying her to her hole in the ground himself. *Your father*

*knows. Your father knows. Your father knows.*

*Your father knows.*

“Move in ten minutes,” the Demon Prodigy ordered. He hadn’t heard him coming. Stupidly, he fired a loose bullet to the ground.

All eyes fell on him.

The Demon Prodigy was everywhere and nowhere at all; the gaze he laid on him said that he knew.

“You might want to be careful,” he told him, clearly unimpressed. He dragged his vowels in a way that was distinctively *young*. His expression turned sharper. The moonlight, he told himself. It was always crueler in Yokohama. “No reason to lose a hand, is there?” he noted.

Two lifetimes away, mere minutes after he had wasted one bullet, he sank his hands around the edge of the toilet until it *hurt*, and threw up blood and mucus and his every unconfessed sin — and thought, *your father knows, your father knows, your father knows because I told him.*

*What are you waiting for?*, he didn’t beg, every night, when they shared their dinner. *What are you waiting for?*, he didn’t scream, every morning, holding the urge to rip the man’s only blanket off his body — to make him just *cold* enough words might slip from the cracks on his skin. *What are you waiting for, what are you waiting for, call me a killer, why won’t you just call me a killer?*

“I came to the city for a normal job,” Yasunari confessed. Stakeouts could last hours at the time, he’d learned. “My father had to stop working, because of — a condition. His savings ended soon. I wanted to help.”

“And you ended up in organized crime?” The senior who had been with him *that day* curled an eyebrow. “What had you been looking for?”

“Office work,” he sighed. “Anything that wouldn’t ask too much of me, really. I wasn’t that good at school.”

“Can relate,” she said. “Ending up in an Executive’s *Unit*, though — That’s impressive. And on your first try, too?”

Yasunari shrugged. “I’m good with a gun.”

“I’m not,” He couldn’t recall her name in the slightest; it felt gut-wrenchingly embarrassing to even attempt to ask, at this point. “Yet Boss chose me anyway. You know, some people believe he sees *something* in recruits — something that has little to nothing to do with talent.”

He tried to imagine it — his thin silhouette, shorter than most of those heads in black of his that lazy drawl in his eyes, *focusing* and *searching*, somehow growing deeper than the ease with which he refilled a gun.

He was too smart for his age. He was too smart for anyone.

*Your father knows.*

“Are you one of those people?”

She snorted. “Not at all. It’s bullshit. It’s exactly the kind of story someone who’s never worked with him would make up.”

“Well,” he considered, “What do you believe, then?”

“That he’s Boss’ most trusted,” the senior said, unhesitantly. “And he gets to choose whoever he wants, because no one will stop him. You think he trusts any of us? I’ve seen him execute members of the squad for speaking *one* word out of turn. He doesn’t even trust us not to shoot him in the back. He probably knows no one would manage,” She tickled her trigger; fixed the eye-scope. “Or maybe he hopes we will. Who can tell.”

“He’s the most brilliant man in this organization,” she added, unprompted. Somehow, she managed to make it sound like a personal defect. “No one comes close. He is the backbone of this syndicate. Everyone knows. But none of us *trusts him*, alright? It’s a thing you need to learn. I’ve seen you look at him —“

He flinched. “No, that’s not —“

“We obey his orders. Every breath out of his mouth is for the good of the syndicate,” Her jaw settled. “Ability Users are rarely sane, anyway. He’s just — He’s dangerous. You watch him being psychotic from a distance, and you live to tell a story. The ones about him sell real well.”

“A bit young to be so feared,” Yasunari noted.

She cooked the rifle; shot a passerby from the other shore. “Then he shouldn’t have become a monster as a child. ‘Fuck you want me to tell you?’”

His mouth dried.

*[“We don’t tell anyone,” his father stuttered. It had been three days since he had last looked him in the eyes. “We don’t tell anyone, and you don’t do it anymore. There are consequences, Nari. There have to be consequences, Nari, there have to be —”]*

“The moment I get demoted,” the woman added, “I’m filling in for the god’s squad.”

Yasunari held his rifle tighter. “Vice-Executive Nakahara’s?”

“Him. He’s got the *Guerrilla* squad — It’s the biggest *Unit*, apart from the *Lizards*. And he’s a *dream* of a Boss. *Everyone* respects him — he did more for the *Dragon Head Conflict* than *anyone* in the organization,” She chuckled. “The asshole would throw himself in front of a grenade for his subordinates. This girl I had a fling with, she was part of his team during the Conflict, and she called him one of the best men she had ever *known*.”

Her mouth curved downwards; she cleared her throat. “She — She didn’t survive the Conflict. I saw him at her funeral, first row and all. He personally apologized to everyone in the room,” She scoffed. “What, you think the *Demon Prodigy* would do anything more than spit on our ashes?”

The thought left a sourness of sorts in his mouth. “They’re partners, though.”

One would not be given a pamphlet before joining the Port Mafia; at best, they would be lucky enough to meet the more gossip-oriented grunts. But some truths were as stable as the *Five Towers* — and recognizing a matching set of steps was part of the survival package.

*[He had only seen them together once, months back. Two stark silhouettes, black and dirty white and a shock of crimson appearing a few inches down. They never touched — didn’t even brush shoulders as they stalked forward in the crowd, parting to let them pass — and yet, keeping your eyes on them for too long tended to arouse a strange sense of discomfort.*

*Something like peeking into a locked room. They were wrapped around each other’s skeletons in a way that put ivy and trust and horizon to shame.]*

“Yeah, and Nakahara can’t stand him,” She rolled her eyes. “Not that *Boss* can stand *him*, but, you know — We all need to pick sides, don’t we? All that matters is not doing it in front of *them*.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “If you care about your life,” She clasped his shoulder, tightening in her hold with a grin. “Cheer up, man. You’re young and successful. You’ll stay so, if you play your cards right. Daddy must be proud as *hell*.”

Yasunari stared. “He — he doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t he?”

*Your father* — “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

A weird glance washed over him. “Calm down, man. It’s kind of a hard thing to hide. I get it. *My family* —“

He grabbed her wrist. “What,” he insisted, head pounding, “Did you mean?”

“Knock it out, Yasunari,” she snapped. “What the hell has gotten to you, lately? Let go right now, or —“

*Your father knows*, the Demon Prodigy swore. He was behind the car. He had just appeared from the door. He was holding Madame Tanaki’s hand; he was delivering his head on his father’s door. *Your father knows. Your father knows, your father knows, your father knows, Nari, of course I do.*

“The lip thing?” The man blinked. “What *lip thing*?”

Food had tasted of blood since the diagnosis; food had *been* blood since before that. Habit did not make for less shadows under his eyes; his father was getting worried.

*Your skin is a canva*, he would tell him, when he was young and wanted to stay out late. Because he was an artist, and the world was pure art. *If you paint it the wrong shade, no one but you will see its worth.*

*Aren't I enough?*, he never asked. *Do you not wish me healthy?*

"You know," he said. "You told me when I was young. My lip trembles when I lie. That's how you always know."

His father laughed. "It's not *true*, Yasunari."

His white rice floated to the center of the bowl. *Snow country*, they called it. "No," Yasunari insisted. "No, it *is*."

"It's not," His teeth hadn't been white in a long time; his smile was as old as their walls. "It was something your mother taught me. Whenever you were getting ready to lie — you would lower your head. Cover your mouth, even. And I'd know."

He laughed some more. *He would know*, he thought. *His father always knew.*

*Your father knows.*

"Tuberculosis," Yasunari said, possessed.

Despite the summer, a gelid wind entered through the windows. The puppets would rot — their smell would alert the village. The village would never alert his father. His father would always know.

"Early stages," he added.

"Nari," his father's voice was kind. The Demon Prodigy was there, in the corner of his house. Fiddling with that phone charm. "Nari, we will fix it. Alright? We'll do something."

*Make an image in your mind*, he would tell him. *And when we get home, I will show you.*

*What about my painting?*

*What about me?*

"I had to," he choked out. "Dad, I *had* to."

"Nari. *Yasunari*. You need to —"

"I *had* to join," Tears dug scorching lines down his cheeks; he gasped for air, splintering his nails against the edges of their wooden table. "You don't — You don't *get it*, I *had to* — I tried looking for something better, I *tried* to listen to you — I *wanted to be better* —"

“Nari,” His father stood up. Yasunari threw his bowl to the floor — backed into the wall; met the Demon Prodigy’s only eye. *Never look him in the* — “Nari, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I *don’t know*.”

*Your father knows. Your father —*

*If your father doesn’t know*, he thought, utterly calm. *If your father doesn’t know, make sure he never will.*

There was a saying, in the Port Mafia. Yasunari did not know it.

*All he knew*, he thought, watching his father step closer and closer, holding onto his seat like a shield — like a *weapon*. The Demon Prodigy was everywhere. *What his father didn’t know*, he kept telling the puppets — would never manage to hurt him again. *Was that it belonged to the Demon Prodigy.*

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“Fucking *shit*,” the bouncer at the *Libelula* said, a tad unprofessionally, the moment he raised his eyes enough to recognize their faces. “Fucking goddamn *hell*.”

“Thank you,” Chuuya commented, polite. It was clear he was the slightest bit pleased.

“Bless you,” Dazai offered. “Can we go in?”

The man spluttered. It seemed there was no sufficient efficiency in the world — his hands fumbled with the entrance door, muttering some vague mixture of *Double* and *Black* and *clear out the VIP floor immediately* until he managed to tear it open. Blinking owlshly, Dazai leaned his chin on Chuuya’s shoulder, watching him fumble with his radio as if it was a hot potato.

The lines of people crowded by the front of the club let out a roar of victory — one that turned into curses when only Dazai and Chuuya were pushed inside that maze of lights and chest shaking music.

“Shut the *fuck up*,” He vaguely heard the bouncer snap, as the door closed. “Do you know who those two are? You bastards want my fucking head on a platter of dog shit?”

“That’s original,” Chuuya stuck his lips to his ear to comment, pulling him down by the tie to defeat the music. ““We ever done that?””



“I heard we tore a man’s tongue out and shoved it between his buttcheeks,” Dazai said.

“Now *that’s* interesting.”

“Quite. Why are we here?”

The boy motioned him to sink through the swaying crowd. *Best place I know to do this*, he tapped on the small of his back, leading him to the doors on the opposite side of the club. *And Tanaki grounded us.*

“You can’t call it *grounding*,” Dazai replied. “It’s no calligraphy. She just — forces us to spend time together when we throw popcorn at each other during dramas.”

Chuuya stared.

“Maybe it is grounding,” he conceded, with a shiver. “Hey, wouldn’t it be fun if the roof fell on us? That’s a lot of heavy lights. Chuuya? Chuuya, where are you going —“

One or two times, vaguely familiar faces stopped dancing to offer a hurried, grinning bow to Chuuya — his enthusiasm was never unjust, but it was fairly more reserved than it had been with his squad; and a thousand miles from the Flags.

Still, the few subordinates they bumped against and stole drinks from bent themselves in a half at the mere sight of him — devoted to the very bone under the kaleidoscopic lights; swarming in hypnotic circles around him, moths to a deadly light; nearing more lighters than he would ever need for the cigarette between his lips.

“Slug’s awfully popular these days,” Dazai noted, halfway through the back doors. “Did that last mission of yours grant free concussions?”

“Fuck you,” Chuuya replied, pushing the emergency doors handles with a flare of *Tainted*. “It’s not my fault if *Double Black* sells.”

He studied the circle of free space around his own person. “You misunderstand.”

“What?”

Dazai rolled his eyes, and walked inside.

The beating chaos of the *Libelula* wasn’t entirely muffled by the heavy walls of the basement or the locked doors; but by the time Chuuya had removed his jacket and pulled a string to turn on a candid light, the endless gym in front of his eyes was entirely too empty not to seem quiet.

A professional fighting ring rose in the middle of it, caged by fabric grates and covered in a layer of dust shaped in footprints.

“That’s cute,” Dazai said, eventually. “Is this the place where you bury your bodies?”

“As if,” Chuuya replied, rummaging through the single locker in a faraway corner. “I’d hang your corpse from the chandeliers at the entrance. Everybody deserves to see.”

“I’m sure you’ll look like an ant from up there,” he reassured. “More than you already do.”

Something scratchy hit him in the face. He blinked at the rolls of bandages, hesitatingly; raised his eyes just in time to watch the other boy slip a pair of boxing mitts on, curling his sleeves all the way to his shoulders.

“Oh, great,” Dazai said, unenthusiastic. “This about me letting the *Hounds* break my nose and blaming it on you, isn’t it?”

“*Letting*,” Chuuya scoffed. A moment later, he was jumping over the railings.

Nonetheless, Dazai did his best to stall, as petulantly as possible. He sat on the ground and point blank refused to move, crossing his arms to his chest — when the boy managed to raise him from the armpits, ignoring his alarm-like shrieks, he moved to clutching Chuuya’s hair and *pulling* just violently enough to give him a bald spot.

“One you don’t already have,” he specified.

“I have,” Chuuya snapped, between tight teeth, stepping between his legs, “*No goddamn bald spots.*”

Eventually, whining and affirming his own dormant talent — *if you can beat them, then* do it, *bastard! You’re making me look fucking bad!* — he brusquely acquiesced to tentatively punch into the ruvid, padded surface of the mitts.

“Higher,” Chuuya would say, occasionally, deaf to his complaints. “Lower,” and, “Next time they come for your nauseating face, you go for the middle of the eyes,” and “Do you think people are made of fucking *play-doh*? *Hit!*”

“Short,” Dazai replied, maturely. “Ugly,” if he wasn’t fast enough to get down before Chuuya swung for his head. “Kouyou doesn’t even like you,” and “Fake Executive.”

His makeshift teacher didn’t even have the gall to get mad.

“So what’s this, *ah?*” he panted, between a shaky-leg kick and some punches that were lazier than Dazai *knew* he could do. “You’re so diligent that you had your men build you an underground training gym? So you can take a break from all the partying no one invited you to?”

“That’s funny,” Chuuya said, in a tone that said that it truly wasn’t. “No, this is all Iceman’s work. He owned the building, and he thought he wouldn’t get *pestered by eager recruits* if he kept his training grounds in a — less than typical location.”

His eyebrows flew to his hairline. Chuuya stuck a foot between his legs, and he almost fell. “Posh, aristocratic Iceman boxed?”

“Iceman kicked *ass*, ” he corrected. “He’s the only one who ever managed to land a hit on me, when you guys kept attacking the Sheep.”

“Oh, I remember that,” Dazai sighed, long and nostalgic. “I used to draw up the plans. Your hiding spots weren’t all that good, you know?”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. He aimed a kick at his head, showing off his flexibility; by the time he landed, his hat had flown off to the floor. “Good enough to keep *you* on your toes.”

His next fists were more purposeful.

Some eons later, once Dazai was matted in more sweat than his bandages could withstand — summer snow or no summer snow — and Chuuya was done accepting *just one glass* from the spiral of devotees dancing around his bouncing hair, Dazai stuck himself in the boy’s car and forced him to drive to his brand new penthouse.

Chuuya locked him outside the moment they slipped out of the car. Given the place was only accessible via elevator handprint-recognition, and Dazai had both burned fingertips and one of his stolen gloves, it didn’t amount to much.

“When they open your eyes and see you for the stingy, insufferable maggot you are,” Dazai made sure to declare, loudly, as he turned on every water source in the house, “*Then*, you’ll have to start paying for your own drinks.”

“I paid for *yours*, asshole!”

“You’re older,” he reminded him. “Doesn’t count. Hey, what if you get stuck in that *elevator pseudo door* and the cables break and you miserably fall to your death?”

“I fucking *won’t*, you jinx,” A pause. Then: “March 17th?”

It came from somewhere at the end of the thin staircase of unconnected steps, framed by a see-through interior balcony. All the couches were in dark leather — the kitchen counter alone was longer than the hallway of both his and Albatross’ apartment. “*Dang!*” Dazai tutted.

When he took his shoes off and abandoned them in the sink, all the lights turned on at the same time. He stole canned crab from the filled up cabinets, and dropped to the floor.

“This place sucks,” he called, munching.

Physics and poetry books — for which he switched every bookmark — and two boxes of unfinished pizza, at least three days old; paintings he probably didn’t even like and an automatic trash system. Chandeliers. Actual dishes. *A big place*, he thought. Dazai knew they tip-toed the same path on many strings they would not pull.

*What problem does he have?*, his mind chirped. *He has spaces to fill. He is here to stay.*

*You’re not.*

He found a room with shelves of astonishingly pricey wine bottles, and he mixed their liquids until he got bored; he plastered himself on the nearest wall and traced a line upon his head, adding another three feet underneath.

Upon it, he scribbled: *Heights Race (Lost)*.

Eventually, he played *Hopscotch* all the way to the balcony.

Shades of ink-grey had taken over the sky and the skyscrapers, following the rusty creak of a hammock. There was no snow on the balcony tiles; it had gathered on the flower-shaped metal railings, though.

Chuuya was a mere bump under some yellow blanket, curled up on the hammock, facing the city. Dazai grunted, dragging his pulsing ankle forward — he dropped down, shaking the whole bunk and startling curses worthy of opening the sky — kicked and *elbowed* and showed his tongue until their backs were pressed against each other, and he could curl up under the blanket.

“You’re *cold* and *sticky*, ” Chuuya snarled, pointlessly trying to scoot away, rattling the hammock. He shut his eyes, ignoring him, and pulled the blanket off his body. “Oh, *you* — “

It took them three car alarms in the distance to settle down. Dazai felt heavy enough to break through the hammock itself — destroy the floor and never stop landing, deep into the brightest sides of the earth’s insides.

“Why do you smell like someone threw up on you?” he asked, eventually.

Chuuya’s *tsk!* could have woken the birds. “Some idiot at the club. Should’ve seen his face when he recognized me.”

“He must have mistaken you for the ground. The difference is minimal.”

The boy settled his sock-cladded heel on his strained ankle, and *pressed down*. Dazai knocked his head back.

“*Oi*, asshole —“

“Mori is going to call a meeting soon,” he said.

Just like that, his attention was stolen. “The snow stuff?”

“You figured out it’s not normal?” Dazai feigned wide eyed surprise, though he couldn’t be seen. “I’m astonished.”

“Man, there’s polar bears on the street,” His heel dug deeper in his ankle. “*And* the police are on us like we’ve been going around without washing the blood off our clothes. Did he find something?”

“He will.”

Chuuya huffed. “Always does.”

The gaze they exchanged was in equal parts annoyed and benevolent. “Yes,” he agreed. “We just have to wait.”

“Way to be enigmatic.”

“You know how Mori is. *You are to uphold the name of the organization, and to answer only when called.* Et cetera.”

His wince shook the whole hammock. “That’s *not* how you say it,” he corrected, “It’s, *you must uphold the name of the organization.*”

“No,” Dazai said, pointedly, “It’s, *you must uphold the name of the organization.*”

“*You must uphold the name of the organization.*”

“*You must uphold the name of the organization.*”

“*You must uphold the name of the organization.*”

“Now you’re just making stuff up. *You must* — “

“You’re so fucking wrong it’s not even funny,” Chuuya snapped, voice loud to fight his own rising tone, “No — No, you’re *wrong*, you are, it’s — *You must uphold the* — “

“*You must uphold the name of the organization* — “

Cursed by the same wave of length as they were, when physicality was concerned, they picked the same moment to turn around — rattling the hammock like a boat in a storm, to the point of yelping and holding onto the edges of it.

“Why did you buy it, anyway?” Dazai asked, once they managed to lay on their side, bony knees knocking.

“The old man said it’s good for when you can’t sleep,” Little, infinitely warm space was left between them; just that speaking motion pushed them a bit closer. Had Chuuya started to hum his calming tune, Dazai might have even been able to finally understand *what* song it was.

He pulled the edge of the blanket up, all the way to their chins; Chuuya tightened the knot of his sweaty tie.

“Stop *moving*, ” he ordered, freckles and scars, unmatched eyes running up and down his face like the falling sun and its sapphire-stained twin, “Your shitty face is all scratched — teaches you to jump from cliffs. Shut *up*, I was better at that when I was a *brat* — “

“How would that work for a suicide? “

“The hell do I know?” he scoffed. “You’re the one who keeps failing.”

The sun was nowhere to be found. Dazai recalled the rubbles of a city — the razor-sharp, lightning-quick certainty of *danger* any fool who had tasted blood could feel on their skin. Chuuya, standing on him — crowned by the clouds and directing a band of misfits that was bothering the *Mafia itself*; refusing to be called a king. His boot had left a vaguely triangle-shaped bruise right under his pectoral. It had stayed there, unfading, for twenty nine days.

*Fifteen*, he thought, was the first time he had wanted to be alive. From what Dazai could remember, it was also the first time he had found something beautiful.

“We’re not fifteen anymore, Mackerel,” Chuuya mumbled, eyes closed — speech slurred just the necessary amount to assure the offered drinks had done *something*. “Stop muttering.”

*I know*. His mouth was dry. *I know we’re not. We never were.*

“Here’s a story,” he replied, scooting closer. Warmth was a thing of a different lifetime; warmth was the flickering lights of Bar Lupin — with the alcohol Ango would remark he shouldn’t drink; with Odasaku’s hands over his own, teaching him a trick to pretend his thumb had been cut off.

“God,” Chuuya groaned. “Not this again.”

“Quiet,” he warned. “A story.”

There was no rubbing they could do to be granted a spark; *all bodies*, Mori had said, *are black, until you tear them apart.*

“People have blades on their fingers —“

“Dude.”

“— and the world is the same, apart from that. It makes living somewhat more difficult.”

“Bet it would,” Chuuya commented, eyebrows brushing his hairline.

“Aestheticism is doomed. Washing yourself is a torture. Every act is bound to cause pain,” he continued. “There are many regulations in place, but the wounded and the dead are an inevitable habit. Everyone is used to it.”

“And then, one day,” he continued, wiggling his own fingers between them, “One day, every person in the world wakes up, and discovers the blades on their skin are all *blunt*. They can’t hurt anyone anymore. They can’t hurt themselves anymore,”

*“Hallelujah.”*

“And all the endless bureaucracy on the assured victims of circumstances? Useless.”

“And then?” Chuuya asked.

“And then they kill themselves.”

He huffed. Dazai wondered if he would be the type to do that even to a dream; if he would wake up, drowsy and *real*, and offer a soliloquy on everything wrong with his mind's delirium. "For a good reason, or because you're stupid?"

"I'm not stupid. I want to be dead."

"No," Chuuya looked at him weirdly. "You want to die."

"Same thing."

"No," he insisted. Over the edge of the building, the sun fell. He didn't add anything else.

Dazai shrugged. "You mean you don't get it?"

Where a cemetery couldn't grow, he had wilted flowers for the unmourned. *You are halved*, he thought. Mori's butterflies; the Yokohama's skyline, as balanced as the dead on water. That city only needed what was complete enough to survive without a blade. *You are halved*.

"Who knows," Chuuya yawned, easier than any death. *How do you live*, Dazai wanted to ask, *how do you live*? "I'm a better weapon than person, anyway."

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### **[Camera 7.8.III — Interrupted]**

"You know, access to the Archives has to be requested," the Demon said. "It's usually denied."

Yasunari didn't hear him. He heard him everywhere, in every corner of his pounding skull; the tremor in his hands only grew more vicious. Tearing his tongue off the roof of his mouth, he whispered: "Leave me alone."

The Demon hummed.

He kept his eyes on the mess of files on the floor; he couldn't remember if he had made the choice to kneel down, or if he had fallen. His brain hadn't been able to understand a single *kanji* in eons — his body was rattled so badly by the cold, the words were little more than blurred flares.

“If you’re searching for information on your Ability,” the boy told him, shoulder against the doorframe, “You’re in the wrong section. Medical abilities are in the A-7.”

He heaved. He took a breath and held it close, closer and *closer*; until he could feel his face turn blue. He darted looks from the corner of his eye; that hallucination refused to disappear. It stood there, stubbornly silent and bandaged. It had a hair tie around its wrist.

“You know,” He yawned, “I have a friend who seems to believe life and death aren’t the same,” Genuine entertainment framed him; he lowered his own to the papers again, searching for words between the red stains his nails were leaving behind. “I don’t know if I agree. Someone like you would know, wouldn’t he?”

The hair tie was snapped into his wrist.

Yasunari jumped ten feet back, plastering himself against the wall.

A gunshot, somewhere. A seat breaking into a thousand pieces; blood-stricken wood sinking into an old man’s skull, again and again, again and again, *again and again*, until brains splattered into paintings and naked furniture, and Yasunari was —

The Demon stepped forward.

His whine was animalistic to his own ears; he backed away, pointlessly, as if the walls could absorb him. When their shoes touched, the Demon tilted his head to the side. “You *must* be dead to make deals with the deceased. Which somewhat proves my theory, right? Or maybe not,” He shrugged. “Maybe the living can be cursed enough.”

“Leave me alone,” Yasunari stuttered, his voice a thread. “Leave me alone, leave me *alone*, leave me alone —“

“Your father,” he replied, conversationally. “How did he lose his hands, anyway?”

He stilled.

He ran.

“No, I think I can guess, actually,” the Demon added, from every aisle he turned. No human could appear that fast; no hallucinations could appear so material. Yasunari ran and ran and ran, and the Archives weren’t that big, and *who* would get lost in a circle — “You were the village freak, weren’t you?” He sighed. “Your father never said a word about your role in the disappearances, but they *knew*. Suspected, at the very least. And they weren’t happy with your father’s insistence to hide you from justice, were they?”

Yasunari held his head between his hands, screaming a muffled shout; he dove deep into the next aisle, an invisible weight on his nape. A seat and a blood-stained painting. His father’s hand and his mother’s wedding dress.

“Then someone braver than the others came,” the Demon concluded, walking slow steps behind him. It did not look like a chase; it had to be. “And taught your father a lesson about *washing his hands off* of his responsibilities.”



He choked. The Demon was right in front of his face.

“Your father couldn’t paint anymore,” he said. “And to make it even, you wouldn’t kill anymore.”

He backed away; the Demon followed, a slight jump to his steps, a black lake under his sole eye. *Your body is a canva, Nari.* He remembered — there had been so much blood. There had been *so much blood*, and he was *used* to it, the puppets were always —

“Puppets?” the Demon blinked. “You’re not a child anymore, Kawabata Yasunari. You should call them corpses.”

[“*Nari,*” *his father breathed. His son was eight years old and dripping blood; his son’s deadliest illness yet was nowhere to be found. “Nari, what did you do?”*]

Yasunari dropped to his knees. His throat was torn apart to raw skin; it was, a portion of his mind registered, because he was sobbing too hard. His father’s body was under him, lifeless eyes and missing hands and that stupid blanket of his, and he was *sorry*, he was *sorry*, and he hadn’t coughed blood since that day, because *that was the rule*, he killed and he healed —

“You made me kill him,” His breath came out in gruff, desperate inhales, “*You* made me — you *told me he knew*, you —“

“I didn’t tell you a thing.”

“*You did!* You did, you *did*, you *made me do it* —“

“Yasunari,” he said, pitying. “I didn’t tell you a single thing.”

Thunder rumbled outside the glass.

“Here’s a lesson on Abilities,” the Demon Prodigy told him, crouching in front of him. “Your Ability exists because *you* do. It has the same eyes as you. It has your mind. It shares your parents’ *blood*,” His fingers clenched around his hair. “And when you use it to kill those who gave it life, sometimes — Well. Sometimes it gets angry.”

“You’re not real,” Yasunari hissed.

“No, I don’t think so,” the Demon agreed. “But you killed your father, and you will never be sick again.”

His body jolted. The grasp around his hair kept him still, and it *burned*. “And guess what — Death and life *might* be the same thing, at the end of the day. That doesn’t change facts: when things stop working, they’re useless. And death, however beloved it might be, is an illness.”

Realization struck with the next line of lightning.

“No,” His mouth refused to move. “No, no, *no*, you’re lying, *you’re lying* —“

“Who knows,” He shrugged. “In any case — You must be happy. Isn’t that what you wanted? Isn’t it why you couldn’t stop? You were a well educated kid. Your poor father made sure of it. You must have learned what a corpse was very soon. And yet you *persisted*. Too afraid of sickness, weren’t you?”

He moved closer; plastered his face to his own. “Too afraid to *die*, just like your mother, weren’t you?”

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“That’s the wrong turn,” Dazai informed.

Ango clenched his fingers on the steering wheel. His car always carried a vague candle-like scent; something both newly bought and worsened by the years. “You told me to go left.”

“I was lying. Go right.”

He swerved, barely missing a pedestrian.

“Dazai.”

“That’s the wrong right,” he insisted. “The other one. Ango, do you think I have an accent?”

“What about the accent? We all have an accent,” A pause. “Yours is vaguely northern, now that I think about it. Not very easy to notice, though. When you’re being aggravating, mostly.”

“I’m never aggravating!”

“Shameless dishonesty. I had an acquaintance from the Tōhoku region that spoke like you do. Aomori Prefecture, to be precise.”

He smiled, indulgently. “Did you?”

“Oh, yes. Poor man had a hard time when he came to Tokyo. You know, there’s a story he used to tell me — people from that region tend to speak with their mouths as shut as possible, to save heat for the coldest days. I never knew if he was just trying to justify those stutters of his.”

The traffic lights turned blue — Ango blinked, rethinking their conversation. Right on the verge of turning to the right, he asked: “You mean the *left*, when you say *the other one*?”

“Of course.”

The car *screached*. One of his eyes twitched.

Though the temperatures hadn’t lowered, it was much brighter than it had been in several weeks. Passersby in every season’s clothing roamed the streets, tapping the snowy ground in wonder.

The deeper Ango drove into the city, the blander it all grew. Good areas of the city, Dazai had learned, lacked the fight for something to *stick* — the one the underworld wore as its pride. No inch of a sunlit land would ever be abandoned enough to bleed for remembrance.

“We’re almost there,” he reassured the man, dragging his crutch up and down the dashboard. There had been two of them, until that morning, supporting the weight of his strained foot — until he had thrown one of them in the river. “You’ll get to bury yourself under condolences papers soon enough. Oh, turn left again.”

“It’s not just *condolences papers*, I told you,” Ango pushed his glasses up his nose, “On that matter, though — the department read your analysis on the police surveillance situation. It was — *Illuminating*.”

Dazai groaned, pushing the backrest of his seat all the way down horizontally. “I don’t want to talk about *work*, that’s *boring* —“

“Aren’t you forcing me to carry you around for *work*?” he snapped, one arm pressed against his chest — useless, should a car accident truly occur; but strangely delicate on his bones.

“Depends on how you see it. And you *offered*.”

“Yes,” Ango agreed, passionately, “*Once*, more than eight months ago. I asked you if you wanted a ride back from Bar Lupin, and you decided I am some sort of — *public service*, I don’t even —“

“Be nice,” Dazai chirped, “You’re *older*. You need to be a good *senpai*, or that girl from *Intelligence* won’t give you the time of the day. Neither will Odasaku, for what it’s worth.”

“Don’t you know how to *drive* anyway?” He made a face, soaking in regretful memories. “Well — enough to get *by*. Not to abide by the law, from what I remember.”

He dragged his leg up, dirtying the seat and knocking his knee against the window. Pointedly, he dangled his bright-pink ankle brace.

Ango rolled his eyes, sighing. “Yes, alright, I get it — Put it down. Dazai,” His voice was squeaky; the second safest sound in his existence. “*Dazai*, stop — not while I’m *driving*, Dazai, put that foot off my *face*, for God’s —“

The *Minato Sōgō* High School was a white square surrounded by sadly identical clones, with small darkened windows and stains of grass and trees near the entrance. Few students were gathered near the entrance, their blue-and-white attires both inconspicuous and unmistakable, as they chuckled and dangled school bags from fragile limbs.

Dazai's sole similar experience had been two weeks at a public school in America; the most he knew of those children's lives he had learned through Tanaki's dramas — something about cleaning the classrooms after the lessons, and sticking desks together to eat *bentos*, and doing nothing but bleeding when bullies attacked.

Ango parked his car nearby.

"Great," Dazai said, exiting. "Be right back. Ah, if you see a woman from the *Special Division*, do horn *really* loud, could you?"

He was barely close enough to see all the color drain from Ango's face. "What?"

"I'll be right back!"

"*What?*" the man hissed, as he dragged his crutch down the sunny sidewalk, "Dazai, what do you *mean* —"

Giggling over something on one of their phones, an unexceptional trio of uniformed girls occupied the furthest corner behind the rusty gates. The shortest of them was the first to see him approach; she pulled her friends' sleeves to grab their attention.

Yuan turned around, frowning.

Her school bag landed on the floor.

It took long, *convincing* excuses for her friends to leave her alone with him — the one who'd noticed him eyed his bandages, crutch and vacant expression until the last moment, before the other one finally managed to drag her away with an unmistakable wink in Yuan's direction.

Her cheeks were brighter than ever — only a few shades lighter than her dyed hair. She could have been Chuuya's sister, apart from the singular strand of pink hair — or the *Queen of the Sheep* a confused part of the underworld still talked about. She had cat-shaped stickers on her bag.

"You better have a good reason," she said. Barely a whisper.

He hadn't seen her once, during the *Dragon Head Conflict*; not even when she had been dragged to a safe location, to extract the code. Raw thunder flashed in her eyes the longer she kept them on him. Her fingers were spasming.

"It depends on your definition," he replied. "But Chuuya is safe. Keep it subtle with the street kid attitude. Don't want your little classmates to fear you'll nick them, or something."

"I should kill you," she said.

It was strangely emotionless. Her spine was ready, though. Dazai didn't know *who* she thought she'd defend from him; perhaps it came natural — to fear he would sink his teeth and never let go.

“Act on it quickly,” he encouraged. The metal fences were rattled mercilessly by the cold wind. “I’ve been hungry all morning. I’d like to die before lunch, if scum truly has it out for me.”

She set her jaw.

The last time they had seen each other, there had been Arcade lights and the tense lines of Chuuya's hands, deep in his pockets. She had hung off him like a leech. Dazai had wanted to laugh in her face — even if *he*, too, had not been chosen by the unreachable.

*Closer than you, though*, his mind had chanted, as they walked away. Like the blood they had spilled on its concrete gave him a right to call it theirs. *Closer than you spoiled, blind children will ever be.*

“Then?” he asked, leaning all his weight on the crutch.

Her fists tightened over the hems of her skirt; her tights were patterned in skulls, he noted. She settled her eyes on the groups still hovering on the school grounds; whichever visions of crimson fluttered in her retinas made a vein in her temples throbble.

*They hadn't fought him for their anchor then*, he thought. *They wouldn't fight him for their revenge now.*

Yuan muttered: “What do you want?”

“You might have information I need,” Dazai said. “How much did you know about the women the *Bishop's Staff* imprisoned with you?”

She flinched. The lack of bright pink around her face made her look gloomier. “I’m not helping the Mafia with shit. I already paid my debt — I helped you win the *Conflict*.”

“But we both know you’ll help Chuuya,” he replied. Something rusty crowded the back of his throat; he felt, vividly, that Mori would have disapproved of that lingering taste. “Since he’s the only reason you didn’t bleed your viscera out in a pool of your own foolishness.”

He knew what memories looked like on unwilling faces; her ghosts, though, couldn’t concern him less. “That’s not — I didn’t —“

“You don’t owe the Mafia, and you don’t owe *me*. But I should hope all these months spent building a socially acceptable *status quo* taught you a thing or two about gratefulness,” Amusement — *amusement*, but unbalanced — slit the corners of his mouth. Her eyes sharpened. “Or are you still a willful brat who believes her martyr dog *chose* to be hunted away?”

Yuan breathed.

He wondered, a bit distantly, how it all felt — the tentatively decorated bedroom he had broken in; the warm meal abandoned on her desk; Agent Minami's hand ruffling her hair, dropping her off at school. At the very least, he knew they shared the *unease* — the slight pause in a step, the quiet observation of the *normal*. But Dazai had never looked at someone with the same longing she reserved for her classmates.

“Do you know where Tooru's grave is?”

Dazai blinked. “Noguchi Tooru?”

Her gaze settled on a spot somewhere upon his shoulder, stubborn. “I never managed to ask him,” she said, quietly. “And I can't — I have no intention of bothering him any more.”

Chuuya, he knew, was an impervious stain on most people dauntless enough to come into contact with him. “We don't get graves,” he informed her. “But I know Chuuya has a spot for them.”

As if it was just a little less than spitting on her first family's grave, she nodded. “Who are you looking for?”

“One of the women you were with,” he asked, “Was her name Yoko?”

They parted without a word, enough time later for the school gates to have been shut. He didn't flinch at the metallic rattle; Yuan did.

He offered her the directions she was looking for; Odasaku would have encouraged her to talk to Chuuya, he thought — if anything, because he wouldn't have understood their hesitation. But Dazai was petty and restless, well trained in the art of attempting to sleep next to a body that could not dream, but could *think*. Dazai didn't care. *Of course they're my responsibility.*

Dazai didn't care one bit.

“Be careful,” he warned, waving his crutch as a goodbye. Staring right into Ango's window was Agent Minami — making her way to them from the other street. “Your new Mom might disapprove of you mourning criminals.”

She was quiet long enough he stopped waiting for an answer. As distant as the wind, her whisper was the widest coagulation of blood-rage anyone had ever spat in his direction: “What does a corpse know about mourning?”

Dazai didn't turn.

“Are you *insane*?” Ango snapped, steering his car with the franticness of a madman. “You know Boss ordered to lay as low possible, after the *Permit's* deal failure —“

He settled his strained ankle on his knee; uncapped the marker in his jacket and set to drawing on the pink cast — tombstone; a dog in a temple. “Agent Minami, did you know her?”

A pause. “She handled my case.”

“Your case?”

“The hacking accusations.”

“The ones that landed you in Mori’s radar?” Ango nodded; Dazai hummed. “What a small world. She’s the new guardian of the Chibi’s *pseudo-ex-sister-sweetheart*. ”

The glance he took the time to send in his direction got them a rain of honks; he hissed: “You *threatened* Vice-Executive’s Nakahara’s girlfriend?”

“*Ex*, ” he insisted, “*Pseudo. Sister*. Those are the important bits. He goes by Chuuya, by the way. And I didn’t *threaten* her. I just talked. Is *ex* tragic or comic?”

“Comic. Dazai,” Ango pressed.

“Turn left.”

They swerved, barely missing a fire hydrant. “For *God’s sake, Dazai!*”

“You truly drive badly for someone dead set on criticizing me,” Dazai mused. “What were you saying?”

His sigh fogged up every window.

“Alright,” He shrugged, dotting stars in his dreadful masterpiece. “Hey — I’m way too bored to work. Let’s find Odasaku and see if he’s up for a drink, what do you say?”

“It’s not even *lunch time* — “

From the backseat — having slithered in at some unclear point, rummaging through the secret drawers underneath the seats; and utterly calm when he met their eyes in the rear view mirror, — Odasaku offered: “Maybe not a drink, but I *would* be up for some curry.”

Ango’s car ended up dented.

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Despite not being exactly *scrawny* — and despite mostly *pretending* he couldn't hold up his own in a fight and *win* — lifting weights wasn't amongst Dazai's abilities.

"You're going to die crushed," Chuuya let him know, mockingly dangling his hands over the metal bar of the weights. The padded cushions of the weight bench were damp with Dazai's sweat; he gritted his teeth so hard his head pounded with it, ignoring the blurry vision of Chuuya's dangling hat chain. "You're gonna be squished like a bug. You're gonna end up with a weight shaped hole in your face, and you'll look like the letter *s*."

"Can you die," Dazai asked.

"Nah."

"You should anyway."

Chuuya settled both his hands under the center of the bar, effortlessly helping him lift it — no *Tainted* or anything; only his scarred biceps pulsing with blood and curling muscles.

"I hate you," Dazai said.

"Tanaki says that you are forever banned from her desk *and* general existence, by the way," he announced, triumphant and pestiferous. "Your deranged ass should have thought about it before spoiling *Spider Eyes* for her."

His eyes stayed on the metal bar, trying to subtly gauge how much of the easy lift was to blame on Chuuya's hands. "Maybe she shouldn't have missed our weekly session, then."

"That shit fiancé of hers asked her to *marry him*," Chuuya reminded him. "She was on *leave*."

"Even more reason to ditch him."

Chuuya removed his hands. A mere second before the barbell could land on Dazai's face — carving a cylindrical cave right in the middle of his nose — only *one* of Chuuya's hands shot out, grabbing it a miserable inch from his bulging eyes.

"I'm gonna put you on corpse duty for the next seventy years," Dazai promised, with a thread of voice. "I'm actually going to. I'll move your office to the basement and have you listen to the prisoners' fingers being cut off while you do *my* reports —"

"You can't do that," he reminded him.

"I'm an *Executive*."

"I'm under Kouyou."

"Not," he said, with feeling, "If I kill her."

That got Chuuya to properly explode.



The unmistakable, thunderous hissing rush of *Rashomon* lit the ceiling in red-black shadows.

The training grounds were barely wide enough to fit its peerless rage; strokes of lightning hit without a care for decor or safety, chasing every opponent facing Akutagawa's mindless violence. Something about it, he thought, should have been *satisfying*; that one could kill without the weight of its act.

Dazai sat up, kicking the bench on his way to the wooden bleachers.

*Rashomon* was the sharpest potential blade up the Port Mafia's newly sewed sleeves — and its jailer the second most promising recruit ever brought at the Mafia's door.

*[“These are the facts,” Dazai had told Mori, returning home with no coat on his shoulders and a newly hung picture in the Executive Hallway. It was fine, he had known. He would be given a new coat. He would be given a new blame. “Do you want me to throw them out, or use them?”]*

Framed by the squares of snowy sunlight, from the thin windows of the underground rooms — some of the greatest potential in the syndicate was a storm, and it brought men nose to nose to the end with unfitting seriousness.

The thing about those storms was — you couldn't even use the water, soaked as it was in blood.

“Again,” Akutagawa panted, surrounded by the electricity-like shocks of his Ability. The coat Dazai had given him curled down his sweat-soaked shirt like ink, darting towards men on the ground — with their guns and their less interesting gifts, and the embarrassment of being held down by a fifteen year old. “Again!”

*I understand*, Odasaku might have told him, in that way of his. *I understand, they hated me too*. Had Dazai ever had something that fundamental to *prove*, when he was his age?

*[On the coldest afternoon yet of that ruined season, Dazai checked on the lonely bonsai tree of the second emptiest room in the organization — let Akutagawa drag besetting eyes over it a little longer; obsessive as he looked when stood next to it — and said: “Come on. We're going out.”]*

*If not too afraid to show excitement, he was sure the kid would have found a way to widen his eyes enough to pop them out of the socket, and offer them to him. He had often offered him things, the first few days — reports and questions and glances and his sister. One monumental time, a fallen bullet — the leftover of the first execution Dazai had dragged him to witness.*

*Something about the picture it had made had stuck with him. He was a frail child; kneeled to gather a piece of metal from a pool of blood — offering it to him. How he had noticed Dazai's habit to gather lost bullets so soon, he had never understood. How he had made a beast so willing to crawl on viscera mere days after they had met — he would never justify.*

“Use your Ability,” Dazai told him. “I don't care how, for now. Just use it.”

*Buildings chased each other behind the glass of the train; he hung off the grab handlers, and the boy hung off him — and when the train was rattled, only one of them flinched. He thought, offhandedly, that Akutagawa would have gladly killed a man with a glance.*

*He thought, watching him hide his bloodied lips behind the handkerchief — that Akutagawa would die young, and there wouldn't be enough time to rip that blade he had sewn to his soul off.*

You will kill and you will kill and you will kill, *Dazai could have told him. Odasaku might have, he thought.* And then there will be nothing left to eat, and that monstrous pet of yours will still be as hungry as his first day. And then?

*Akutagawa wasn't a good student — but he was stubborn enough to raise his hand. Dazai could see him swear:* and then, it will find something to eat.

You, *Dazai wouldn't say, lips trembling,* you, you, *you.*]

Bodies landed on the hard ground; training mats had existed, once, before the more violent Abilities had reduced them to stains on the floor. Duels and training sessions circled in the bored field of his vision; grunting men and knife-bearing women — flashy powers he could have turned off with a touch and uncertain glances thrown all the way to the bleachers.

Akutagawa kept trying to meet his gaze.

“That your kid?” Chuuya asked, nodding towards the makeshift battlefield, as he climbed the bleachers two at the time.

“Teen pregnancy is certainly a curse,” Dazai said — slightly surprised. He had expected the boy to hunt the siblings down mere minutes after their portrait session. “But little Akutagawa might even manage to say his first word, one of these days.”

Odasaku had scribbled the phone number of a man on his hand, for some transport business. The man wrote *eights* weirdly; they looked like *nines*. He traced them; rubbed one of them off — watched the onyx stain spread like a bruise, only more *purposeful*.

“Anyway,” he concluded, “He’ll have to.”

The Italian leather of Chuuya’s shoes settled next to his leaned-back hands. Pointy elbows dug in his shoulders, effectively caging his back in that strangely vicious version of a flesh shield. With the finality of a sealed coffin, he sunk his hat on Dazai’s head.

Imperceptibly, he leaned his temple on the inside of the boy’s knee.

He didn’t know if it was the right answer; the pinch it earned him — where his bandages meet the collar of his shirt; where his tattoo peeked — could have been a slap on the wrist or a high praise. In either weather, he knew, the two of them always made for a picture. Every other gaze in the room fell intermittently on them — and they did not have teeth, but the ripping was loud all the same.

*Dazai, as in —*

“That’s a waste,” Chuuya concluded.

*Rashomon* cracked the floor open, pulling a woman in with its sharp dentures. Sweat drops gathered in the palest caves of Akutagawa’s skull, as he stumbled forward, clumsy and lethal. Dangling mere inches from his chin, Chuuya’s gloved fingers flexed, very slowly.

Dazai allowed him to analyse — to dig and carve and *taste*, in that people-disciple way of his.

He hummed. “Why?”

One of his shoes stepped on his little finger. He leaned his elbow on his knee. Chuuya had hated touch for as long as he had known him; he wondered if a deity’s silence was worth it. He wondered if the Mafia thought it had them where it wanted them. “Quit pretending to be naive.”

“Is the thread of familiarity *that* overwhelming?”

“The general agreement the syndicate has settled on is that you want the rookie dead,” The tilt of his voice made it clear what *he* thought of that conclusion. “What, are *you* overwhelmed by the thread of familiarity?”

“Me?” he echoed.

Chuuya scoffed. “That’s a dramatic bastard who would die for no reason, if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Voices tell me Akutagawa is as resilient as the slum rats that probably raised you.”

“He strikes to kill with every hit, with no care for those flagging limbs of his.”

“An optimal ambition for a mafioso.”

“If the afore-mentioned mafioso wants to be dead by twenty, yeah.”

“Look at him,” Dazai dripped nonchalance from his lips, stubborn and willful. On the field, Akutagawa coughed in his handkerchief, caged beast eyes settled on the subordinates attempting to help him to his feet. “Inevitability is to be yearned all the same, isn’t it?”

His pause stretched out. Akutagawa stood; his hands moved in quick motions, demanding a rematch and begging for a gaze.

Failing at shallowness, Chuuya noted, “Did Mori tell you that?”

Something scratched in his brain. He didn’t answer.

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**[Camera 7.8.111 — Interrupted]**

He saw him each time he tried.

“If you see him situate himself near anything deadly,” the seniors had told him, “You lower your eyes, and you *leave*.”

*Is that what you do when someone is trying to die?*, he hadn’t asked. The notion had appeared absurd; at that point, he hadn’t yet had the chance to see him drag his skeleton around with lithe fingers. *Is loneliness what the self-destructive needs?*

In the weeks that followed, haunted by a bandaged silhouette whenever his bones attempted their starved best to shatter against the concrete, he thought — *yes, yes, it is, it is*.

Blades were never deadly; ropes broke under his weight; guns would jam whenever he stuck them in his mouth, pressed them against his temple, laid them so heavy against his chest it felt like they might remain between his ribs. He stood on the edge of a building, and he jumped.

He tried. His feet did not move.

He started fights in every lowest bar their territory had to offer; begged one of those drunken men who had sold their life for the sake of nothing at all to *destroy him*; jumped in front of enemy fire with diligence — always, always, *always alive*.

Through all of it, he was there.

He laughed when his guns didn’t work; he hummed when his feet wouldn’t leave the ground. *Every breath he takes is for the good of the syndicate*, she had told him, and he *believed it*, how could he not — when he was defying every law of nature to make sure the latest Mafia cockroach would manage to stop his heart from beating?

He burned his father’s house with himself inside it. He woke up in the nearby woods, smelling snow.

*You will not die*, the Demon told him. Guilt was a shadow as much as he was. *You will not die. Isn’t that what you wanted? Father, don’t you want a healthy son?*

And then —

“Please,” he vomited out, forehead on the leather of his shoes, close enough to smell dried blood. He kissed them — cried, choked on every breath out of his mouth. “Please, *please*, kill me. I beg you. I beg you, I beg you, *kill me* — “

The Demon Prodigy blinked down at him. He was strangely tall; strangely young. “What makes you think *I* could?”

He gasped, “Nothing human could kill me.”

His gaze shifted, imperceptibly.

“Well, then,” the boy concluded, vacantly. “Tell me who made you infiltrate the Port Mafia, and I will.”

Drool landed on those polished shoes; his stupor lit up some entertainment on his features. “Don’t tell me you thought I wouldn’t know,” he teased. “You came with the bad weather, did you not? I have a criteria to let people join *my* ranks. You and Nakama talked about it, right?”

*Nakama*, he thought. *Her name was Nakama*. She probably didn’t know his name either. “What is *it*?”

The Demon lips did not turn; and yet he smiled. “People who need to be reminded of the consequences.”

Yasunari laid his forehead on his shoes. He talked.

Eons later, when the tip of his gun dug a hole in the middle of his forehead — when *relief* sagged his veins, choking the blood out of it, *gratefulness*, absurdly, for that demon of his, he asked: “Were you really there? All those times, were you really there?”

His fingers tapped the trigger, once, twice. He seemed lost in thought. He seemed crowned by the moonlight outside the window, whiter than his bandages. *Justice*, he thought — standing on its misplaced throne; holding a scale and a sword, to make the queue shorter in either way.

*Justice*, he thought. There was nothing just about a carcass playing man.

“Who knows,” Dazai Osamu told him, a bit obnoxiously. “But just so you know — *you’re* the one who didn’t want to die. Abilities could not care less about us.”

There was a saying in the Port Mafia. It would gain more voices once he was in the grave. But he did recall it, when the last of his air was gifted to the night.

*The greatest misfortune for Dazai’s enemies*, it said. *Is that they are Dazai’s enemies*.

Children got buried near the cherry blossom trees, usually.

*I don't think separating them from their families is very nice*, Dazai had mused, dirtying the foothold of his designated stool at Bar Lupin. *Why make them whine? Children are professional whiners. In the name of what? A somber pantomime of kids' corpses under pink leaves?*

Odasaku had downed his drink in *that* way, too slow not to flank the ice around the glass. It made Ango twitch. Dazai knew their every flutter.

*I don't really think either of them cares.*

*Wouldn't you be mad if they buried your orphans far from you?*, Ango had considered.

His vacant glance had been funny, because most of his glances were. The world would have probably found more entertainment in analyzing Odasaku than the opposite. *I'm sure you two won't let that happen*, he'd said.

"Nothing to be done," Akutagawa was muttering. Too heavy on the ball of his feet; infiltration would be a failed test. Underneath the shattered shade of the widest cherry blossom up the hill, the two siblings were columns of smoke from missing pyres, hiding revolvers and knives under an ill-fitted suit and a too long dress.

"They won't take our word on the names," He kicked one of the stones. "Said allowing us not to bury some *faceless street rats* in the common grave is already enough."

A flash of rage passed through Gin's face. At their feet, six unruined, nameless graves stood unmoving under the nearly *winter-like* wind.

They hadn't seen him yet, Dazai knew — and they wouldn't. He knelt near the grave of some fallen soldier from the *Great War* — *ta-* something, he read, apologizing to his remnants — and he waited. Let them mourn in silence.

"Do you think they'd be happy for us?"

Akutagawa's hesitance was uncharacteristic; he rarely thought about words before vomiting them out.

"No one in the slums liked the syndicate much," he said, eventually. "But their killers were slaughtered, and Executive Dazai is to thank for it. *That*, I think they'd appreciate."

"Executive Dazai," Gin echoed. It was the right way to say his name; all poison and all rivers, and the secret drawer in some dusty desk. Her brother tucked a badly cut strand of hair behind her ear, awkwardly loving. "I don't get what you see in him."

A myriad of shards made their way through the cracks in her brother's face

Dazai saw the backseat of a car, two hunched silhouettes occupying a single seat — and *eyes*, a single pair, so focused it *burned*, settled on him with the curiosity of the first sunrise.

*I haven't done a thing*, he had thought. *Good job*, Mori had said.

“He *saved* us, Gin,” Akutagawa hissed. “He’s giving us a reason to go on. He’s going to make me stronger than ever. Do you know what would have been of us, if —”

“He brought us in because the Port Mafia needed new grunts,” she insisted. “We’re weapons at best.”

“At least we’re something.”

“We were something before, too.”

The wind blew through the rose petals. They hadn’t brought a single gift for the dead. *I don’t really think they care*, Odaskau would have said. Akutagawa stared at his sister, speechless.

“And now, we —” Gin’s dislike painted her cheeks scarlet; something like shyness. “*Mafia dogs*, Ryuu? Is that what we’re supposed to be? We were destroyed by their flood. It was just *years* ago. What makes you think it won’t happen again?”

“I want to be on the side that can fight back,” the boy replied. His voice reeked of pride; Dazai didn’t quite know if it would warrant a slap on the nape or an approving nod. “What do you *suppose* we could do? Be eaten by rats until the end of our days? Wander around, with no meaning and no purpose?”

“We could run —”

His whole body jolted. “Don’t say it.”

“Ryuu, they want us to *fight* for a spot —”

“Have you got no loyalty?” Akutagawa snapped. “Most people don’t even get a *glimpse* of the Boss in their entire life. Executive Dazai vouched for you — You could end up in the battalion squad with *no Ability*, and —”

“They treat you like — like —”

“Gin.”

“We’re *stronger* than we were. We could *try*, and — Remember Katsuki’s plan? In Tokyo?”

He scoffed. “They’d find us everywhere. “

“You think Dazai would go looking for *you*?”

It echoed, somewhere. He heard it in his bones. Akutagawa stumbled back. Gin exhaled.

Dazai left.

Maple trees and bundles of snow lead the way through anonymous graves. The jacket was older than he remembered it being — a bit frayed at the edges, missing little bits of leather near the shoulders. Its green was faded; he remembered wondering if Chuuya had found it in the trash, or if he had liked it enough to beat someone up for it.

It was definitely too large on Yuan's frame. The near death-grip her cold-chilled fingers had around the hems made up for it.

"You know," he started, studying the nameless grave he had seen Chuuya kick in the weekends, when he was done with the Flags' fake ones. "Once, I dyed this handler of mine's beard purple. How *scandalous*, though. I've heard good school girls don't dye their hair."

An assortment of flowers was precariously balanced on top of the stone; graciously enough, stingy like an adult, she had laid a single one on the other five graves, as well. "Minami said I could keep them red, if I promised to turn to the other direction when I saw you again."

Dazai snorted. "Still a liar, then."

"I don't lie," Yuan replied.

"Neither do I. It's more Chuuya's thing."

She frowned at the ground.

"He used to sleep with his hands between his thighs," she told him, a bit pointlessly. Her eyes were bitter and warm. "Otherwise, he would start chewing on them in his sleep from hunger. Like he did before."

Dazai tilted his head back and forth. *He still does that, sometimes*, he could have told her. "That explains the gloves, at least," he lied.

Her gaze flickered towards him, at last.

He had thought he knew what despise looked like when directed to him; her strongest, most desperate efforts were startling — almost. Dazai would take what the harvest would bring.

"Did you land face first in a racoon lair?" she asked, eventually, nodding towards the bruises and scratches on his face. "Or did you go around threatening some innocent people?"

"Oh," Dazai blinked. "No, I fell in a ditch."

"You fell in a ditch."

"Reading. Unfortunately, it wasn't deep enough to kill."

One of her eyebrows twitched. She didn't ask further.

At the edge of the hill, where the sea was nothing but a vaguely polluted line and some boats, the sun began to fall. Once the earth-stained tombstones were bathed in reddish shades, and



Dazai stayed put and staring just long enough for the tension to turn her shoulders into marble — Yuan spoke again.

“That thing Chuuya can do,” she spelled out, as tentative as thorns, “With — Arahabaki.”

Dazai stared forward.

She nodded towards the grave. “He never specified if — Did it kill them?”

On the other side, Akutagawa’s coat was too large on Gin’s shoulders, as he led her out. He was laying most of his weight on her; his neck handkerchief was stained red. The Secret Executive would have to be warned; while not a traitor — not without her brother — rebels weren’t to be tolerated.

Yuan’s jacket tickled some dirty, ignored piece of his rib cage; something like remembrance — like a sharp voice and a slap on his cheek, *no one would believe that*; and a hand around his wrist. Always on his blind side.

Whatever she saw in his eyes when he turned painted her face ash.

He grinned, throwing his head back in laughter. “My, *my*,” He shook his head, bones creaking, “You kids would blame pollution on him, were he tall enough to reach the trash can.”

Her flinch sent her a step back.

She didn’t try to stop him as he walked away; didn’t do anything more than sink her nails in her jacket.

Dazai considered appearing at the siblings’ car, giving Akutagawa the scare of a lifetime. He considered putting some antiseptic in those cuts of his, because Mori was insistent, and that one presentation on poor hygiene practices and the use of bandages was always there. He considered finding that ditch again.

In the end, he left his discarded bandaid on the rebels-dug grave of one *Tsushima Masaru* — *he did not trust the world*, it read, in old kanjis, *and the world did not trust him* — and walked towards where the sun disappeared.

yasunari: the demon prodigy is my sleep paralysis demon

the rest of the mafia: ? same and

yasunari kawabata, author of “snow country.” more on that soon!

fun fact: you know those pages in between bsd chapters that give you information on a character? among akutagawa’s dislikes is “bonsais.”

sugar packets and notebooks and warm baths: elements mentioned by beast akutagawa and beast atsushi as “dreams of kids who grew up in an orphanage” basically.

aomori prefecture: where irl dazai was born. the nod to the “stuttering” comes from my personal hc of a stuttering habit baby dazai used to have.

well! i can’t thank you guys enough for reading, once again. i know i’m getting repetitive, but i seriously need you all to understand just how often i re read every single comment! this has been a particularly emotional week for me, considering i’ve set to editing the last ever chapter of this fic (which will take. so. long. let’s not even start) and all the nice comments i’ve received have cheered me up tons! keep telling me all your favorite quotes and moments, and i hope you keep enjoying this just as much <3 thank you so so much.

keep warm and see you soon!!

# AN

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xiv.*

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*Case number: 62770097*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Ango S.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were  
sent to the town of [...]*

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The car broke down around the first of the three hours it took to reach Yuzawa.

“I *told you* you shouldn’t have touched my car with your nasty fish hands,” Chuuya snapped, bent over the open, smoking hood of the vehicle. “*Let’s take turns driving, Hatrack* — I should have let you rot with a streetlight up your ass.”

“What’s with you and streetlights, anyway,” Dazai observed, cross legged on the car roof. He had spent the last hour offering unnecessary, more than inexperienced suggestions on how to fix whatever was broken. “And I would be touching the car in any case, dumbass. It’s called *sitting*.”

Chuuya hauled a screwdriver to his head. “Did you cut off the brakes?” he accused.

“I didn’t cut off the brakes.”

He squinted.

“I *didn’t!*” he swore. “And this isn’t *your car*, I remind you. Your pipsqueak-sized clown vehicle wouldn’t have fit all four of us.”

“I don’t know,” Unmatching eyes left the engine just enough to study the two quiet bodies leaning against the empty road’s safety railing. They both straightened. “From what I remember, the slums’s sewer system is even smaller.”

Gin stared forward, pointedly. Akutagawa opened his mouth — seemed to think better of it. From inside the car, on the radio, Hirose Fumiko hummed a funerary hymn.

Chuuya leaned crossed arms on the hood, directing a pointed look at his partner. “Remind me *what* you did, that now we’re playing babysitter during a syndicate emergency?”

“Stop assuming everything is my fault,” Dazai tutted, uninterested. “The curse of the world’s most useless User and his sharp-knifed sister is one I bear unsinful and victimized.”

Akutagawa flinched, jaw set.

“No one will be taking the useless crown from you,” Chuuya stated. He hit something a few inches off the center of the hood; with a hiss and a terrifying screech, the engine came to live. “Fuck, *yeah!* Finally, *God*.”

When Dazai attempted to slip into the driver seat, he kicked him so hard, he slipped on snow and landed on his knees.

The car was warmed up by the heating system, fogging the windows up against the snowy lanes. The bright lids of his console would give Dazai a headache by the time the sun started going down — it still wasn’t enough reason to take his feet off the dashboard and *not* tidily beat every record Chuuya had set.

Despite the distraction of Dazai singing along rather loudly to the radio, it seemed the boy’s mind was still stuck. “Mori wouldn’t have ordered them to join a *Double Black* mission for no reason,” he insisted.

His innocent blink tightened Chuuya's grip around the steering wheel. "Maybe their tendency to match dark monochromatism?"

"You're fucking annoying."

"Crash the car and die, then. Thanks."

Chuuya snarled. "No need for your hand me downs."

"Wet dog."

"Toilet paper dispenser."

"Eyes on the road, sweetheart."

Chuuya's fingers wrapped around the back of his skull, almost shattering his nose against his legs on the dashboard. Dazai hit him on the head with the console, cracking the screen. From the backseats, came a stunned silence.

Cold wind filtered in from the sole ajar window, fluttering through candid fields on both their sides. Over the last week, the region had reached temperatures that had every meteorologist on Tanuki's screens speechless. Most stared at the snow with an exasperated, hysterical acceptance.

Kouyou had — as subtly as her imposing frame was capable of — been pushing scarves in his direction for days, now; probably not willing to deal with his obnoxious sniffs and fragile immune system. *It's not that bad*, Odasaku had shrugged, blowing hot air in his hands. *Summer must be hell on those bandages of yours, right?*

*It is*, he had confirmed, *but I'd prefer my corpse to be found with a soundtrack of crickets and dew.*

*I don't know. The smell of corpses under the sunlight is intolerable*, the man had replied, ever so knowledgeable.

"Our target," Akutagawa said, eventually. "Who is she?"

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. He had left a nail shaped bruise on Dazai's jaw after his hat had been stolen — but he was now studying the road through wind-ruffled strands of hair.

"Reading debriefs *is* part of a mission, kid."

"Now, now," He yawned. "We can't be sure little Akutagawa knows how to read."

"He's reading every report *you* write, for sure," Clear skepticism painted his tone. "You might want to lock up any and all secret diaries you might own."

Outrage — or the closest thing to embarrassment he would bear — only made the kid pale further. "How *dare* you —"

“Very easily,” Unimpressed, Chuuya shrugged. “Just so you know, outrightly shown attachment gets people killed. Don’t be surprised when they try to get you by putting a bullet in your *beloved* Dazai and *I* have to step in.”

“Aw,” The hunting season had started a mere week ago, slowed down by the unpredictable temperatures. The deeper they went, the more often the distant thunderclap of rifles appeared.

*Why do you never hear them cry out?* Dazai had asked, once.

*Because weapons don’t care*, Mori had replied, clearly misunderstanding — or perhaps, not quite. He’d ruffled his hair and eaten his knights on the chessboard. *Isn’t that merciful?*

Blankly, Dazai asked: “Would you?”

“If I can’t make it look like an accident.”

A flash of red, *void-bright* light blinked from the backseat; something humming in unison with the breaths out of his chapped lips. “I would *never* — “

“Akutagawa,” Dazai called, eyes on the console.

He twitched. Gin tapped his wrist.

Fingers flexing in *that* way that meant he had miraculously understood something — Chuuya nodded.

“The target’s an ex-prostitute from the organization,” He had left his jacket and coat somewhere under Dazai’s own busy butt; under the fading lights of sunrise, the criss cross of his harness was a bruise upon a gray waistcoat. “We have reason to believe she and Kawabata were connected. If he died, leaving her with no immediate allies — it’s possible that she would have taken refuge in his town.”

“A living center near an *onsen* town, nonetheless,” Dazai added. “Think one or two baths might cure that cough of yours, Akutagawa? I heard that’s what happened to hysterical women in novels. A few months in the Alps and *poof!* As good as new.”

Gin’s eyes met his eyes in the mirror.

There was acceptance in there — though she still hadn’t realized it. Akutagawa wouldn’t live much in any case; perhaps, dying knowing he had breathed through corrupted lungs for *something* was a good enough deal for both siblings.

His fingers stilled on the console.

Then tapped, again, and again.

“That’s because every *womanly reaction* was deemed a sign of hysteria,” Chuuya informed, helpfully, either not noticing the veil of tension or — more probably — walking all over it

with those ground-breaking steps of his. “Kouyou said she’s been giving you two catch up lessons. Right?”

Lower than a breath — and *oh*, what had the Secret Executive even *done* to her, after he had been informed of her less-than-loyal ideas? — Gin murmured: “Executive Kouyou said they were signs of depression, often.”

The boy snapped his fingers. “That, too. Why *that* tone about her, anyway? She’s cool. Don’t let the big demon fool you,” He slapped Dazai’s hand before he could change the radio station. “Want some advice? Call her *Ane-san*. We all do. It’ll piss her off to the point of growing fond of you.”

“No one calls her *Ane-san* except us two, Hatrack,” he reminded him. “Probably because she’s barely old enough to *vote*.”

A dirty glance. Akutagawa straightened in his seat at the sight of it, and he had nightmarish visions of a knight in shining armor, defending an honor that wasn’t there. “You’re barely old enough to waddle around with those beanpole feet, and yet you *still* stick your nose everywhere, don’t you?” Chuuya commented.

“And *you’re* barely tall enough to wear hats without resembling a leprechaun, but look at you,” Dazai tapped the hat on his own head. “Did the submission I sent to the local kindergarten ever receive a response, anyway?”

“That was *you* — you’re *younger than me*.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You told me!”

“Show it, then,” He batted his eyelashes. “Some politeness and your *bento, senpai?*”

In the backseat, Akutagawa choked.

Chuuya mimicked retching. “As if your deranged ass doesn’t make me pay for all your meals already,” he scoffed. “The *Vampire Siblings* sure won’t be voting for anyone soon either, so I think they’re good.”

The pale kid seemed bewildered. “*Vampire Siblings?*”

“Like the movie?” Gin whispered.

“Sure thing. So someone *is* catching you two up with the *Outside Slum Life*. That’s great.”

“The — Lemon-bomb maker,” Akutagawa said, with a perplexed intonation. “He keeps giving us DVDs.”

Chuuya cringed, just a bit. “Maybe don’t exactly take his word on — *Ah*, whatever. As long as he doesn’t put bombs in my office again for the sake of cinematography. Also, you *don’t*

need to take his Opera recommendations, they're all shit. Which one of you brats kicked Tamaguchi's ass in the *Sword Room* the other day?"

Dazai saw them exchange a cautious glance.

Their shoulders seemed to *bloom* forward — one hesitant voice after the other, they allowed Chuuya to wove a conversation over their most pendulous thoughts, until their exchanges moved quicker than the occasional warning signs on the road.

There was a vortex, he knew — one mostly innocuous and genuinely not calculating; as, *cruelly Machiavellian* could only describe Chuuya when the scratches down his arms turned his gaze into the end of an abandoned well. There was an eye of the storm, and they both had the talent to make pieces of wind believe themselves *necessary*. Dazai made people talk, and Chuuya made them want to.

On his console screen, *0-1* appeared.

"What's *that*?" Chuuya questioned, at last.

Akutagawa's flinch was less startlement and more unwillingness; he didn't bother to watch him wrap the small branch in an old piece of fabric again — before hiding it in his pocket. "None of your business."

"It's a branch from a bonsai tree," Dazai informed.

Chuuya frowned. "You don't look much of a green thumb, kid."

"That's because he's anemic."

"And you're mentally unstable."

"That's *not* what —"

"One of the recruits has a nature-related Ability," Akutagawa intervened, for the sake of shutting them up. "The branch is connected to the main plant. I can check on its condition."

"It's a *plant*," Chuuya noted.

Akutagawa stood a bit straighter. Next to him, Gin eyed the hidden branch. "If Executive Dazai says it's important, it must be."

*I-I*, said the screen.

The assumption that the distrusting pair wouldn't be foolish enough to fall asleep was soon proved wrong. By the time the road had turned into little more than old concrete framed by grass, matching slow breaths were fogging up their windows — undisturbed by the bumps, the blinding dawn, and the gun whose safety Dazai was mechanically switching on and off.

Chuuya didn't appear a bit surprised. "They're used to sleeping together," he explained. "You still on about making them duel? They're already electric at the sole sight of each other."



Gin was plastered against her door, knees hiding her face; her brother was plastered against her, his too large coat covering every naked part of her skin. “Mafiosi should know better than to sleep where the door isn’t barred,” he replied.

Staring at him, pointedly, Chuuya locked the car.

He squinted, sitting sideways, shoes dirtying all over the leather, printing the fabric of the backrest on his cheek. Against the polluted firmament, the bridge of the boy’s nose was familiar and endless, and he had walked miles to reach nowhere at all. “Mafiosi should know better than to sleep where the *local wonder duo* is awake.”

“I could leave you here to hitchhike,” he offered. “Half a wonder duo is surely not a safety hazard.”

“Don’t play big brother with my subordinates,” Dazai ordered. “Is this your usual friendship-making method? It sucks.”

“Gin isn’t yours.”

“No,” he agreed. “She’s the Executive’s.”

Chuuya threw him a glance. “You ever going to tell me who the fucker is?”

“Why do you assume I know?” he asked, just to waste some air. That was all they were, he considered — a twitch in a well-oiled machine. Something he hadn’t quite wanted.

“You know everything that might inconvenience me,” the other boy answered, courteous enough. “I’ll kill you for it, one day.”

The Akutagawa siblings didn’t snore at all. The sound of their rise-and-fall through slumber was as mocking as any and all spit landing near his shoes. Chuuya was humming that song of his, and he found himself surprised by the *urge* to figure out what it was. The thought of him knowing what Dazai didn’t was haunting.

The horizon-less road and the snow-bruised sky embraced; the afternoon painted his mismatched eyes almost the same color. “How,” It fell from his lips, sticky until the last syllable. He pulled at the rolled up sleeve of the boy’s closest arm, until his hand abandoned the wheel; twisted the fingers until the bones creaked. “Tell me how.”

Chuuya studied him.

“A bullet seems like it would be poetic,” he said, at last, never one to question what would go unanswered. *Price of partnership*, he reminded the curiosity in his bones — that dozing creature insisting, *reminding* him that Chuuya had never *not known*. “You’d love something fancier.”

“You and your poetry,” The velvet of his gloves was a field of pins and needles, rougher than his own bandages and softer than the skin underneath. One of Dazai’s strategies, all of it — cruel when he thought of it, foolish when he forgot. Transactional until his very last breath. “You’d have to learn how to shoot properly first, though.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Chuuya replied. “I wouldn’t kill you with a weapon.”

He pretended drowsiness, endlessly vacant and perpetually unbelieving; leaned down until the tip of his fingers brushed his lips. “Wouldn’t you?”

“No,” he promised. Dazai thought saying *thank you* might have been polite. He thought Akutagawa would have to be taught not to sleep where men could plan anyone’s demise. Thought about biting to raw skin, and asking Chuuya to take off his bandages — hang him off them to dry up where it was warm.

*It had to be*, somewhere. He sneaked his thumb over the border of his glove; settled it where existence pumped and a scar he knew to be black rested — and thought about saying something, and didn’t. *It had to be somewhere*.

“No,” Chuuya repeated. He wondered if Arahaki would deign him worthy of something more than pure hunger, when he tore him apart. “I’ll put that bullet in you with my own hands.”

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### **One day before.**

If Dazai had to kill Mori Ougai — moved by the little insurrectionists left; or the spasms of his fingers at night — this was how he would have gone about it.

His hands.

“That little pet project of yours,” the man said, from the head of the endless table. They were the only souls in the meeting room; the walls had been rolled up from the windows, bathing the air in moonlight and the hot red lights of the ceiling. “Akutagawa. How is he?”

“Tending to bonsais and training mats all the same,” Dazai answered. He made to pull at the ribbon in Elise’s hair; she huffed, spread out in the middle of the table, and moved away. Before, she only ever fought back when it was Mori.

The former doctor blinked.

“Is that a riddle? You know I’m not good at those,” A slightly affectionate tilt curved his lips — leaning down, just a hint *conspiratorial*, he added: “Remember when I would give you all the ripped puzzle pages from the newspaper? Old age won’t change a stubborn man.”

His *hands*, certainly. Mori would like that.

He would die laughing like a madman. He would pat his head and say something funny — something that would get Dazai to shake his head, *Pavlovian-ly* fond. The men would call him ruthless. Fear would keep them obedient.

“Riddles are boring,” he reminded him. “You’re not *old*. Hirotsu is. Stop being dramatic.”

“You never like the fun things I propose.”

“Factually untrue,” Mori was tapping his hand on the table slower than usual; the bruise Ace had accidentally caused him — half sedated, as Mori fixed his dislocated shoulder — was probably still hurting. Dazai had been wanting to take his glove off, just to see the mark.

“He reminds me of you,” the doctor added, stupid man he was — always wasting the air he was given. After, he handed Dazai a piece of paper to play with. “Just a bit.”

He sighed. “Little Akutagawa is not nearly as remarkable. No need,” he insisted, not too *anything*, “To concern yourself with him.”

His smile was smaller than the barely there wedge of moon. “As you wish, then.”

The doors of the meeting room opened. With one last bored wink, Elise vanished.

Ace sat on the other side of the table, his missing digit adorned in old jewelry — because Mori knew his men. Kouyou in front of him, right hand woman and lady of the house — just the right place to meet Dazai’s eyes. The Secret Executive stayed in his basement. Dazai sat with his feet on the chair.

The newest chair next to him screeched against the floor. As Mori entertained some flattering words from Ace, Chuuya’s gloved fingers pinched between his eyebrows.

“Did the raccoons that attacked you steal your band aid as a war spoil?” he mocked.

Dazai stared at him, very blankly.

He turned to Mori, wearing all of his *tantrums* on his sleeve, and cried out: “*Why* is he here — this is an *Executives only* meeting, not the *sub-Executives* —“

“Shut your *mouth* you —“

“He barely reaches the the table! This is a safety hazard and a show of —“

“*Ah*, Chuuya,” Boss cut in. “Did your conversation with Detective Matsuda go well?”

“He confirmed the station has their eyes on us — but the more rational of them recognize the patchwork of, *an years old bother*. Someone who isn’t us,” Chuuya replied, uncaring of the taken aback glance Dazai was directing at him. “I don’t know what group he was referring to, though.”

He huffed. “You couldn’t have *asked*? ”

“I tried, dipshit —“

“What are you even doing here, if —“

“Boss *asked* me to come, unlike your noisy ass — who *fell asleep* during the last meeting —“

“So we’re back to playing charity cases —“

“Boys,” Kouyou called, very politely, in the tone of drying ink over tiredly traced calligraphy. Ace massaged his temples. Mori smiled again, very much on the verge of patronizingly patting their heads.

“Some composure,” the man tutted. “If you could. You’re not children anymore. You are to uphold the name of our —”

Right as Dazai sank his teeth in his lower lip, gulping down a fit — an endlessly gratifying, *horrendously* loud snort left Chuuya’s mouth.

When all eyes turned to look at him, he blushed to the tip of his ears, sinking the heel of his shoe into Dazai’s shin.

“Dear,” he sighed, as pained tears gathered in his eyes. “Unprofessionalism enters by the pet flap, does it not?”

By the time silence had fallen, all amusement had disappeared from Mori’s eyes, leaving space for careful analysis — settled on the fist-wide glass sphere Elise had left behind. Inside it, floating aimlessly behind the fogged up glass, was a lone speck of white — a snowflake.

“Kawabata Yasunari was an unregistered Ability User, and our most recent mole,” the Boss explained, with that vacant tilt he liked to call authority. Dazai studied the man’s eyes on the photocopied picture, evacuated by the weight of posing; thought about the weight of his ashes, and the end they had done. The end of all traitors. “His Ability, *Snow Country*, allowed him to heal his own sicknesses at the cost of a human life,” he continued, “Recently, it was the cause for his father’s demise. He joined the Mafia six months ago, roughly — we have reason to believe he was meant to infiltrate from the start.”

“And how is he connected to the — *unusual* weather?” Ace questioned. “Urgent as it is — several of our shipments *and* planes have been stuck for weeks — I’d be somewhat disappointed if a sloppy traitor was to blame.”

“Not every enemy is a mastermind,” Kouyou commented. “His Ability only *mentions* snow, though.”

Boss hummed. “According to the — *final confession* he offered to Dazai, Kawabata was part of a group known as the *Ballerinas*. ”

Straightening, Chuuya blinked. “You mean the freelance Ability Users mercenaries?”

“He sure didn’t *move* like a ballerina,” Dazai muttered. “He kept bumping into my men. And this one time, he almost shot his *foot* —“

“Have you met the *Ballerinas*, Chuuya?” Mori asked.

“Only one of their messengers,” the boy nodded, squinting. “The poor chick was probably shot in the head the moment she returned. They tried to recruit me, back in Suribachi.”

Dazai’s delight dropped the files from his hands. “Slug, you didn’t tell me you had a dancing past —“

He pinched his wrist — undeterred, he continued: “They’ve got this whole thing going on about institutional injustice on Abilities, don’t they? They tried to get me by promising they’d have their insiders find my information in the Government Archives.”

“Quite,” Kouyou intervened, eyes settled on her own dossier. “According to the voices, the movement started out as a peaceful protest against the institutionalization of Abilities. An attack was launched during the first night of a ballet performance, roughly a decade ago — that’s how they got their names.”

“Oh, I remember,” Ace tilted his head to the side, flimsily. “A colleague of mine barely came out of the theater alive. Almost every man inside it was slaughtered by the fire.”

“It tightened the regulation process over Users rather intensely,” Mori settled his eyes on the floating snowflake — some eons ago, before Dazai’s blood had ever stained his porch. “To this day, Ability Users are forbidden from *any* actual use of their gift, unless partaking in an activity in possession of an *Ability Permit*.”

“Yeah,” At the mention of *Permits*, Chuuya’s expression had gotten complicated. “They’ve unclenched the grip a *lot*, these past few years, but before that...”

“The *Ballerinas* used to have a purpose,” Dazai tapped lithe fingers on the paper. Without turning, Chuuya moved his glass of water — right next to his jittery bandaged wrist — closer. “Or they said they did, at least — most of their fundings were actually uncovered as a scam. But their first attacks were aimed very carefully, despite their morals being more words than actual interest in helping Users. These last few years, though, they’ve turned into epigynous criminals,” He yawned. “According to Kawabata’s scaredy-cat tales, many of their Abilities are related to natural phenomena. He mentioned a particularly upset colleague of his with *glacial* powers of sorts.”

Mori’s pensive expression was laid on his hands. “I believe I heard Elise mention something similar.”

“That’s an animated movie, Boss,” Chuuya clarified.

“Then,” Ace intervened, “This unlikely season is the result of some terrorist neophyte? Their next ballet is bound to cast a snow spell over the south of Japan?”

“Kawabata must have infiltrated for information,” Kouyou said. “As Ace explained, the weather has caused numerous economical delays and deaths — on a national scale. Information on our deals would have told them where to act.”

“And information on possibly recruitable Ability Users, from the biggest assortment of the already-Government-hostile ones available in the city,” Chuuya added. “For whatever large scale attack they’ve been preparing all these years.”

She nodded. “And whose squad could be better to infiltrate than the Demon Prodigy? He has his hands everywhere.”

Dazai curled an eyebrow. “Stop attempting to imply something, Ane-san. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Kawabata gave us some names,” Mori breached in, before the dangerous tinge of the woman’s eyes could pull her lips apart. “Our Intelligence is already searching for possible hideouts. News about their dead mole must have already reached them — and the men are mostly in agreement to say it explains the official invite we have just received from *Standard Island*.”

The sound of a pin dropping would have shattered the windows with ease. Before an hesitant Chuuya could turn his confusion towards him, chaos exploded.

“*Standard Island?*” Ace’s jaw brushed the table. “What in God’s name might have caused *that?*”

“They’ve sent back our offers for years now,” Kouyou laughed, disbelieving. “The former Boss sent gifts and threats almost relentlessly. They’ve refused to deal with our banking affairs for almost a decade.”

“Europeans,” Dazai shook his head.

The other boy frowned. “What’s *Standard Island?*”

“It’s a glorified perpetual cruise for white aristocracy,” he answered, helpfully. “As a street punk, I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

Chuuya snapped, “As a stinky fucking fish I’m not surprised you’d know it *all* about stupid islands —“

“It’s a floating city, to put it easily,” Kouyou offered, promptly ignoring his wide-eyed existence to lay a gentle gaze on her subordinate. “Germany, France, and England designated it together shortly after the *Great War*, as a — meeting spot. It’s an entirely self-sufficient structure, and it moves around the South Pacific Ocean, following the climate. Some summers, it passes by Yokohama.”

“Some of the most important banks *globally* rest on that island,” Mori added. “Gaining a credit there means tight-lipped, absolute privacy from indiscreet governmental eyes —

especially since Japan has no jurisdiction there. The Mafia has been attempting to be granted membership for a long time now. We've always been rejected."

"And now they're suddenly sending offers themselves," Chuuya concluded. "And the *Ballerinas* have been known to receive support from European Abilities advocates groups for a decade, now — we can assume they have some sort of base on the *Island*?"

"And that they *will* take advantage of its recent stop near the city," Dazai nodded. "For, *oh* — whatever reason it is that's moving them. What I still don't understand though, is — *how* did *Standard Island* manage to contact us? We have Users to lock our communication lines."

"Through the *Pomegranate*," Kouyou explained, chin high, after a pause. "A fake client communicated the invite under the guise of buying a night, and promised to remain in the city until we offered our answer."

Ace frowned. "And *how* did they know about the *Pomegranate*? Not to assume such a powerhouse has no insights over the underground — but information on the *Pomegranate* is severely guarded, even in the criminal scene."

"He said he was sold the information."

"By *whom*?"

Gloved fingers wrapped around Dazai's hand, under the table.

Dazai selected a portion of his brain to keep up with the mindless, sharply polite exchange of the two Executives, under Mori's sadistically entertained gaze. He listened to the taps, with the rest of it; casually flipping through the pages of his dossier until he landed on the indicated one.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Chuuya study his other glove, pointlessly abandoned on his own paper. He read through *kanjis* of Intelligence information on names he had been confessed and their most recent connections, until —

— *Kawabata Yasunari was recruited to the Port Mafia, according to the stories of his comrades, through information gained by the hands of an unregistered sex worker, by the name of Furata Yoko, age* —

He paused.

"— accept the offer, *knowing* it's most certainly a trap?" Ace was insisting.

"Specifically *because* we know, *Executive*," Kouyou replied, collected, "It makes no sense not to take advantage of the opportunity. As Boss said, the *Ballerinas* must be well aware of the murder of their mole. A response is to be expected. We might as well try to understand *what* their plan is."

"*We*," the man noted. From the other side of the table, Mori stood up, hands twined behind his back and a gentle smile on. He walked to the windows; studied the skyline. "Have no care for squabbles against the Government, though, do we? If it turns out this whole play is a

game to fumble with non Users, staging an attack might ruin any chance of staying out of the *Ballerinas*' path — as long as they aren't after us, who cares?"

"Who *cares*?" she snapped. "And you dare call yourself a *Night Warden*? The well-being of Yokohama is our utmost sacred mission. I will *not* let some willful terrorist wannabe —"

Dazai dragged his fingers over the rim of his glass, pulling it closer. Chuuya's eyes followed the motion — when they moved to meet his own, he raised his eyebrows.

"Boys."

Mori hadn't turned yet. His voice was enough to bring a breathless silence; *with his hands*, Dazai thought, and his spine readjusted to fit that tone. "Boss?" Chuuya asked.

A wedge of his gaze appeared, as amused as the moon framing his silhouette. "Something to share with the class? With your Ane-san, perhaps?"

Inevitable as gravity, Kouyou's eyes fell on them.

They exchanged another glance.

"About Furata Yoko," Dazai started.

Her lips parted. "I haven't heard that name in — I still have men looking for her. What does she have to do with —"

Ace huffed. "Are two brats' tales of whores the most relevant matter at hand?"

"You'll want to hear this story," Mori confirmed. He nodded towards the windows, innocuous and hungry. *A coward*, Dazai thought, again and again, *with sadistic tendencies*.

Undignified in their suddenness, all the Executives made their way to the windows.

Glimmering gently under the stars — and the eyes of an emergency helicopter reporter — was a valley of ice spikes, staking the entire square outside the Headquarters; curling into the night like white ink, wrecking the streets and freezing the puddles abandoned by the latest storm.

What passersby might have missed was easily caught from the highest floor: the ice road had been carefully woven through the square to create the Port Mafia symbol.

"I believe," the doctor added, unnecessarily, offering Dazai his most obnoxious gaze, "That we might be getting framed."



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What remained of Kawabata's house stood mostly incinerated and bone-thin against the endless white valley, just close enough to some nameless lake oozing off cold air to appear satirical.

"Well," Dazai blew warm air into his hands. "Time to explore the abandoned ship, mermaids."

"I should have said no to that movie marathon," Chuuya grunted — he didn't hesitate to stumble down the hill, though, sinking into the snow knee-deep before deciding to simply float. Leafless trees hid the weak roofs of the town; he got the vague desire to paint it.

"*Maybe* if you hadn't bet on who could fall asleep the latest —" he hinted.

"*Maybe* if you stopped breaking into *my house* —"

"*Maybe* if all your door passwords weren't some variation of your birthday," he called, careless of the middle finger he could *feel*, rather than see. "Little spider, I need you to do me a favor."

Gin stood straighter.

Suspicion would only be clear to an eye as well trained as his; to the silent eyes of that freezing wind, she was the poster child of obedience.

"Go into town," Ignoring the intake of breath out of Akutagawa's mouth, he continued, "Gather every ounce of information you can squeeze out of the farmers' lungs on the Kawabata family. Their bar brawls, their preferences, the last person they talked to — All of it. And then," He crouched down, whispering into her ear.

To her credit, her gaze did not shift an inch, the more detailed his instructions grew. A hint of curiosity was brightening her face, by the time she ran towards the town — not before a concerned glance in her brother's direction.

"Sir, won't they find a stranger being so nosy suspicious?" Akutagawa pressed.

Dazai gathered some snow from the ground, shaping it up in a ball. "They would find *two* weirder, for sure."

"I wasn't suggesting —"

"Has your sister gone non-verbal?"

The kid's nostrils flared. "She's not — Gin has always been quiet," And *that*, he could imagine — that the two of them had been left in bundles of dirty cotton on the roads of the slums, and that a child might have not been a good enough teacher.

“She certainly had just the right voice to propose an insubordination,” Dazai observed.

Frail as he already was, all substance seemed to be sucked right out of Akutagawa’s lungs. “I would *never* —”

“Gin wasn’t wrong, you know,” Dazai said. “You two *could* run. And you would probably be welcomed by most organizations, in and out of Yokohama. Whether or not they would be better than the Port Mafia, though,” He shrugged.

“Sir,” Akutagawa insisted, fueled by unnecessary rage towards a target he wouldn’t strike. They had brought a good number of weapons, and the rifle stuck in his unfamiliar grasp pulled him down like gravity. “Sir, we’re not leaving. Neither of us. I owe you,” He licked his lips, “I owe you the knowledge that you didn’t make a mistake in taking us in.”

“The Mafia needs loyalty,” he noted. “Not debts.”

“A debt of loyalty, then,” he raised his chin. He was truly dramatic at heart. “You showed faith in me. Loyalty is the least I can give back. I’ll gather enough blood at your feet to be worth the effort.”

Something tickled his skull.

He disliked it vividly. Disliked the wide eyes settled on him, the curve of his too-big coat — a promise to kneel, or to attack. All of it in his name. All of it not *enough* to —

“All you owe me,” he replied, “Is a bonsai and your sister’s defeat in a duel. My faith in your success in either of those requests is terribly low, but I *do* sometimes sin in hopefulness,” Dazai tapped the barrel of his rifle. “Do hide in the trees and snipe any vengeful ghost that gets in our way, yes? Gun, *Rashomon* — you pick. If you let it decapitate Chuuya, I might even be proud.”

“He’s your partner,” His feelings about it were written in blood on his frown. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Dazai sighed. “You all say that.”

The skeleton of the house hardly recalled its shape, apart from the few walls left standing; Through an half an hour long exploration, he prodded at some mess of dust and cloth that might have been a dinner table, barely managing to hold on when it collapsed.

Alerted by the noise, Chuuya floated down the skeleton of the stairs. “Maybe try not to destroy our trail, sucker?”

“I think I hear a little fairy talking,” He blinked. “My, this place might *truly* be haunted.”

“Where the hell were you?” he insisted, crossing his arms. “I’ve been calling for you for ten minutes. You need to see something.”

Dazai looked at him funny. “I’ve been here for longer than that.”

“Whatever,” Chuuya sighed. “Joke all you want. Come on.”

Haunted or not, the place certainly had the look for it. Whatever might have been left of Kawabata’s father had disappeared among the onyx furniture and the decaying arches, giving the few rooms the semblance of rusty domes. He had visited burned down locations countless times; none of them so utterly —

“He was as fucked up as your reports said, *ah?*” Chuuya concluded, hands in his pockets, studying a vaguely human-shaped trace of ash on the floor. “Did his Ability make him insane, or did you?”

“Ability Users are tormented,” He offered him a glance. “You’d know.”

Chuuya’s fingers twitched. The electricity stuck to his skeleton had seemed to worsen, after *The Net* — sometimes, he caught him flinching at nothing at all. But his hands hadn’t been black and decaying in months.

Someone else wouldn’t have noticed. But Dazai was next to him more often than he wanted — and Chuuya was carved on his blind side, picking at the scabs of divine-shaped scars.

“So would you,” he said, eventually, eyes somewhere else. “And that’s not what I asked.”

“Stop worrying,” He fixed a brick back into place, aimlessly; studied the circle of light a hole on the roof painted on the floor. “Mori would get mad if I locked *you* into a storm of madness.”

“*Stop worrying,*” Chuuya parroted. “I don’t have any fathers your deranged ass can make me murder.”

Dazai snorted.

They roamed through that old skeleton, moving fragile furniture and searching inside the miraculous remnants of cabinets. A dreadful sort of absence embraced every inch of that place; the inaudible sound of some impersonal thing’s rage at being emptied.

“Is it *warmer* in here, or am I losing it?” Chuuya muttered, at one point, kicking what might have been a chair. “Like crossing the door fucked up with your senses.”

“Nothing so fancy,” Dazai leaned down, squinting at a slightly less incinerated tile. From underneath it, he extracted a dossier. “Someone with *very* warm hands was simply here before us.”

“A musician, then?” Chuuya wondered, leaning his knees on his back in a pointless attempt to unbalance him. Music sheets mixed with children drawings and professional sketches; at the end of that inconspicuous bunch, only numbers. “Or not. I’m assuming the *Maihime Project* isn’t some particularly hard piano piece.”

Dazai focused on the dig of his kneecaps under his shoulder blades, relaxing his heartbeat without a twitch — because they had both learned to hear, and now they both had a bad habit of listening.

“It’s a governmental project from the *Great War*,” he said, cautious. “Propositions on the aid Ability Users could offer to the conflict.”

“That was the first time Ability Users were allowed a license for any kind of activity, wasn’t it?” At his nod, Chuuya scoffed. “That spells *Ballerinas* out in capital letters. Are we to assume Kawabata casually kept secret Government files in the house?”

“We could,” Dazai considered. “But that wouldn’t explain how he would have scribbled on the wall with fresh blood.”

Almost comically, his head snapped up.

Half-hidden behind heavy curtains moved by a more violent hiss of wind, stuttering *kanjis* dripped red onto the ash. Dazai crawled to the puddle of blood, wetting his fingers to study its density. “This is from a few hours ago at best. They knew we were coming — they’re playing with us,” He climbed to his feet. “Right place, wrong time.”

When he turned, Chuuya was nowhere to be found.

“Did you get spooked out?” Dazai called, settling his hands on his hips. Louder, he screamed: “Unbelievable. Leaving me to talk to the walls — We have a job to do, *you know?*”

No answer came.

He huffed, cleaning the snow stuck to his coat, settling to squint at the *kanjis*. The *tip-tap* of the wind against the fragile walls was a eerie creak; when he studied the endless white valleys outside the windows, they seemed to last to the end of the world — inhabited and unfriendly.

The wood of the door frames cried out.

“But why *us*,” Dazai muttered, frowning at the scattered papers on the floor. “The *Ballerinas* do it for Media coverage. Why pin the mess on any other underground group,” He tilted his head back to meet the eyes of a painted woman — only her pale face having survived the fire. “Who knows. Maybe they hate Abilities these days.”

She didn’t answer either. With a sigh, he stood — and crashed right over a crouched down Chuuya.

“*Oi*, asshole!” he wasted no time saying — jumping to his feet just quickly enough to watch Dazai tumble to the floor. “What the hell is up with you? Playing hide and seek in the middle —“

“What is up with *you*, you germ!” Dazai snapped, spitting some snow mixed with ash. “You’re the one who just up and disappeared —“

“Sirs,” Akutagawa called.

At the destroyed doorstep, one hallway away, his rifle was digging into the skull of a child.

Said kid appeared strangely relaxed about the whole ordeal — a round-cheeked smile on and naked feet that seemed to shake from the effort not to jump in place from excitement. His ash-blond hair was intertwined with hay; the blue overalls he wore were torn at the seam in a way that spoke of affection, rather than poverty.

When he waved at them, enthusiastic, it brightened his freckled face. “City folks, aren’t you? I’ve heard all about your guns!”

The stillness was broken by another hiss of wind, just cold enough to be felt. Chuuya put two fingers on the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes. “Akutagawa,” he exhaled, “Let the brat go. For fuck’s sake.”

“He was *spying* on you,” he spelled out.

“The *wind* could blow him away. Holding chatty brats at gunpoint is exactly —“

“I do *not* answer to your orders.”

“I’m your superior too, *Dark Knight!*”

Very politely, the child raised his hand.

Dazai stood up, brushing dust off his coat. “Let him go,” he ordered — and once Akutagawa immediately did, much to the spluttering offense of Chuuya, he nodded, “Yes, kid?”

“I wasn’t spying on you,” he swore. “I sat outside to wait for you to be done. I’m patient! It’s my prayer time!”

“Prayer time?” Chuuya questioned.

“For Uncle Eikichi and Nari-nari,” His smile lacked one or two front teeth; his eyes had the vacant glee of someone who had genuinely not considered the possibility of blood leaving the body once in his life. “The house was destroyed by fire. If we don’t pray, this place won’t be puri — *putri* —“ A blink. “That thing where we kick evil spirits’s butts. That’s how Granny put it.”

He couldn’t be older than nine. One glance exchanged with Chuuya confirmed his lack of suspicion — the possibilities crowded in front of his eyes, still.

“These evil spirits,” Dazai dared. “Are they, according to your Granny, by any chance — causing the bad weather?”

The kid's home was among the few buildings in the town that might have been repainted, at some point in the last century. The same couldn't be said for the others — or for the goggle-eyes the near-skeletons hanging from their windows had laser-pointed in their direction.

"Students," Dazai offered, cheerfully, kissing the hand of a particularly old woman who had screamed an intelligible — to all but their child guide — question. "Lucky *to-be* journalists, if it all goes as it should."

"And what's with those bandages?" she shouted. The upcoming darkness of the evening had her squint to see even a inch of them. "Are all photographers this eccentric? I've never met one."

"Most certainly!"

"Your friend will die if a flash hits him," the woman *shrieked*, nodding towards Akutagawa. The snow reached her hips; it was a wonder how she kept moving. "He is too pale. Get some meat in him."

"*She* will die if the photographer blinks," he heard the kid mutter, as their guide pulled on Chuuya's hands to lead them over the enclosure of cows and goats framing his house. "I'm not pale."

"Don't insult old women," the well mannered dog warned. "They managed to live longer than your stubborn ass probably will."

"Yeah, Akutagawa," Annoyed with his slow pace — a mixture of stubbornness and something he had no desire to analyse — Dazai grabbed one of his coat sleeves, pulling him along. "Don't insult old women in front of Chuuya. As a bag pet, he has an affinity for them."

"What does that raised finger mean?" the child asked, marveling at his gloved hand.

The front door was open; from inside came the chaos of four walls disseminated in children's drawings — holding more people than they should have been able to. What could have been a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom at the same time welcomed them in a hurricane of colors and loud voices, more blinding than any stained glass windows in the Headquarters' hallways.

Dazai only registered the vague smell of warm food and a pair of children jumping on a couch, before a wooden sword was sunk in his abdomen — followed by the war cry of a victorious child in milk-stained clothes.

"*Finally!*" He exclaimed, immediately falling to his knees. "Defeat, at last! The embrace of death is finally —"

A flash of familiar *bright-void* appeared at the corner of his vision; quicker than lighting, he wrapped a bruising grip around Akutagawa's wrist, suffocating his instinctive call to

*Rashomon.*

Akutagawa's pained gasp was suffocated by a feminine voice, calling from the stairs: "*Kenji*, what in *God's name* —"

"Seriously," Dazai smiled. Given the look he received from Akutagawa, he knew it wasn't a flattering show. "Get a grip."

"Granny, I brought city folks!" Kenji waved his hands, bolting in the woman's direction. Short as he was, hanging from her gowns was still feasible; but the endless deserts of her wrinkles denounced antique bones — she patted his head, quietly asking him to settle. "They want to know about the fire woman!"

Dazai turned to meet Chuuya's gaze — and his eyes widened. "Chuuya was *pregnant*?"

"I will actually slit your throat open," the boy warned, the one arm that wasn't holding the awed newborn fixing an overly large blanket around its small limbs. He seemed to be wondering just how *immoral* it would have been to float the kid — just to be safe. "I think they — Oh, *shit* —"

Their guide's grandma — and not, as it turned out, the guardian of the *entire* maze of youngsters in the house; *they just like to come around for dinner*, she explained — cleaned the vomit off Chuuya with great effectiveness; but the child still refused to be taken from his arms.

Much to Akutagawa's distaste, they were forced at the endlessly long table and refilled with enough food to wonder if the whole *town* would come to join. Much to his rage, Chuuya and his newfound creature settled between him and Dazai — either not willing to listen to the boy's praises, or not willing to have Dazai bruise him under a stranger's eyes again.

"Everyone's washed their hands, correct?" Granny asked, though the army had already attacked.

*There was an old glass*, Dazai thought; close enough to his eyelids to tickle, and old enough to be greenish at the edges — it had been there since he was a child. The chaos behind it resembled the one of the giggling children around him; a bit distantly, Dazai had always thought such liveliness might have been rather nice, had he been able to clean the glass enough to set through it.

He smiled. "What a polite bunch."

"They are, aren't they?" Granny cooed, patting each of the heads she could reach from her middle-table seat. The kids hung off her like a lifeline — pulled at her gowns, put food in her bowl, fiddled with her heavy earrings. "I apologize for the mess. We rarely get guests in town."

"I cannot imagine why!" Dazai widened his eyes. "Such a little jewel you've got. A sheep tried to eat my shoes in the middle of the street. I'm cultured enough to understand a greeting."

Chuuya choked on his water. Akutagawa made an about-face, unwilling to ask the question on his lips.

“You boys came all the way here alone?” she asked.

“School project,” Chuuya confirmed, as he awkwardly rocked the little girl in his arms. She was drooling on the black fabric of his jacket; her eyes, brighter than rising suns, were set on him with something akin to astonishment. “Some of us are doing an internship at the Police Station, for — credits and stuff. They have us wander out of the city, and bring back reports of the situation.”

“Small towns tend to receive less aid,” Dazai continued, seamlessly. “Some middle schools use it as an opportunity to teach the importance of support to younger kids — you might have seen a little girl around, this afternoon? Black air, cute face — looks just like our companion here.”

“Ah, yes,” Granny nodded to Akutagawa, not appearing offended by his stillness in response. “Seeing her so interested in the Kawabata certainly caused some confusion in the neighborhood. A few of us started wondering if we’d just lost one kid in the count.”

“There’s fifteen of us!” Kenji, head on the woman’s lap, jumped to say. “*Five-teen*. But the twins are leaving. And the other twins too,” A sigh. “Soon, only the Aunties.”

“Don’t say that with that *tone*,” She pulled on his ear, affectionately. Turning to Akutagawa, she added: “Your sister is very beautiful, son. Very quiet, too. You should pack some of your dinner and bring it to her — She’s been working hard,” Her glance turned critical. “Maybe it’s better if I give you another plate. What do they even feed children in the city?”

“I grew up in the slums,” Akutagawa said, somberly.

“Excuse me?”

“He grew up with some loons,” Chuuya intervened. Both the kids in her lap and the one in his own seemed endlessly fascinated by every inch of him. “Horrible people. Forgot to feed him and all. Our school intervened,” A flash almost startled him out of his seat. “Where the *fuck* did you get a camera?”

Granny raised a finger to her mouth. “*Language*,” she lamented, sending a pointed look to her nephew’s eyes, bulging out of his skull.

“Hatman said a bad word,” Kenji whispered, amazed.

Chuuya’s eyes widened, “*Don’t* say it again, it’s — not until twenty and stuff —“

“You’re too short to be twenty!”

Akutagawa hummed.

“*Excuse me — Mackerel*, give me that *camera* —“



Enthusiastically, he shook the photograph in the air to develop it. “Ane-san gave it to me. She also ordered me to take *endless* pictures of you. *Even* when you were peeing.”

“Ane-san *likes* me,” Chuuya made to grab the picture, but was stopped by the weight on his lap — he did manage to elbow Akutagawa on the side, though. “No, she *didn’t*. Give me that, you — fudging — *give me* — “

“Don’t you look *parental!* Look, look — don’t you *hit me* in front of the — what? Oh, you brats want a picture too? Let’s go! Who can throw more rice right on top of the Slug’s hat — “

It took the table a good half hour to settle again, after that somewhat simple discovery. By the time Dazai was allowed to sit, abandoning a pile of pictures on some knitted blanket on the floor, even more food had been left in his bowl — and even Akutagawa was gingerly answering wide eyed questions from their smaller companions.

He offered Granny another smile, as polite as Mori would have put his hands on his shoulders for. “You’re as welcoming as your nephew promised us.”

“Oh, he’s not my nephew,” She ruffled his hair, patting the child’s squirrel-cheeks when he attempted to offer her a big smile through all the food. “His parents left to find work, and they asked me to take care of him. Kenji is not made for the city. He’s got a — delicate temper.”

Chuuya made a *face* — one that Dazai had not quite mastered yet, and that knew to mean someone had just lied to their faces.

“He certainly has good intuition,” he offered, with that gracious tilt of his mouth that got old ladies on the street to ask him to help them cross. “Took him no time to understand what we had come here for.”

“By spying on your conversation, sure,” Akutagawa noted, eyes and chopsticks inches deep in his soup.

Dazai attempted to direct him a look, leaning over Chuuya — only to be stopped by his foot stepping on his own. On his lap, the baby garbled some nonsense, small hands pulling at the asymmetrical strands of his hair.

“Our condolences for your loss,” he said, instead. “And our apologies for coming to disrupt your mourning. The media coverage on the case is certainly lacking, but our teacher suggested we might find one or two interesting details if we — took the matter into our own hands.”

“We’re studying a unit on filial homicide,” Dazai added, helpfully. “Perhaps you could help us understand what might have brought Kawabata to murder his father and burn his house?”

Chatter dimmed.

Every young eye at the table laid on him.

Granny's storm-colored eyes flashed. She was a curved line filled with generous intensity, and her floral dress was anything but threatening — nonetheless, her warning was more than clear. "Some subtlety, son, if you could?"

"Nari-nari is *dead*?" some young girl seated on the other end of the table stuttered. "But — But he was supposed to help Miri give birth! The cows can't —"

"The cows are perfectly capable of giving birth on their own," Chuuya reassured her, his mouth half hidden by the playful infant's hand. "Statistically, over 75% of animal births end up in a success. Miri won't fuck up the statistics."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"It's a complicated matter," Dazai hurried to say. Clearly offended by his nails in his thigh and Akutagawa's low *tsk!*s, Chuuya mumbled into his plate, systematically dumping all the vegetables he *knew* he detested into Dazai's own. "We know. But your child, he said something about — some sort of connection between what happened to the Kawabata and the recent meteorological mess?"

The woman's gaze fluttered — from them to the door; and then, to the small bodies next to them.

"This is an old town, boys," she sighed, eventually. "Myths and spirits are nothing new. According to our stories, a son shouldn't kill his father unless possessed. Burning our houses — You need to understand, most of the buildings you've seen have been here since the very *foundation*. We might fix them up, we might change some things — But our homes are our ancestors as much as our dead."

"Which makes Kawabata's actions even weirder," he guessed. "Is the general consensus in town that some evil spirit made him do it?"

"Yasunari..." Granny blinked. "He was never much — *stable*. A quiet boy. Very pensive, very shy. It got worse after his mother died, and when his illnesses began. He mostly stayed with his father. Then he got a job in the city, and he started bringing friends home."

Chuuya gently tore the child's hand from his mouth, trying and failing to stop him from putting his harness between his own drool-pooled lips. "Friends?"

Kenji leaned forward, as conspiratorial as a nine year old could be. "People with *Abilities*," he whispered.

Granny recoiled back, as if shot. "*Kenji*."

"You know about Abilities?" Akutagawa questioned, sharp — perhaps thinking back to his efforts to capture him by weapon, and not *Rashomon*. "I thought most towns didn't even believe they existed."

"The Aunties say they're all *stories*," the kid replied, elbows on the table and knees on his chair. *City folks want to charm you into leaving home!* But I *will* leave home, one day."

The woman's expression tightened — clearly, she had heard that monologue more than once. "Of course, little sun."

"I will walk a *thousand* miles, and go to the city," he continued, twinkling, "And I will join the Detectives!"

Half-amused, Dazai curled an eyebrow. "As in, the ADA?"

He might as well have dropped a bomb right in his bowl; Kenji's jaw dislocated itself, and he pointed an accusing finger towards his Granny. "I *told you* it existed! I told you — I told you, I *told you* —"

"You mean that shabby Detective Agency?" Chuuya asked, surprised. "The one that dealt with that one shipment failure a few months ago?"

The incident had been of great coverage, though the two of them had been stuck in some safe house in Greece, at the time — the Agency had dealt with a hostage case on some crusade ship near the Port, using Abilities to do what the authorities had not managed to.

It had granted them a publicity they were probably unused to; according to Mori's — always somewhat *amused* — reports on the Agency, they mostly dealt with security jobs for high names, and with unimportant lowlife that was lucky enough to sport an Ability. They had never truly crossed paths with the Port Mafia; either they were too big of a fish, or the detectives too small of one.

"I thought only Ability Users could join," Dazai said.

"That's not a problem! I —"

"Kenji," Granny hissed.

A glacial sort of silence descended on that portion of their table.

The boy sat back down, curling into himself like a turned-off toy. He picked up his chopsticks again. "Sorry, Gran," he murmured.

Tiredness was endlessly fast to take the place of sternness; she sighed, in an ageless way, caressing his head — and Dazai knew, irrelevantly, that no one had ever cared for him a tenth of the amount that old woman held in her creaking ribcage for each child in that village.

Akutagawa had been unwillingly captured by the tales of some entirely toothless child at his left. Chuuya met his eyes.

"Ah," Dazai started, widening his smile to the point of ache, "Enough with all this funereal stuff! Granny, I am *very* interested in that beautiful garden of camellias you've got in the back. Why don't you tell me something about it?"

"And those nice drawings on the walls!" Chuuya added, slightly less cheerful, but offering his best performance with his hands under the child's armpits. He made her dance a bit, much to the joy of the other kids. "Dare I presume *someone* in this room is to blame for them?"

The entire table lit up.

Dinner didn't quite end as much as it blurred away — in sleepy, slow steps, the kids began to rise from the table and wander off, either to play near the couches or to skip their way to whatever old house in the street was theirs. They all kissed Granny's cheeks before leaving; some of the younger girls waved in Chuuya's direction, blushing.

For that, Dazai kept the ugly photos.

At some point of that exodus, Gin quietly slipped in from the constantly open entrance door, making a beeline to her brother. The few children still in the living room refused to hear excuses — they *dragged* them along for some rendition of a game involving chairs.

Dazai offered an unimpressed expression in the face of Akutagawa's outrightly blank terror, tapping his wrist in a silent reminder.

"Come on," A weight was dumped in his arms; only by pure instinct did he manage not to drop the sleeping girl. Bright with determination and all the manners Kouyou had pushed into him, Chuuya turned towards their host. "My apologies, Gran. May we use your kitchen?"

They ended up washing ten cartoonishly unstable towers of dishes, under the grateful eyes of Granny — her ancient chair and her thousand blankets.

*Officially*, at least. Waving the child as a clear excuse not to move a finger, Dazai obtained the woman's *coos* and to lazily sit on the counter.

"You boys shouldn't face the road so late at night," she told them. "I have a free bed, and some futons upstairs — The attic is abandoned, but the heating and an old TV still work. If you four can split up, you can leave when it's sunny," Her face grew a bit contrite; she hugged her blankets tighter. "Well. As sunny as we get, these days."

Chuuya, sporting a comical pair of yellow rubber gloves, only paused for the time it took the warming up faucet to emit a scream-like screech.

It somehow didn't wake the girl in Dazai's arms; he rocked her, lacking the *finesse* of Madame Tanaki's beloved protagonists — he wondered if the texture of his bandages on her cheek was a bother, or if she had no time for such concerns.

"You two are good with her," Granny complimented. "She's a stubborn little thing. Her Mama works twenty hours of the day in Tokyo; by the time she gets back, she can barely even feed her. It has made her somewhat irritable."

"Why doesn't she move to the city?"

She shrugged. "Habit? Lack of trustable babysitters?" Her gaze swam over the mess in her living room; the chaos of children and the lack of lights from the other houses. "People already have so much to give up, everyday. Perhaps that's why they're stubborn about giving up their home, as well."

Dazai settled his chin on the child's head, blowing up a bubble out of the faucet. Chuuya scrubbed at a plate, eyes settled elsewhere.

*Behind the glass*, he considered. Behind the grave, only — up.

“Granny,” he asked, “Why are you so scared of Abilities?”

Not an inch of shock appeared through the wrinkles in her face; *hesitation*, perhaps, and an ounce of defensiveness.

“I’m not scared *of* them,” she admitted. “I’m scared of what it will make him believe about himself. I’m scared about what it will make the *world* believe about him,” Her fingers traced the flowers on the hems of the blanket. “He’s a good kid. His best friend calls him *a fallen sun ray*. ”

Dazai hummed. “My best friend calls me *Did you put laxatives in my curry?*, occasionally.”

“So he’s great,” Chuuya replied, squinting at the old woman. “Sweet and good. An Ability isn’t going to change that. Things aren’t as bad as they were a few years ago, Gran.”

“Any quantity of *bad* is a threat to his happiness.”

“All quantities of *bad* are as necessary as the ones of *good*, ” the boy insisted. His hat had been abandoned on his seat, and the children had decided the best course of action would be to put it on Akutagawa’s head — where it refused to sit, slipping on his eyes whenever a new round started.

The logistics of the game were as lost to him as they appeared to be to the siblings. Ever since he had dragged them to the Mafia, he had only studied the shape of their frames in a valley of much taller, much *older* ones — watching them tower over those over children did strange wonders to their features. Terror and longing, all in one.

He wondered if they would have gotten along with Odasaku’s orphans.

“You can’t give him a perfect existence. No one can. If you treat him like this, teach him that every person out there will despise something that’s part of him — He will think it’s out of fear. *Your* fear.”

Granny’s lips trembled. “I’m not scared of him.”

“He doesn’t know that,” Dazai said.

“But —“

“Gran,” he insisted. “Those *friends* Kawabata brought to town. They were all Ability Users, weren’t they?”

She stayed quiet.

The faucet was turned off. Dazai laid the sleeping kid on a bundle of pillows near the counter. *Men*, Mori had said, once, *are much like animals*.

“Kenji told us the entire town has been visiting the house to free it from evil spirits. But the house almost collapsed on us after a few steps, and the grass outside was untouched. That’s not a place that’s been visited,” He glanced at the maze of kids. “You sent Kenji there because you were alerted about our presence — by *whoever* left the place in a hurry when they saw us coming.”

Granny shut her lips. Once the skin around them had turned white, she murmured: “She said they’re working to create a — a better world for Ability Users. She said they will avenge Kawabata — create a city where Kenji will get to do all he wants.”

“They won’t,” Chuuya announced, matter of factly. “All they want is to cause a storm. They don’t care about Ability Users — If they did, they wouldn’t be killing people in their name.”

She paled. “Killing?”

Dazai crouched down in front of her chair. “I need you to tell us all you know about the woman who visited that house. About Kawabata’s friends — I’m assuming he might have introduced them. If he tried to use the kid as leverage —“

“I’m not putting him in danger,” she stuttered. “I — I am not putting him in danger. *Killing* — She said she could save him, and —“

The lights flickered.

Her pupils shrunk; petrified, but for the spasms of her wrinkled fingers — Granny’s eyes settled on the barrel of the gun half-hidden under Dazai’s coat, and the sharp edge of the kitchen knife Chuuya had slipped down his sleeve.

“I know how to kill quietly enough no Auntie will find out until the morning,” Dazai explained, very softly. “I know how to get enough *screams* out of them, all those runaway parents of theirs will hear it from whatever hole they have scurried into. Those pictures will be the last you have of them.”

“Your so-called saviour has her eyes on *my* home,” Chuuya added, still polite to the bone. Granny’s eyes flew to the playing bunch; standing still in the middle of the jumps, Akutagawa and Gin were staring right back at her — *Rashomon* a there-not-there possibility in the air.

“And it’s not with any intentions of justice. I hope you can understand.”

Sweeping into the attic by the window didn't manage to startle Chuuya — dropping his game console on the dusty tiles of the vacant floor almost did, though.

“*That’s* where you ran off?” he gawked, grabbing the red controller, as automatic as every fight they had had about anything in this world. “I thought you were going to lay awake in the car out of fear Granny would fuck us up in our sleep.”

“I’m hardly fortunate enough,” Dazai replied, reaching for the blue one.

“Fortune helps fools.”

“And Grannies help starving kids,” He dropped on one of the old futons the boy had spread out in the one corner with a dry ground, and coughed through the cloud of dust it raised.

“Want to debate?”

“You’re less of a debater, and more of a shit-talker,” Unimpressed, Chuuya kneeled to hook the console to the ancient television in front of the beds. “Your protégée stole my hat.”

“You like him.” That, at the very least, was abundantly clear. He knew the face Chuuya wore when he wanted to make friends — all the muscles he never moved near Dazai got into action.

Seamless, the boy said: “You don’t.”

“That’s certainly an idea,” he offered, and added nothing else. Veiled by his blanket, he shuffled forward on his knees — wrapping that heavy semblance of his body around Chuuya’s curved form. “You like them both. Or you would have let us take the bed.”

“Mackerels belong in fishbowls,” Chuuya replied, and dodged that makeshift shield *only* seven times, before settling on selecting their game options — which was as good of a white flag as he would ever receive. “And I’m fucking done with your snoring.”

*That was hypocritical.* “I could snore in another bed, too.”

“I can wrap myself up in a cluster-like creature and drown you out, though.”

Dazai embraced the circle of his shoulders, wrists knocking as they crossed under his chin, where he could reach with nimble fingers to pull at his choker. Nuzzled into a piece of hair that got stuck in his mouth; wondered if he could push until magnets formed on their rib-cages, and no one could question his corporeality — not when attached to gravity itself.

“I can recite the Bible in Russian,” he concluded; nonsensically, tightening his grip until Chuuya couldn’t breathe — because it was less world changing than asking *can I wear your skin until they notice* or *can I sleep in your bed again*. “You pick.”

“Can you learn to do something actually useful, instead?” Chuuya proposed. “Since you keep breaking into my apartment —“

“Albatross’ apartment.”

“— and eating *my* food, and using *my* —“

“You’ve gotten so stingy, since Ane-san —“

“And why the *fuck* do you keep washing only half of the dishes?” he snapped. “Not even — it would be *better* if you just didn’t wash some of them. What’s the point of you washing half of a plate? I’ll just have to do it again —“

“You asked. I did them,” Dazai insisted.

He barked some more — slipping into the cracks of Chuuya’s defense was an art, though, and he only ever painted when his pockets were empty. If he moved just *imperceptibly* enough on the couches of the Headquarters, he would end up with his head brushing his thighs — if his eyes followed the *hoards* of reports Dazai had tricked him into writing, he could get away with laying his head on his lap.

There were warmer things than a fight. It had all been about survival, though. All of it — always.

“I miss Odasaku,” he mumbled.

“And I miss when I didn’t know you,” At last, moved by either the moonlight or the racing video game, Chuuya shrugged him off, throwing his controller in his lap. “Whoever wins this gets to tell Gin you bruised her brother.”

“Her brother clearly needs to understand not to cause problems where they aren’t needed.”

“Gets to tell Akutagawa you sent his sister to gather blood from the happy villagers, then.”

Dazai twitched.

Gingerly, Chuuya smacked his nape. His back landed on his futon; he wiggled madly, until he managed to drag it into a parallel line to the TV. “Stop underestimating me.”

“But it’s so easy,” he lamented.

“What are we up against right now, Dazai?”

“*Oh*, name basis. Are you about to kill me?”

His glare was unmoved.

“What do you think it is?” Dazai yawned, pinching the more bruised sides of his thighs until he parted them — crash-landing his head on the hardened lines of his abdomen as the boy let out a *oof!*. It wasn’t the most optimal position to play in; he ignored Chuuya’s yelps for an



elbow in less than acceptable areas, and laid on his side, until his ear could be stuffed with the distant heartbeat of one of the veins over his ribs.

On the screen, his pink princess character swerved through roads of rainbow. Chuuya scoffed, attempting to raise his thigh enough to block his vision of the TV. “What do *you* think I’m prodigious enough to find out?”

“Ability supremacists,” Dazai answered, a bit honest. “Or Ability persecutors. Lowlife or senators. They want the Mafia to go down — so whichever it is, they will be dealt with,” The smile he threw his way, lit up by liquid neon lights and nothing else, was vacant enough to empty out his bones. *You are halved*, he recalled. “Isn’t that enough, soldier?”

Quietly, they played.

All but silent, in actuality — curses and gloating and insults, and the sound of the pack of chips and the whiskey *he* hadn’t brought from the car — so, *Chuuya* ; which said much about his reluctance to play along with his bored antics.

Sleep tickled his spine as much as the sleeplessness; his mouth was dry. The warmth was suffocating and mind-numbing and gathered in unusual points of tension — the quality fabric of Chuuya’s pants over his jaw; his sharp hip, where the shirt had risen, being covered in goosebumps with every exhale out of Dazai’s lips.

“Mackerel.”

He tilted his head back. The unmatching eyes he met told him he had only heard the last of a few calls.

“Too scared for a rematch?” he questioned.

Chuuya slipped his hair free from the hat; brushed the strands of atomized autumn back, worked the buttons of his waistcoat open — he hummed his melody all the way through it. He envied, for a moment, that unblemished penchant of his — for molding existence into something that would fit him. He *envied* how easily he let existence touch his skin without flinching.

“The *Maihime Project*,” he asked, like that had been the whole point of that evening. “Was it connected to the *Arahabaki Project*?”

Dazai dropped his head again, rolling his thumbs on the commands until they ached. “All Ability-related projects are connected to the *Maihime Project*. It was the first time the Government ever considered *using* Abilities.”

“Not what I asked.”

“Why do you assume I know?”

“You’re an Executive,” Chuuya’s distaste was clear; his aims even more so. “That was what the race was all about, right? You’d read the files on my past before me,” His fingers curled around the commands. “I’m assuming you know all about that, by now.”

“Did you ever consider,” Dazai asked, in occasional honesty, “That just because I wanted to read them *first*, it doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have let you see them?”

Chuuya scoffed. “Fine,” he hiccuped, downing the last of the bottle, already swaying in that way of his. “Bullshit all you want.”

He stared at the floor. They played well until after midnight — until the urge in his bones subdued.

*There’s a glass*, he had told Odasaku, once — except then, he had forgotten what he wanted to go with that start. *There’s a glass, and they all know how to punch it hard enough to crack but me.*

*Is the glass a window?*, he had asked.

He hadn’t thought about that. *It used to be, I believe.*

“A file or two on whatever seaside village you came from won’t tell you much, you know?” he noted, after his next round win. “Professor N died with the relevant stuff. You knew it would happen. You decided it.”

“I don’t regret it,” he replied, and Dazai *knew*, from the depth of himself, that it was the most honest he would ever be. “Can’t I just be *curious*? It’s my life.” A sound left his mouth — something between a scoff and a hiccup, plus some word he wasn’t meant to understand. “Fuck, do you think he had a *Granny*?”

Kneeled over the television, he paused. “He?”

The cables were disconnected; the room drowned in a silvery kind of darkness. One of their shorthands, he recalled, stupidly, worked only in reflections — a blinding dot to the eye for aid in escape; *two* of them to signal enemies; *three* to annoy Hirotsu.

“*Y’know*,” A yawn. “The other one.”

They hadn’t annoyed Hirotsu in a while, he thought — Kouyou hadn’t punished them in a while. He was an Executive, and Chuuya was the closest thing Mori could concede. The portrait had been hung in the hallway already.

“Let’s sleep,” Dazai decided. His cheeks were warm; there was an ache through all his body — something softened by the drumming nausea. “Tomorrow will be fun.”

Chuuya grunted, gathering himself on his lower limbs, and he stumbled to the abandoned bundle of his coat, taking off his clothes to the best of his chuckling abilities. His failure was predicted and ordinarily amusing; by the time he tripped his way to where Dazai was folding his suit jacket — his waistcoat was hanging from one of his arms, his removed harness stuck around his knees.

“Stop,” he admonished him, batting his hands away from his tie, “You tie this shit wrong on purpose, don’t you? You fucking donkey.”

“Yes, Chuuya.”

“Don’t you *Yes, Chuuya* me,” He fumbled with the tie himself, attempting to choke him with it — hanging so heavily off of him, they stumbled around the room, soaked feet getting stuck in the old tiles, “Bitch,” he added.

“Moron,” he replied. “Slug.”

“Fuckass. *Mackerel.*”

“Simpleton.”

“Mummyfucker.”

“Hatforbrains.”

“*What?* Enemy of all women.”

“Women *adore* me.”

“No,” Chuuya swore, folding his tie and sticking it in his own pants, fixing his collar up and down, indecisive. He didn’t protest when Dazai got his fingers under his choker to remove it, tracing old *Corruption* scars over his gulping — so he did it, doing his best not to fall over his attempts to get the harness off. “They really fucking don’t.”

Dazai was somewhat buzzing.

He slid his hands down his arms in a way that would have tickled someone else — stuck two fingers in his gloves and pulled them off, “I think they do,” he insisted, under the garbled mess of Hirose’s *Killer At Noon*, and some added insult.

“You’ll never know if you up and wring your own throat,” Chuuya muttered, naked hands and mind elsewhere, the burned eye brighter than the other — and it was a strange concern to have. *Mori won’t blame you*, he kept telling, and —

Before he could do anything about the fingers almost — *almost* — brushing his own, they landed on his arm bandages — not a question and not a threat and nothing at all. Lighter than wind, he thought; realer than —

He stumbled back.

Chuuya paused.

“Sleep,” he yawned, absolutely forgetful, too unstable to even walk a straight line to his futon. He fell face first — curled up; *he slept on his back but fell asleep on his side*, Dazai knew. “Fuckin’ senator,” he added, for no reason, and he slept, or pretended to.

Dazai laid on his own futon.

He thought of the hiss in Ango's voice when he sent the local cat away; the eyes Odasaku wore to handle a gun that would not kill; Mori, always *Mori*, in a dream — making his way down the stairs of Bar Lupin to check on his stitches. *You always have a wound, don't you?*

"Hey," Chuuya called, at some point. "Tell me."

He did. He dreamed, he thought, but he did not sleep.

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"Right," Chuuya concluded, eyeing the — entirely rebuilt, it seemed; shimmering wood and stone roof and snow-covered cobblestone road — Kawabata household. "Because that's not ominous at all."

"Are you referring to the blood?" Dazai made sure to ask, courteous, nodding to the plastic bag in Gin's hands. The girl's knees peeked only barely from the snow; a gentler shard of *Rashomon* kept trying to shake snowflakes off her hair.

"I'm referring to *Ability: House Renovation* or whatever we've got going on here," the other boy replied. He tilted his head. "*Ability: Interior Decor?*"

It was terribly funny. Dazai would have rather died than admit it. "Give it up," he said. "No one cares for dog-hosted cabarets."

Chuuya massaged his temples. "Allegedly haunted house later. Blood in a bag first," He set his eyes on the Akutagawa siblings, standing quiet and wide eyed a few steps away from them. Then, he blinked at Dazai. "Why. No — *How*."

"Black Market grunts used to accept blood without too many questions," Akutagawa replied, defensively, having already bitten down the urge to question Gin's secret job. "Gin adapted."

"Remind me to be mindful of any paper cuts I get if the little spider is in the room," Dazai said. He lowered his eyes to her. "Anything to add to your report?"

A *short* report, certainly — cut-throat to the extreme, but not imprecise enough to demand more clarity. Almost meeting his gaze, she shook her head, wind-chapped chin and lips bleeding.

"You should invest in a mask," Chuuya told her, predictably taking the bag off Gin's fingers and pinching her cheek. "Listen here: you can even get a *black* one, how great is that?"

Dazai squinted. “Didn’t Detective Matsuda have some pictures of you wearing —“

“We should go,” he interrupted.

Someone had polished the walls. They were a shimmering shade of wooden crimson; bright as if oiled with sweat and all that kept viscera soft one against the other. The summer sun broke through rusty, fogged up windows; the particles of dust in its rays chased each other through the shadows — their imperceptible hum louder than even the tiles. Dazai danced on them; they didn’t even creak.

The silence was heavier than the snow. No one dared to make a sound; even the knife Gin was playing with slashed the air soundlessly. At the end of the entrance hallway, a grandfather clock ticked.

Tactless, unconcerned as ever, Chuuya let out a huff, dragging his nails down an empty canva settled against the floor. “Well,” he said. “Maybe we should start upstairs.”

A distant buzz broke through the air, like a ticking bomb; out of nowhere, a gust of wind shut the entrance door right behind their backs.

Very subtly, Akutagawa moved behind Gin.

“We should,” Dazai agreed, nodding to the stairs at the end of the hallway. “After you.”

As soon as the last of their row climbed the last step — Dazai turned, feet barely brushing the tiles, and set off to the living room.

The old chair took up most of the space — a leathery thing, covered in blankets much cleaner than they had probably been when Yasunari’s father had died on them. The paintings on the walls were full of eyes; they stared him down with the void-filled stillness of corpses, tilted and round, too fleshy to be mere oil colors. Their smiles were mostly bright green lines, though.

When he turned, a man was hanging from the flower-shaped chandelier.

The man didn’t seem to notice him.

“Kan Kikuchi, I assume,” Dazai offered.

*That*, at least, seemed to catch his attention. His naked toes twitched — the skin of his feet had turned a greenish shade; his body was bloated and scratched, like wallpaper removing itself from its own surface. The skin around the hangman’s knot had turned stone-hard and pale; his bulging eyes settled on something over Dazai’s shoulder.

He said: “Are you back?”

“Your father, you mean,” He settled on the ground, legs crossed, studying the torturously slow way the Ability User’s body dangled. “I might be missing some details. I hope you can forgive me. I had only a few hours to read your files, after my friend sent them to me.”

Kan stared at nothing at all.

The house bloomed and died around him; sun filtered through the newly made foundations and shone on paintings that were ripped one blink and fresh the other. When he attempted to gulp, the world turned upside down — and Dazai was on his feet inside a bedroom, as Kan Kanuchi did not die from a new chandelier.

“It’s the house, then,” he guessed. “Is that why the *Ballerinas* use you? To trap people they want to chase around a looping cage?”

“A father died here,” Kan informed him. “I couldn’t have done anything, otherwise,” His eyes focused, only a bit; he laid them in Dazai. They held the transparency of ghosts. “I’m told you are to thank. From one haunted house to the other — I thank you.”

Dazai bowed his head, respectful. “*Father Returns* is the name of your Ability, correct?”

The wrinkles around his eyes curled. With a blink, the windows over the bed exploded in a thousand pieces — they turned into dust the very moment the wind entered the room, vanishing in the middle of frail snowflakes.

He studied the white dots on his coat; when he raised his head again, he was on the first step of the stairs, and Kan was standing.

“She wants to talk,” he said. Without the distinctive characteristics of a corpse, despite the old age, he was rather handsome — ruffled hair and round glasses, with a mouth that seemed well used to curling up. “I don’t know if she will want me to let you out, after.”

“Do you, usually?” Dazai questioned.

“The house doesn’t want you here,” Kan answered, easily — but his eyes were seeing right through him. “You know that, Dad.”

“Ah, right,” he said. “I apologize.”

There was a pause. All the walls and all the foundations seemed to hold their breaths; when he studied them, he thought he saw blood drool from the edges of the ceiling — landing on the floor in a *tip-tap*, quiet and gentle.

Kan Kanechi was nowhere to be found. He turned, and made his way up the stairs.

“ — found where the hell he’s gone,” the unmistakably irritated inflection of Chuuya’s tone came from the kitchen, over the muffled sound of their rummaging. “How are we supposed to figure out where she’s hidden? A *Ouija Board*?”

“What’s that?” Akutagawa questioned.

“*Oh*, that will make for a fun night. I’ll tell you later,” Chuuya settled his hands on his hips, hat chain dangling madly as he frowned at the long, empty space between the table and the single couch on the other side of the room. “Am I sleep deprived, or there wasn’t a couch here?”

“You *are* sleep deprived,” Dazai tried. “Not that you’d ever admit it.”

Not one of the three heads turned.

Gin stepped forward; hesitantly, she kicked the edge of the couch. Confirming it was real, she offered a helpless shrug.

“Not like this place is normal,” Akutagawa pointed out, arms crossed, warily dragging the tips of his fingers over one of the framed paintings. Just to try, Dazai walked to stand in front of him, and offered him a genuine smile. He didn’t even blink. “You do remember it was destroyed until yesterday, right?”

“Well, forgive me for trying to figure out *what’s* fucked up about the Halloween Location, smarty pants,” Chuuya muttered, hands deep in his pockets, twirling around the edges of the room in wide strokes.

His burned eye squinted at the peerless job of the wall paint; he kicked the wall mere inches from Dazai’s calf, and didn’t even turn red from anger when Dazai told him: “You’re really hopeless if I’m not around, aren’t you?”

Pointedly, out of nowhere — grabbed the nearest flower vase and smashed it on the floor.

Both Akutagawa siblings flinched.

“What a brute,” Dazai muttered.

“No point in getting mad,” Gin said, very quietly. She was still twirling her knife in her hands — she seemed at loss for an excuse to stop Chuuya from stealing it from her hands, when he stepped close. “What are you —“

Wordlessly, the boy kneeled by shards of the destroyed base; frowning, he gathered the closest of them, and made it face the blade.

Muffling laughter, he crouched down in front of him, shaking his head. “Chuuya,” he said, surprised. “Look at you being self-sufficient.” Out of spite, even if he couldn’t hear, he began humming his recurring theme.

“What are you doing?” Akutagawa asked, carefully walking to stand behind him.

“There’s a reflection,” the boy said. “It had no reflection when it was whole. The pieces have one, though,” When the vacant, uncertain gazes of the siblings fell on him, he huffed. “The house was destroyed until yesterday, yes? The Mackerel and I explored it. There were fragments everywhere — I *know* they’re real. If the entire vase has none, it means it isn’t real,” Chuuya climbed to his feet; he studied the ceiling. “It wasn’t rebuilt — we’re just seeing something that isn’t here.”

Understanding pooled down their faces. Gin held onto her knife tighter when Chuuya threw it back to her; Akutagawa straightened, the tell tale hiss of *Rashomon* surrounding him like a second layer of oxygen.

“Which means—” Chuuya concluded, eyes focusing on unsuspecting corners of the room. In a fit of inspiration, he turned in the wrong direction and recited, light: “*Oh, grantors of dark disgrace—*”

It took Dazai a petrifyingly long moment.

He had tasted the boundaries of the strange invisibility with complacency; under a threat that made his fingers remember the feeling of bloodied skin layers ripping apart, his feet flew.

The wall digging into his shoulders one moment — the next, he was close enough to break his skull against Chuuya’s on impact.

Nothing happened; not even the fabric of the table cloth fluttered with his hurry. “Don’t be stupid,” he warned, annoyed, ignoring the way his hands were fluttering over his cheeks — unable to touch; unable not to curl forward, sharp like claws, intent in their efforts to tear the flesh off Chuuya’s eyelashes before his eyes could become a void.

“— that?” Akutagawa was asking, mostly unconcerned, examining the inside of the ghostly fridge. “It’s hardly the time for metaphors —”

“Tell that to Dazai,” Chuuya replied.

He hadn’t moved an inch; his eyes, though uncertain in their placement, were looking straight at him.

“What?” Akutagawa snapped, turning so fast the fridge shut itself. His eyes searched around; Gin’s own flew to the doorstep. “Is he back?”

“Somewhat,” the boy replied, distractedly, palming the air between them. His palm would have pressed against his chest, had it been possible; he curled gloved fingers over his shoulders. Dazai noted that he remembered them lower than they had become. “His heartbeat is.”

A pause.

Dazai smiled so wide his face hurt with it — then, theatrical for no one, he retched. Exchanging a rather *heavy* glance, the siblings kept quiet for a long breath.

“Oi,” Chuuya frowned. ““You there, right? I’ll look so goddamn stupid if you aren’t.”

He held his breath, regulating the pumping blood in his veins. The boy tilted his head to the side; slowly, endlessly slow, his face turned crimson red with absolute exasperation. “Who the *fuck* are you calling *sniffing police dog*, you wrapped corpse looking —”

At last, Gin asked: “Did you just say his *heartbeat*?”

“Of course,” a new voice confirmed. “That divine thing in your veins must be well accustomed to his presence. I assume not even Kan’s efforts can tame a Singularity’s obsession.”



She was waiting for them near the table — destroyed, in the next blink; surrounded by the same skeleton walls and the same burned floors that had been there the day before. Dazai got the feeling that leaving the room would have been impossible all the same. Both Akutagawa siblings slowly backed towards the door all the same.

“No need,” she told them. “It’s much better to talk where it isn’t quite so snowy, yes?”

The shades of emerald of her kimono broke the monotonous grey of the sky behind the torn apart walls; her pinned up ash strands, resembling old hairstyles from Hirotsu’s fashion magazines collection, made her look taller than she actually was.

When Dazai leaned down to kiss the hand she offered him, she barely reached his shoulder.

“Night Wardens at my doorstep,” she breathed out, glazed. Akutagawa and Gin were both blinking at his sudden appearance; Chuuya did nothing more than lean against a more stable column, studying the scene. “I do apologize for singling you out. I had to check something. Have you come to be melted before your organization can burn?”

He tilted his head. “Just how painless of a death do you think that would be?”

She studied the malodorous blood bag they had abandoned on the table. “Depends on how much of that you brought.”

“Granny said nothing about vampires,” Chuuya commented, shoulders as relaxed as ever.

“For a reason,” the woman confirmed. “It’s about the act of violence, not the blood itself.” She met Dazai’s eyes again. “A good death, child. Better than the world would offer.”

Dazai smiled. “Good enough.”

Komako — as she introduced herself in a shaky breath of cold air, forming clouds over the blood she kept scrutinizing — insisted on making them tea.

“You should have probably predicted that,” he noted, when the entire table pulverized under the pressure of the mostly incinerated teapot.

A cough — less bloody than usual — escaped from Akutagawa’s lips, as Gin let out a surprisingly *violent* sneeze.

“I’ve met people in worse conditions,” she replied. The finger dipped in the blood moved to her mouth; then, she lit a birthday candle flame on her forefinger. “They tend to become the worst versions of themselves when they’re with me.”

“A firey Ability,” Chuuya observed. The reports on the *Ballerinas* had assured *those*, at least — *someone who could drown the city in winter; someone who could burn it from the inside*. “You must be the one behind the fire at the theatre — all those years ago. The first *Ballerinas* attack.”

“I never did like ballet,” Komako confirmed.

“My mentor takes me to ballet shows every weekend,” he replied, and Dazai suffocated the urge to ask, *still*? “None of the dancers ever threw us out because of our Ability.”

“Not outwardly,” she agreed. “No. But you think even only one of them picked up a pen and asked the world not to ostracize us? Protested our inability to get jobs not licensed to handle our *problematic traits*? Cried when we were declared dead on national television?”

“That’s cool. But did *you* assholes ever care?” Chuuya questioned, skeptical. “Because I clearly remember your group being revealed as a bloodthirsty scam who never meant to help out Ability Users at all.”

Her smile turned into a snarl. “Did *they* care?”

“Maybe not,” Dazai commented, settling on the mixture of ash and snow on the floor, chin in hands. “But the Port Mafia exists for that, too — protecting Users, and making sure the Government knows we *exist*. Did killing them grant you the tears to heal your wounds?”

Komako studied the silver lake, right upon his shoulder, from a crater in the wall and two lifetimes away. “Not yet.”

A humorless laugh — a voice, out of turn: “Daring to challenge the Port Mafia won’t solve it. All it will accomplish is to teach rats where they belong.”

“Akutagawa,” he warned.

“Perhaps not,” Her smile grew mocking. “I think the *rats* might surprise you, though.”

He paused.

*[A letter, he recalled. It had been heavy in his pocket and half-hidden by snow — abandoned on a grave that did not exist, but he knew where to find all the same. Curling letters from a hand more adapt to music sheets than stories.*

*“Doesn’t mean I cannot learn,” it read, in a language he hadn’t spoken in years. “At least, she would always put it like that.”*

*Dazai had not slept a single unplanned rest since that day.]*

“You don’t care if Ability Users get blamed,” he said, following the turn of her fingers inside the bag. It was somewhat hypnotic; not quite *hungry*, at its roots, as much as *entertained*.

“You’re not looking for recognition anymore. You’re past that. You want attention, but not for Users’ sake.”

“It *is*,” Komako spelt out, smile creaking, “For Users’ sake. It’s for *everybody’s* sake. We were blind for a long time — but we understand, now. All we needed was someone to show us the error of our ways. We believed the lack of fairness to be the issue. But isn’t the *root* the problem? The *difference*?”

“You mean Abilities.”

“Certainly,” She motioned towards the plastic bag, more disgusted than she had allowed her traits to show until then. Drops flew from her hands; they landed on Gin’s face, splattering her in freckles. “Is accepting this what *fairness* is about?”

“That’s blood,” Chuuya noted, unimpressed.

“This is a *curse*,” she spat. The entire house shook with her offense. “And so was Yasunari’s. Blessings don’t come with counter prices. He was a desperate kid, not a *murderer*. My Ability,” She nodded towards the blood. “It requires an act of violence. One done in my name, or to hurt me. How is that a *strength*?”

“And whoever in your group got a grip on snow,” the redhead questioned, “Do they have a similar price?”

“Worse,” A trembling thing pulled one edge of her mouth. “He’s a romantic one. An act of love is all he needs.”

“We’re stuck in this situation because your Boss has an *admirer*?” Akutagawa snapped, before Chuuya could open his mouth.

“Must be,” Dazai intervened. “No other reason to ruin everyone’s fun like this. Midlife crisis. Mid-Ability? Kids *love* summer, don’t they?” Akutagawa and Gin didn’t answer his encouraging glance. “So I’ve heard. You’re doing this for Media coverage, I assume. You want to make the world watch the strange season of Yokohama, to have the chance to blabber on how Abilities ruined your lives.”

“They’ve ruined —“

“Why pin it on an illegal syndicate, then?”

Komako twitched.

“Ah,” Dazai blinked. “You’re just pawns. To whoever is waiting for us on *Standard Island*, I assume. You haven’t been told why you’re doing this.”

“*She* said you’re one of the keys to the city,” Despise drooled between her teeth. “She filled our Boss’ head with ideas. Amazing how many things a whore could find out about her organization.”

Chuuya leaned forward. “You mean Yoko —“

The table had been an idea — the moment her palm landed on its surface, it crumbled like a sandcastle, dragging the ruined tea set and the plastic bag with it. Blood splattered on the floor; Dazai watched dirty Komako’s floral kimono — *Still life* to a point of exaggerated realism.

“That’s certainly a waste,” he commented. “Gin spent hours gathering that. We gave you the upper hand as an act of peace, you know?”

“Don’t *utter* that bitch’s name,” she growled. “Don’t you *dare*. If it wasn’t for her —“

“Furata Yoko has no Ability,” Chuuya said. “We know that. What is she doing in your little group?”

“She’s here because he *loves* her,” There was no blood left to throw; Dazai felt it land on his face like a spit, straight from the depths of her scratched throat. “She gave him one or two details on the biggest syndicate in this cursed city, and he decided he *will* destroy it — if it makes her happy.”

Dazai tilted his head. “So whoever *inspired* your change of ethics — your *rats* — they didn’t want to target us?”

“I don’t know,” Komako taunted. “Just a *pawn*, as you said. I, at the very least, remember what we’re fighting for. He’s too busy running after the first woman to ask him to put it all at risk for her.”

“The first woman who isn’t you?”

Vapor began to rise from the blood on the floor.

At once, the woman deflated.

“This isn’t about love,” she said, in a firm voice. “And it never was. This is about *hope*.” Her eyes fell on them, brighter than the flame she had lit on her finger. “You’re young. Younger people are often the only ones who understand. The ones who didn’t get *stuck* in the day-to-day yet — who won’t accept it as something that *has* to be. If someone told you *one last* act of violence could bring a world where violence is not a thing anymore — how could you put honor before *hope*?”

“People with no honor still understand common sense,” Chuuya replied.

“There was a world without Abilities, once,” Dazai noted. “It wasn’t any more peaceful.”

“There’ll be a world that is *used* to Abilities, one day,” she replied. “And I can assure you — it will be worse.”

He curled an eyebrow.

“They *will* accept all Abilities, at one point,” Komako said. Her fingers grasped something on the ground; the dossier they had found the day before was waved in their faces. “Of course they will. They accepted every shade of violence this world was able to create, and they will continue doing so. The moment they find a way for us to be *useful* — “ The dossier fell open. “*That’s* when we’re allowed to exist.”

Akutagawa flinched.

Dazai studied it, quiet.

“You don’t get permission for that,” Chuuya scoffed. The set of his jaw was harder than another eye would have noticed. “It just *happens*, and you can’t do shit about it. Blaming

Abilities for an increase in violence is like blaming whoever invented sharp objects for murder.”

“Someone has to be blamed.”

“No,” Dazai took a step forward. “You’re just mad no one can get rid of those flames for you.”

“But what if there was a way,” Komako insisted. Her hands reached forward; she stopped, shy of touching him. Gin stared at the blood on the ground. “Wouldn’t you want a *free* life? One where you will not be the cause of the newest way men will find to kill each other?”

“I would like not to freeze whenever I go outside,” Dazai replied, wide-eyed. “But I wouldn’t know, really. I don’t have an Ability.”

The beat of shock coming from behind him didn’t last much; the blood on the ground bubbled, melting the ash and the snow and the edges of Komako’s kimono —

— before the flames had reached her eyes, Gin had sunk a knife in her abdomen.

Her face twisted into something haunted.

The skeletric house trembled. Komako lowered her eyes on Gin’s determinate face — the white-knuckled grip of her thin, pale hands around the hilt.

“Gin,” Akutagawa called. It was a sound Dazai had never heard before.

Chuuya was as still as a rock, eyes set on him. *Wait*, he thought. *Wait*. When the Komako’s hands wrapped in a skull-bruising grip around the girl’s face, Gin had no time to scream — a current of bone-melting heat exploded in a wave, sending all of them flying.

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*[“I’m making you a deal,” Dazai whispered, leaning closer to her ear. “But you’ll need a bit more than to gather blood to obtain it, little spider.”*

*The slight curl of her eyebrows was a question she would not vocalize. He offered her his most charming smile, and said: “We will meet a woman. She will attack whoever gets to her first. For a very important reason, I need her to hurt one of us. If you agree to be that person —“*

*Imperceptibly, he moved his gaze to her brother. “I might tell Hirotsu to test you and your brother’s aptitude with something less arduous.”*

*Gin’s breath hitched].*

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*[Unlike he’d spent weeks whisper-spreading through the Port Mafia, Chuuya did not sleep with his hat on.*

*His coat was the last thing he folded; the hat was usually abandoned upon it — upside down, so that his perpetually half-destroyed phone and gloves could be abandoned inside it. He didn’t wake when Dazai grabbed his phone by the fish charm, and he didn’t wake when he lowered himself down from the attic window.*

*The closest of the windows from the camellia garden offered him a glimpse of Kenji’s sleeping form, curled around a tiger-shaped toy.*

*“You don’t do night shifts on Thursdays, do you?” he questioned, into the phone.*

*Detective Matsuda’s terribly awake voice replied: “Not usually, no.”*

*“You went to work just to talk with Chuuya?” He widened his eyes, unseen. “That’s sweet. I’d consider it stupid, if you’d done it for the sake of telling him the Station knows about the Ballerinas. But you took the occasion to bug him, so I will offer you a single clap.”*

*He held the phone between his shoulder and cheek, and he clapped, once.*

*Silence answered him.*

*Then, “Putting a spying device on a minor is a crime.”*

*“And this is a registered phone-call,” Dazai agreed. “So I want you and all your cop buddies to listen to this — I deactivated it yesterday, the moment he entered the Headquarters. Jewel companies don’t much appreciate outsiders’ eyes.”*

*Detective Machida gritted his teeth; he could see him, if he tried. “Dazai, the entire city believes the Port Mafia’s Users are to blame for this shit. It doesn’t matter how many ties you guys have — The moment you step out of line and put the city at risk, they will ask us to intervene.”*

*“And if it was proved the Mafia is being framed?”*

*A scoff. “And how would you do it?”*

*“By reactivating that bug of yours tomorrow,” he said. “Let’s say — Eight, nine o’clock? The Hatrack won’t notice. Someone needs to give him a lesson on how to recognize cheap tricks,”*  
*A sigh. “That someone will probably be me.”*

*“You’re telling me Chuuya didn’t notice?”*

*“Oh, no, he did,” Dazai corrected. “Took him — One hour? He thought I had put it on him.”*

*“Why would he think that?”*

*“Wouldn’t be the first time.”*

*“Wouldn’t be the —“*

*“Be there tomorrow,” he ordered. “The Port Mafia has more important matters to deal with than putting beaches out of service,” A pause. He smiled. “Or so I assume, Officer.”]*

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The back of his skull was scalding warm and uncomfortably wet.

Dazai blinked through the blurred quality of his own vision and of the heat-woven air; his hands clung to the knee-tall snow, unfeeling and burned, as he concentrated on the fresh blood making its way under his bandages, sticking to his eyelashes.

A wall of smoke filled the field; vapor arose from the lake. Burning pieces of the house had landed on every inch of the white valley, turning it into a minefield — caged by a ring of fire, growing higher and higher, closer to the town.

*“Gin!”*

Akutagatawa’s voice breached through the fire and the ringing in his ears.

He blinked until he found the onyx of his silhouette, dashing towards the lump on the other side of the ground, painting the show scarlet. The unmistakable *void-bright* of *Rashomon*

whipped everywhere his gaze could follow, dying spider legs kicking the poison out.

Walking towards them was a no-longer green frame, spasming hands and eyes bulging out of her skull.

“After all I’ve *done*,” Komako whispered, somehow louder than the chaos, “After all I’ve done for my *freedom*, you think you can just *rip it off me*?” Her laughter was tense; bloodthirsty as it was, *Rashomon*’s claws landed everywhere but near her. “*Do you, Yoko?*”

Painfully, Dazai climbed to his feet.

“Now, Chuuya,” he called.

He passed by him like a bullet, faster than any eye could catch, appearing from an imprecise point his brain had registered the moment he had awoken. His hat landed somewhere at Dazai’s feet; the distant echo of a familiar chant pulsed through the blood pooling from his ears, screeching.

When the sky exploded again, its shades were red, and the edges of Chuuya’s dress shirt were torn over spiral scars.

In a single throw, violent enough to rattle the earth, *Corruption* led Chuuya through the flames and let him sink his claws into Komako — then, feet only touching the water to speed up, he raced through the lake, disappearing underneath.

Akutagawa was shaking from head to toe, when he got his hands on him.

“Listen to me,” Dazai thundered, sinking his fingers in his shoulders until he could feel them *deep*, watching the flagging limbs of *Rashomon* disappear. In his arms, Gin’s eyes were barely open; Komako had left hands’ shaped burns on her cheeks. A sharp corner of the roof had pierced her side; her blood was staining the hem of her brother’s shirt. “I need you to *do what I tell you*.”

“She needs help,” Akutagawa croaked out. He looked unrecognizably angry; looked familiarly lost. “She needs *help* —”

“Chuuya’s Ability will not work effectively under water,” he continued, pragmatic, “Which means he will use the little of it he can to drown Komako, and to get out of the water. I need *Rashomon* to drag him out, so I can nullify him.”

Gin whimpered. Her brother tried to cup her face; his fingers landed on melting skin, and she shrieked so loud the valley shakes with it.

Dazai clenched his teeth.

Before he could insist, a whiff of wind hit his nape.

It raised the hair there — tickled him down his spine. The hiss of the ring of fire had died down almost staggeringly easily; the vapor rising from the lake was growing less and less blurred.



[“Worse,” Komako said. “He needs an act of love.”]

Akutagawa’s voice was a whisper: “Ice?”

Every thought in Dazai’s mind scratched to a halt.

He sunk his nails in the sleeves of the boy’s coat — he *dragged* him close, until he choked with it, hands uselessly holding onto Gin’s body.

“*Listen to me,*” Dazai spelled out. There was a shake in his hands that was entirely too angry for mindfulness; *Mori would burn him alive*, he thought, *Mori would* — “You’ll see him. You have to. When you do, use *Rashomon*.”

After Dazai sprinted to the lake, all he heard was the rustle of blood-soaked fabric — and Gin, whispering her brother’s name.

Crystal tiles were spreading from the edges of the lake, curling in shapeless waves of freezing glass, racing towards the center of the lake. Dazai didn’t test its stability — the freezing process was faster than his legs could catch up with. By the first crack his shoes left on that ice coverage, the lake was entirely frozen as far as his eyes could reach.

He knew it when Komako stopped breathing.

It freed the air from that warmer breath they had barely tasted; the vicious smell of fire clogging his nostrils. All he felt was cold; it seeped into his bones with more viciousness than it ever had, settling in the hollowness like a material thing.

“Chuuya?” he said — more to himself than anything. Louder: “*Chuuya?*”

Dazai’s eyes searched the sky, frantic, for a crimson dot that wouldn’t be there. Somewhere around the third crack caused by his shoe, sinking into waters so cold they *burned*, the wind-whipped silence was shattered.

A scream — familiar, unmistakable, less than human and more than him — crawled across the freezing water — trapped under the ice.

He stilled.

The world was made of snapshots — Dazai turned to find the snowy ground framing the lake, searching for *Rashomon*’s lighting strikes. Dazai felt the groundbreaking cold of the ice carve numb bruises on his knees, though he did not remember falling on them. Dazai felt the blood stick to his eyelashes, and his fingers *clawed* at his bandages — just enough to free that almost useless eye of his, *almost* — just good enough to search through the opaque surface of the lake, a kid playing treasure hunt, and Dazai *searched* for red, *red* —

*Thirty seconds*, the notebook he had kept during their training sessions reported. Chuuya would *shake* with it, any longer than that — would lay his head in his lap; would rebuild himself on his own, where the Mafia couldn’t see and couldn’t live and wouldn’t help and wouldn’t care.

*A full minute. Two minutes.*

Then: *do not let him.*

“Akutagawa,” he called, pragmatic. Mori would have punished him for this. Dazai would have to kill him. The Mafia would let them die in a field near an *Onsen* town. “*Akutagawa!*”

Frost got stuck under his nails. There was nothing to carve; when his fingers began to bleed, he clenched them into fists, fighting premature *rigor mortis* and settling hypothermia — he hit the lake, again and again, *again and again*, thinking back to a fighting ring under the *Libelula* and the sound of *Corruption* breaking bones and the face Mori would have made looking at Chuuya’s torn apart corpse, *he is your responsibility* —

He recalled a roof, and an old conversation. *Wonder if he sat on the walls of Suribachi, scared the passersby*, he had thought. And then, a bit less mocking — *I’m not letting you fall.*

“Sir!”

*Rashomon* was a mirage of poisoned black and crimson spears; it attacked the ice, settling in a makeshift birdcage around Dazai’s limbs. His legs flew to his chest; he made himself smaller — just small enough to make sure not to cause troubles; *you can’t look*, she’d said, *but you can touch* — he watched Akutagawa strike the surface, again and again, *again and again* —

“Why isn’t it working?” he asked, calmly.

Akutagawa was paler than the snow gently falling around them. Gin’s blood was splattered on his face; *Rashomon* uncurled from his limbs like unpeeling skin. “I — I’ve never — the Ability, I —“

His brain couldn’t follow. His palms were spread on the glass, slowly losing their feeling — *his heartbeat is*, Chuuya had said.

“I don’t care,” he struggled to say. The one person Dazai wanted to kill for a *reason* and not for a means to an end was a thousand waves under his feet. No one in the Mafia ever listened. “Do it.”

“Sir —“

“Akutagawa,” he said. He could feel the edges of his bandages brush his jaw. He crawled forward, nails bleeding and air coming out in clouds — sealed his hands over the boy’s collar, pulling him close enough to study the terror in his pupils. So childish it burned him to the bone — so childish Mori would give him another framed picture of him in the hallway for it, he swore: “Do it. *Right now.*”

Akutagawa’s eyes burned.

After — all was the crack of the crust of the earth, vanishing from under his feet, rumbling louder than thunder — all was the merciless, limb-tearing embrace of cold, unforgiving

waters.

*[On a day their car wasn't coming and it was raining, Dazai watched Chuuya self-destruct for a minute and fifty seconds — and then opened an umbrella and stood over his bleeding body.*

*“For me,” he'd let him know — to be sure. It wasn't even a lie. “Never for you.”*

*Chuuya, born to bleed, hadn't answered.*

*The car came, eventually. The driver kept his eyes forward as Dazai fixed the worst of the mess of bones and flesh in the backseats; when he asked for a tissue — blood trailing down the tips of his nails, all the way to his elbows — he gave it to him without turning around.*

*Seen and not heard, Mori liked to say to the small, famished children who did commissions for the Mafia. Seen and not heard and successful.*

*A rainless space came, eventually. There was no bed and no futon in that safehouse; Dazai settled the boy on the naked floor and forced him to gulp enough alcohol that his fingers clung numbly to nothing at all.*

*At one point, while Dazai threw the empty bottles out, he called, in a broken tone: “— Mama?”*

*There wasn't much to do at all, on the other end of the world from a home that would have left them alone all the same. Dazai laid next to him.*

*Chuuya breathed in and out. Was he more human or less, Dazai wondered, watching him keep himself awake by tracing his Port Mafia tattoo, for loving the machine he was built for?*

Too much, all the same, *he concluded — when a shattered, intoxicated: “Can you —” came from the shaking shoulder settled against his own. Dazai had curled up his sleeve until it had cut his circulation off. “Can you touch me?”*

*“I am,” he let him know.*

*A pause. Small; horribly not-him: “Please?” he attempted, like he wasn’t sure of the intonation of those foreign syllables.*

*Dazai knew he was a bit of a fool. Cruel, even more. It was staggering on its own. “Chuuya.”*

*Harsh — crueler than the tip tap of the rain right on his open wounds; and what a sight it had been — he snapped: “Don’t make me fucking beg.”*

*Something in Dazai’s ribcage beat. A fluke, he thought. Rain-caused hallucinations. Some kind of infection; you need to keep away from his blood, Mori had suggested, medical and analytic, it might cause infections — in the same breath as he’d told them they weren’t allowed any doctor but the other.*

*A fluke, he thought. Chuuya would die all the same, one day, and Dazai wouldn’t be there to see it. Infection.*

*Chuuya inhaled around a closing spiral in his chest. Dazai sunk his bare nails so deep in it — rain wet and untouched; always, and in any viscera’s warmth — he felt his heart beat in his palm.]*

## Chapter End Notes

kenji, roughly five years later: yeah and i never saw those weirdos again... they made grandma mad though! :)

dazai, three ada desks away: :)

the town of yuzawa, and all the characters named (apart from furata yoko, who’s from the first arc) come from kawabata yasunari’s “snow country” (and there are quite a lot of sneak peeks about their role in there, so i may go into more depth about it some other chapter!!)

standard island: from the 55 minutes novel!

the maihime project: in case you don't remember, i talked about in the first arc — it's a project mori came up with

kan kikuchi: his novel revolved around a father and son's relationship.

hi there!! i've got to run (exam literally in ten, so wish me luck) but thank you guys so much for reading, and thank you for all the comments and all the support! i hope you'll like this chapter, and i hope you have a wonderful day!

keep warm, and see you <3

p.s..... something something ability users working for "Someone" who apparently wants all ability users gone/resorting to methods that don't care about ability users themselves... the difference between believing abilities are a curse and what the port mafia does (take ability users in and USE THEM but at the same time giving them purpose... something something chuuya and dazai feeling inhuman and both of them initially joining the pm because they think they could find Something there ((a reason to live or a family)))..... something.

# ABANDONED

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xv.*

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*Case number: 62770097*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

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*On the \*\*/\*\* of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. **[Code Name: Double Black]** commenced what would be known, in the underworld and among the highest ranks of the Government, as “The Yokohama Cleanse.”*

*Under mysterious circumstances, each of them set up a strictly unconnected and masterfully covered up plan, and in a parenthesis of time ending on the first days of October of that same year — twenty seven members of the Yokohama City Council were*

*brutally murdered, along with an entire wing of the Special Division for Unusual Powers [estimated count: 45 members].*

*The so-called Cleanse effectively eliminated all the then-known allies to the then-unknown organization behind the Ballerinas' abruptly changed mission — momentarily loosening the Decay of Angels' grip over Yokohama. It is uncertain just how much the Port Mafia knew of their mission, back then; we can say with the uttermost certainty that Dazai O. [...]*

*[continue reading]*

*Special Ability Department Agent*

*Intelligence Archivist 061, Sakaguchi Ango.*

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A fist was rattled against the cell bars. With hectic precision, Dazai's eyes snapped open.

"Here's your prodigal sons," Detective Machida said, dryly, to the deadly silent silhouette beside him. "Maybe tie a bell on them while you carry them out, yeah?"

It took him a single, eerily vacant moment to realize that he had no idea of what was happening.

"Yes," a familiar voice agreed, and his brain decided it was *blank*. Something hard was pressed against his back; his bed was uncomfortably small for his frame. "I really should."

The ceiling was white, and littered in humidity stains. Yellowish, blinding spots floated near the center of it, telltale of a headache he was too *limbless* to feel. He tried to turn his head away from that single panorama; his burning neck might as well have been broken. A cacophony floated in his ears, widening the cracks of his skull; phones and creaking radios, and paperwork and —

*A police station*, his brain concluded. Then, before he could move forward from that point — mouth too sticky to even yelp, he rolled off his bench, landing face first into —



“*Fucking hell,*” Chuuya’s unmistakable hangover-grunt managed to pierce even through his eyes, sending waves of hurt down his nervous system. “Turn the fucking sun *off.*”

*That’s impossible,* his brain informed him, refusing to offer aid on more pressing questions. *The last thing he remembered,* he thought —

A scoff came from the thousands of feet that had to be separating them from the real world; Dazai leaned his weight on his hands, blinking at the spinning floor underneath him, doing his very best to straighten his eyes before they could cross again.

Somewhere through the haze, Chuuya warned, “If you throw up on *me* — oh, *fuck* — “

With more effort than even stakeouts had ever taken from him, they sat up. His foot had fallen asleep, trapped under the other boy’s thigh; he rubbed his face, wincing at the gruff texture of bandages against his sensitive eyelid. Chuuya was little more than a blurry mixture of red and black; even then, he saw him stare at his own hands with a distinctively *lost* face.

“Fingers,” he said, eventually. “I have them.”

Then he turned around, and threw up mere inches from Dazai’s leg.

He moaned, curling on the floor again.

The bustle outside the cell got clearer with every breath he took against that cold ground: busy officers and old furniture illuminated by dim sunlight; the exhausted glances Detective Machida kept directing them from his desk, which he had crawled back to, seemingly *done*. And then, at last, standing still at the threshold of their cell —

Quick enough to split his head open, the Commander of the *Black Lizards* dropped on one knee.

“What the — “ Chuuya spluttered, holding his head between his hands. His hair was a bird’s nest; his hat had ended up on Dazai’s head.

“Executive,” Hirotsu started, outrageously respectful. “Vice-Executive. I have a request.”

“Great,” Dazai attempted, pressing his forehead on that cool floor, considering the pros of rattling his skull against it until it all stopped *pulsing*. “That’s great. Go on.”

The man bowed even deeper. “Humbly, however bold I might appear,” his voice boomed, just low enough no one but them would notice, “I ask you to show mercifulness, and allow me to act and speak freely — with no care for rank, for the next hour.”

On the verge of tears, Chuuya stared at the man. He begged: “Could you repeat that — a bit slower — “

“I *ask,*” he thundered, again. Bile gathered under the bridge of his tongue. “To — “

The boy stumbled forward, almost landing on his own vomit. “I’m seeing fucking double.”

“— be allowed —“

“*Yes!*” Dazai swatted at the unseen world behind him, almost screaming, “Yes, *yes*, do what you want, take one hour, *seven* — just *shut up* —“

Hirotsu’s gratitude lowered his head once more; he climbed to his feet. “Your leniency will not be forgotten.”

More vicious than any torture tool he had ever been put under, a thumb and a forefinger pinched Dazai’s earlobe in a near skin-tearing grip — and then *hauled*.

“*Ouch!*” he shrieked, deafening to his own aching head, as he stumbled to his feet — too utterly defeated by that pain to notice the echo of his horrified whines, coming from the victim of the Commander’s other merciless hand. “Ouch, ouch, *ouch, ouch* — *Hirotsu! Ouch!*”

Both their shoulders bumped against the cellbars on their way out; a false step almost landed Chuuya against one of the wide-eyed officers at the desks closest the entrance. But the man’s grasp was infallible and chin-up, and he didn’t even *pause* to fix his hold — too busy dragging their convulsing bodies out of the station.

“*Two times*, ” the man hissed, the moment their feet touched the sidewalk. Blinded by the sunlight, Dazai groaned, as blood rushed to his ears. “In *one* night?”

“I have withstood many things, boys,” he continued, pulling them as if they weighed nothing. Car horns blared; Chuuya let out what could only be called a scream. “Two years since we met, I can confidently say — I have withstood *many* things. *Much* more than another man might have taken in stride. For the sake of my role, and of my respect towards our Boss, I have taken every last drop of it — have I not?”

“*Grandpa!*” Chuuya growled. His body glowed red — intermittently; unable to focus enough to have his Ability tear him from the man’s grasp. “Let *go!*”

“Quietly, and without *complaining*, ” His face grew a bit more scarlet with each declaration. “I have done it all. Replaced my car all *seventeen* times you put some sort of bomb under it, fixed my office whenever you decided to tape the furniture to the ceiling, ran up and down every inch of this city, in *every* kind of weather, to chase after *both of you* —“

“That’s *not* —“

“— I didn’t say a word when I had to drag you around for missions Boss didn’t trust you not to kill each other on the way to — and when *I* got caught in that innate violence of yours because of it. I ate poisoned food,” he breathed, “Had paint and grenades thrown on me, had bullets fired at me, had *lowly* pieces of paper stuck to my back, clothes dyed *hot pink* while in the communal showers. I have *never*, ” His fingers tightened their grip, almost sending them flying forward.

“Told Mori a single word about the times you two have disrupted *extremely easy* missions for the mere sake of *arguing*, and graffitied everything me and my squad own. I haven’t

complained about your borderline assassination attempts. I have never mentioned the times I had to bring my own lawyers around for the property damages you *two* cause with the efficiency of a *damn clockwork* —“

“But,” Hirotzu concluded, his chest rising faster with each ounce of strength he added to his pinches, “*But*, getting arrested *two times* in a single *night*, after *two days of radio silence* on the most important deal of *the year* — and nothing but *two bloodied heads* delivered on our damn porch? Boss made us prepare troops to send to *Standard Island*. Executive Ace activated the *Black Widow Protocol*.”

“And for *what*?” he snapped. “Do you guys have any idea of the list of reparations our contact at the police station sent us? How in God’s name did you even *manage* to cause such a widespread destruction in a little more than a day? You have offended *every gang in Yokohama*. We owe money to half of the *damn city*, for *fuck’s sake*!”

Despite the anguish, that unusual profanity snapped their gazes to each other. Dazai couldn’t remember if he’d ever heard Hirotzu curse.

“*Uhm*,” he spoke up, right as his ear grew too numb to bother with pain. “Old man, not to anger you even further —“

”That is nearly impossible.”

”— what are you talking about?”

Hell could have been frozen by the sheer rage to appear on the man’s wrinkled features. “Do *not* test me right now, Dazai,” he spat, tossing all honorifics down the drain for the first time in months. “With your *position*, your influence — You should be ashamed of yourselves —“

Red flashed in the corner of his vision.

The bundle of limbs was too much for his dried mind to understand; by the time he managed to open his eyes again without falling forward, Hirotzu stood in a makeshift crater, staring down Chuuya’s figure, perched upon a stop sign.

“That’s *enough*, Gramps,” he snapped. From his new seat on the ground, Dazai almost admired his attempts to not sway to the side. “What the *hell* are you talking about?”

This time around, the man’s anger had a short life — growing weaker and weaker the longer their stare off went on, as he slowly realized the confusion in their eyes was genuine. “How *much* did you two even *drink*?”

“Boys!”

Detective Matsuda’s voice appeared long before his breathless silhouette, stalking towards them with an evidence bag in his hands. His expression was hardly any less stern; memories of his voice were *somewhere* in his skull, but he couldn’t quite —

“You forgot these in the cell,” he explained, right as Chuuya pretended to have always been on the ground. “Don’t think you’ll get out of this mess as easily as before. A court date *will*

be demanded. And a new police car, for what's worth."

"We stole a *police car*?" Chuuya hissed.

A pitiful glance. "Whatever the hell they put in your veins really did a trick on you, didn't it?"

Dazai grabbed the envelope. Inside was an absurd number of photographs, the clear product of Kouyou's camera; underneath those, a piece of paper with his unmistakable handwriting, reading —

"When did we even go to the *Sparkling Twilight*?" Chuuya was insisting, roaming through the photographs. His eyes bugged out a bit more at each of them: blurred, colorful snaps of their faces, mostly, in the most improbable places he could think of. "What the — why would you climb the Ferris Wheel? Is *that* a dog —"

"We can talk about that later," he cut through. His tone was enough to call the others' attention on him; even Hirotsu's anger seemed to vanish. "We need to call a meeting."

On the crumpled up paper he showed them, Dazai's handwriting read: *Komako is alive. Shimamura will come for her.*

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## **Twelve days before.**

As unaffected by morphine as his body tended to be, Chuuya's eyes snapped open in the middle of his operation.

"Tsuchiya," he rasped, deliriously, "*Tsu*—"

"Stay still," Dazai advised, meeting his fight instinct through the metal railing of the hospital bed. The naked fingers he was holding tightened around his own — recognizance, uncertainty, and the materiality of the *hiss* escaping his mouth, right as Mori extracted a hand-wide shard of ice from the bleeding gash between his shoulder blades.

The low-cost lights of the Boss' secret Infirmary — a square with no windows and no furniture; only the choking smell of antiseptics and a collection of pills that Mori never let him steal — flickered. Needles and pins danced quietly upon a chasm of ruined skin. Mori's

eyes were focused — and Dazai was fourteen and bored, watching him stitch up a terrorist and his victims, and asking if he could touch.

*Not unless you wash your hands*, he would say.

It had always seemed an unreasonable request. Bodies were bodies, and blood was blood.

Laid on his stomach amongst ghostly white sheets and pillows, Chuuya croaked out, “Dazai.”

His entire spine seemed to jolt forward — reaching for that barely-breath with unplanned urgency; stretching and molding and pulling, air shaping around the trace of that latest poisonous road — accepting pollution as a condition of quiet existence.

Mori’s eyes followed the motion.

Dazai settled more comfortably on the hard floor, legs crossed, and leaned his forehead on the cold metal. “With that useless intellect of yours, you couldn’t find a better way to get rid of your tacky scars?”

A lingering stutter inside his bones couldn’t quit getting terribly annoyed whenever Chuuya happened to get hurt — a mixture of delay on schedules he only intermittently cared about, and the bother of having to drag him into a safe location by the blood-sticky sides of his skin. Something slightly less familiar, too — pulling his lips the way tantrums did, when he wanted Mori’s amusement.

“Now, now,” the doctor tutted. He didn’t ask if Chuuya wanted to be put under again; *you made your bed, you sleep in it*. “Our Chuuya’s scars aren’t tacky at all. In fact, I have heard some people put ink over it these days. Youngsters think it’s *sick*.”

His hair fell on his eyes; *mere seconds*, Dazai thought, *before he was asked to pull them back for him*. Apprentice and patient, all in one. His gloved hands were crimson; it went all the way to his old lab coat.

He barfed, just a bit. “Boss, don’t use words you don’t understand.”

A wet cough. “No one’s —” Chuuya’s tongue searched for strength; he didn’t flinch as the doctor sealed one of the holes on his back, “*Call’d it ink in decades*.”

Mori paused, the latest removed shard clanging into the container on the bedside table. Their texture was as much of a mystery as the sheets of snow littering the streets; it stuck to the boy’s skin like pieces of chandeliers, and it refused to melt. “Dear God, haven’t they?”

A particularly small shard had to be removed with a bit of digging, steel moving under freckled flesh — tensing the grip around Dazai’s knuckles. He doubted it was classified as pain; the cheek Chuuya laid on the pillow hid half of a blank gaze.

“*habaki?*” he managed to mumble, as pissed off by his slowness as the fading morphine would allow him to.

“No other reason for me to be here,” Dazai reminded him, quiet enough not to ruffle the sweat-sticky hair on his forehead. “I could be making dog-shaped snowmen outside, right now — or gulping down snow until it freezes my lungs. You’re as much of a bother as always.”

“Snow dogs,” Mori considered, wiggling an eyebrow. “No need to worry, Chuuya. Just the usual *Corruption* side effects — plus the impact of *Rashoumon* pulling you out of the ice. And —“

A glance.

Wordlessly, Dazai raised their hands until the edges of Chuuya’s fingers entered his field of vision. The blackening edges stretched his sluggish eyelids apart — he attempted to sit up, automatically, and choked on a half groan when it stuck Mori’s blades too deep into his wounds.

“Stay still,” the doctor echoed, vowels dragging concern along. All powerful men had their favorites; all drops of affection guaranteed *something* in exchange. He settled a blood-dirty gloved finger on his temple; an half-fond gesture, only meant to push him down. “Don’t break yourself over the untouchable. You’re safe.”

“I’m fine, Boss,” Chuuya slurred.

A smile.

“You’re rotting like stinky vegetables,” Dazai noted, as obnoxious as possible. He intertwined their fingers; brought the Stygian knuckles to his lips and bit them, inspired, for the sake of watching him stutter through a *don’t fuckin’ touch me*. “You even taste disgusting. Mori, wouldn’t it be better to just terminate?”

“Not quite,” the doctor replied. He fixed the IV on the boy’s outstretched arm, and Dazai had the vague thought of stealing his morphine. “He still has a chance or two. Better than that time you threw your whole body through the Hall’s windows, yes, Dazai?”

“Don’t listen to him,” he whispered, conspiratorially, leaning in until his nose fit between the bars, almost brushing against Chuuya’s own. Blue and burned-amber followed his every motion; imperceptibly, the boy shifted closer. “It was *stained-glass* windows. I would have been the most outrageously beautiful corpse in existence.”

“You’re ugly as *sh t*,” Chuuya slobbered. “*lways* .”

“And you look like a zombie’s thrown-up child.”

“Sit on a stick and *spin*. ”

“Step on a crowbar.”

“Boys,” Mori called.

Chuuya muttered some more.

Insults, undoubtedly — Dazai failed to understand most of them, and hid his grin behind those decaying fingers of his when he registered the ones they were trying to tap on his chin. And then, amongst them —

“Have you checked —“ Chuuya asked, stupidly, under Mori’s never uninterested gaze.

““Was too bored.”

*Every IV and blood bag and door*, he would probably interpret it as.

Chuuya hummed.

“Don’t fuck wit’ *kutagawa*,” he ordered, eventually, “‘t’s fine.” And then he passed out again, hand still on his own, but only after pinching him between the eyebrows. Too used to the pain not to be lulled by it.

Two lines of vaguely teeth-shaped indents decorated his bicep; Dazai’s least dignified memoir from a particularly bad stitch-up session.

“How stubborn,” Mori commented, some eons later. All the ice had been removed; bandages were being wrapped around him, and Dazai’s help was fundamental — was smearing Chuuya’s blood all over his ungloved hands. “Didn’t even cry out once. Sort of underwhelming.”

*All doctors are sadists*, Odasaku had once sworn.

Hands on the boy’s naked ribs, his fingers brushed the bandages around them — *matching*, he thought, stupidly, and saw Mori grin about it, as if he knew. “Nothing as undoing.”

“As stubbornness?” he asked. “As him?”

Dazai wrapped him up. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Don’t get our most powerful asset killed, then.”

“I fear I may have prior engagements. I promised I would, mere moments after meeting him.”

Mori met his eyes, and there was no glint.

Justifications would not be appreciated, so he didn’t offer them. The only thing the former doctor enjoyed less than excuses was apologies — the one thing more astringent than responsibility was a failed plan that had worked just fine. Dazai extracted Chuuya’s gloves from his pockets and put them back on his hands.

“Was it Akutagawa who slowed down the process?”

Mori hadn’t been there to watch Chuuya get torn apart. Supposedly, he shouldn’t have been able to know when *Corruption* had gone on for too long. “No.”

The man removed his own plastic gloves; they made a wet, *squelching* sound as they landed in the trash. Ango had a tendency to smack things around when he got mad — glasses, doors. Mori drowned in pretend class, though.

Then, “Passcode of the Port Mafia’s emergency armed vault?”

“I’m not lying,” Dazai huffed.

“Could have fooled me,” He offered him a smile, a bit clumsy. Dazai’s thumb itched — he scrubbed away the blood left on Chuuya’s temple, and pretended not to see Mori’s eyes land right there. “Tell the boy I’ll personally oversee his sister’s surgery.”

Dazai stilled.

*[Gin’s bloodied palm had left a handprint on his cheek. When Dazai had punched him, he had made sure to match].*

Under his knuckles, a vein throbbed near Chuuya’s eye.

“As a reward,” Mori specified, patting his head. He had grown shorter — or Dazai’s skeleton had missed the memo of unchanging carcasses. “For correct action under imprecise orders.”

Unimpressed, Dazai noted, “You’ll scar her to spite him — to spite me?” He didn’t blink. “Do as you want. Too much effort for the irrelevant. You used to be better at knowing where to pinch.”

“I *know* where to pinch,” Mori chuckled. *Mori*, he recalled, from his dreams — walking down the stairs of Bar Lupin. He’d step on every creaking tile, and Dazai would screech like a child. “You haven’t given me any reason to.”

*Halved*, he thought. Not even good enough to deserve proper consequentialism.

“If I kill him,” he offered, “Will you kill me?”

“Of course not.”

“Of course,” he echoed. He hadn’t shaken it all out of his oldest gold-tree; not yet.

Mori rummaged through the one cabinet in the room. A bottle of pills was put on his hands, with a hum. Chuuya murmured something; some name Dazai did not have a right to recognize and did, still — he tried to shift, to lay on his back, and his occupied fingers, stuck in Dazai’s hands, didn’t move.

“For Chuuya,” Mori said, nodding towards the pills. His eyes ranked down the blood stains on Dazai’s own shirt, the torn apart skin of his hands; *will you die from it?*, he’d asked, only, watching him arrive; and then, *let it scar then* — before ordering him to put Chuuya on the bed. “Just for him, yes?”

Dazai stared.



“Yes, Mori,” he concluded.

He nodded. “*Standard Island* has sent another invite. I need you to analyze it.”

“Bring it to me here.”

“No,” Mori replied, “I don’t think so.”

“I have to scribble at least *one* dog on his face,” Dazai insisted, waving his marker towards Chuuya’s sleeping form. “I have oaths to fulfill. You know the importance of deals.”

“I know Chuuya doesn’t like doctors.”

“You aren’t a doctor,” Countless ideas fluttered behind his eyelids, and there was *urgency*, there was some kind of emergency he wasn’t seeing — the same tension stuck to his shoulders since that *sound*, bones and ice and the heartbeat monitor. “I’m familiar with how comforting you can be to a waking patient.”

“I doubt *you* to be someone he would want at his death bed,” Mori observed, a bit mocking, a bit patronizing.

“Chuuya doesn’t deserve that much. What he *deserves* — is to wake up to a scribbled face.”

“And you don’t care.”

“No,” Dazai confirmed.

“Let go of his hand.”

He did.

No darkened traces of skin resurfaced; Mori nodded, satisfied. “You’ll find the invitation in my office,” he told him, as good of a dismissal as he would ever receive. “Tell me what you think about it. How to proceed.”

“Don’t you already know?” Dazai asked.

He grinned. “Let’s play the guessing game.”

Chuuya twitched. Red bloomed on his own bandages, hiding tauntingly between knotted strands. Mori sat at the feet of his bed, reading his file — the endless lists of failing organs and broken bones and chasms wrecking Chuuya’s skin open. The dog silhouette he had tattooed under his foot was still unnoticed.

*Stupid and blind*, he thought, and, *blind and stupid*, and his fingers were *reaching* —

[“*Gin agreed to be wounded. She’s smarter than you are, at the very least,*” he let him know. *Akutagawa’s knuckles were white; sealed around a bonsai branch, still. “And if I ever wanted to execute her, I would have you tear her apart with that pathetic Ability of yours.”*].

Dazai didn't bow when he left, because he hardly ever got blamed for it.

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### Three days before.

*Standard Island* smelled of gasoline and seaweed.

“Minors are not usually allowed on the island without a representative,” the *Gentlemen Bank's* guide — an old, white man in small glasses and a three piece suit, whose eyes had yet to show anything but composed, *polite* dislike — informed them. “Granting them golden coins for free passage is unheard of.”

“You're the one who gave them to us,” Chuuya made him notice, hands in his pockets, doing his best to pretend not to be gawking at the Western-style buildings embracing them. “Were those prickly retina scans and the fingerprints not enough? Want a piss sample?”

“No take-backs!” Dazai warned, skipping along the stone railings of the sidewalks.

The sea was exceptionally close and sweetly azure; whenever his foot took a step too far, the other boy would yank at his coat belt like a leash. It took some effort to talk, that day — the words left his mouth as if torn from the skin.

“The checks at the ferry are meant to ward off any sort of threat,” the guide replied, without missing a beat. His smile was a beacon of civility; his eyes traced their clothes like he could see crimson stains. Pointless effort: Mori had printed *Standard Island's* etiquette under their eyelids, and seized every knife in the redhead's collection.

“Society and man are meant to prosper here. To *atone*,” the man continued, “Untouched by whatever mistake the world might have made in its tremendously bloody history, and developed a taste for. Weapons wouldn't allow that.”

Chuuya tilted his head to the side.

The last Dazai had seen of him had been in a hospital bed. All that he had left of that room was a certain tension to his limbs. “Ever heard of a punch?”

Concrete between his teeth, and yet — “I haven't,” Dazai raised his hand.

“You *will*, very soon, if you don't get off that railing —“

“I’m *promenading* — “

The guide’s smile creaked.

Odasaku, he considered, would have called that *Island* a, *living competition*. Dazai knew, because they had gotten drunk at Lupin, and the man had been open to offering all tales of his days as an assassin. They were always fascinating stories; the more he heard of them, the less he could find a good reason to make them only memories.

*It wasn’t guilt*, Odasaku would shrug. *I found something to look forward to. Something less... vacant.*

*That’s beautiful*, Dazai had wanted to say. *That’s unreachable. That’s a waste of time. Tell me more; tell me all of it.*

But *Standard Island* truly looked like an endlessly polite cold war — built in marble and cobblestone roads. The three way division stood out like a bruise — the passage from English-like tight brick buildings and horse-pulled carriages; to flowered-balconies and glass-painted houses in the French district; to the geometrical balance of the German one.

The *Gentlemen Bank* rested in the British quarters; Chuuya made sure to loudly lament the choice, offering a middle finger to every horse that attempted to cross the street when they did.

“Be nicer,” Dazai tutted, watching their guide clench his jaw as he fixed his nearly bitten off toupee. “I hear the big bad horses are afraid of mice. Your presence is probably disorientating.”

“That’s *elephants*, you miscreant,” Chuuya slapped his nape. His fingers lingered; he listened to the *tip-tap* like one would to the rain, and he offered him his widest smile and emptiest eyes. “Is *that* an actual fucking reproduction of the *Big Ben*?”

“You —“ the guide called, as they sprinted towards the square, “*Hey!* We cannot be late to the — *Sirs!* “

Their passage went all but unnoticed; the man’s voice appeared and disappeared, depending on how close he would manage to get — before they climbed over some innocent bystander, or pushed through the crowd to gawk at the replicas, or mildly inconvenienced a souvenir stand.

Flamethrowers and contortionists occupied the streets, playing along to the falling sun, gathering coins inside old hats.

Dazai only managed to abandon Chuuya’s own on the ground for a few seconds, before he was noticed — he got chased to a crowded street-market, the boy armed with a stolen flaming stick that had the guide stop and apologize for a good half-hour.

“The latest trend from the West!” some stand-vendor let them know, waving towards the colorful, sealed glass containers in front of him. Inside it was some sort of bread — but in

vibrant shades of pink. “A bite of these beauties, and your worries will disappear! *Only a few coins*, for a few hours of regained youth — These beauties will be gone by the night! Approach!”

“Reminds me of Kajii’s *Secret Lemon Brownies*, back in France,” Chuuya shuddered. “Koda tried to eat horse shit from the ground when he ate those.”

Dazai hummed. He watched the name fall from his lips, and thought about being mean.

A lot to see; not much to be impressed by. It was all *too* clean; all a bit too well constructed, insistently perfect to the eye. Snow didn’t cover the streets, saved by the island’s system — the cold was enough to get the tourists muttering, though. If he squinted, he could see the edges of Yokohama, over the shore.

“Why didn’t we go to England?” Chuuya questioned, at some point, playing lonesome catch with the guide’s stolen toupee. “Or France. No money to stash there?”

“Europe is complicated,” Dazai replied, curtly, splashing the water of the square fountain towards his shoes.

The boy settled one foot on the marble, much to Kouyou’s non-present eyebrow-twitch; leaned on his knee to get a good look at his face. He hummed his tune through it, as if being studied wasn’t enough of an irritation. Dazai met his eyes, undeterred, as nearby tourists happily threw coins into the fountain. Some alleys away, the guide’s breathless calls echoed.

“Oh,” Chuuya said.

“*Sirs!*” the guide screeched, redder than a traffic light, “Sirs, if you *could* — Director Winston is surely expecting us by now —“

“Yes, yes,” the boy huffed, wiping invisible dust off his clothes. “Let’s go see the star. You guys get no tourism points, though.”

One of the man’s eyes spasmed. Outsider to his own bones, Dazai saw Chuuya’s fingers wrap around his wrist — *pointedly* over the suit jacket; over the shirt and the bandages — and *pull*.

The *Gentlemen Bank* was a greyish brick building like all the other brick buildings in those streets, its entrance framed by vertiginous columns and statues of a blindfolded Justice. At the sides of the curling gates, was a row of Royal-like guards.

The guide, genuinely concerned that they might get too distracted by the men’s hats, — *or steal your swords to duel*, he heard him murmur — decided to skip the entrance controls, dragging them to the depths of the paintings-filled hallways.

“Wait here,” he told them, when they reached the heaviest set of doors yet. The bustle of workers had stopped some floors down, where the offices and the smell of drying ink rested.

“Don’t take too long. Otherwise *he* —“ Chuuya nodded towards him, “Will start eating the candles.”

“I will,” Dazai confirmed.

The guide stared.

Whatever he wanted to ask was sealed. “Of course.”

When the doors closed behind him, Dazai kicked a pencil — stolen from the offices; dragged under his sole — forward, leaving the entrance imperceptibly ajar.

“— *brats*, ” the guide was hissing, from the slot of the doors. “Lack of — Is *this* how — *Respect*? Are they aware of the importance of — Send *kids* to deal with their matters? They’re far more interested in stealing candy from the stands than in concluding a deal!”

They exchanged a glance.

*This is why Schoolgirl is the perfect operation name*, he noted, tapping his foot on the moquette.

Offense scrunched up Chuuya’s nose. *It’s stereotypical.*

*Don’t get all technical on me.*

In that brusque way he had learned to associate with stitches, the boy began to ask, *are you* —

“Don’t be stupid,” Dazai answered, staring forward. “An impossible trial, I know.”

“Let them in,” a high-pitched voice said.

“Ma’am,” the guide insisted. “With all due respect, they are *offending* us—“

“I would like to be offended personally, then.”

Chuuya kicked the pencil away, sending it flying to the other end of the hallway. The guide opened the doors, eyes hostile, and welcomed them in.

Director Winston was an exceptionally delicate sight. Her office was a storm of pastel colors, assembled in a way that somehow maintained the antique taste of the entire building. Her sunflower attire gave her wrinkled, stern face a welcoming look to it — like silk pillows on a bed of thorns. She sat at the head of a meeting table, with two guards at her shoulders; framed by white men and women in much more funerary suits.

Seemingly untouched, she offered them a nod and a well-used speck of Japanese: “Sit, please. It’s an honor to meet you. Welcome to *Standard Island*. ”

Dazai bowed — morphing into the picture of Kouyou’s teachings. “Thank you for inviting us, Director.”

“Oh, I *like* when their men do that,” a voice murmured, in an unconcernedly loud English. “The bow thing. *Very* old-fashioned. Western men wouldn’t know about it.”

“*Ah*, thank you very much, Miss!” he intervened, brilliantly, in the same language. “Truth to be told, all the Western men I have met have tried to kill me.”

Tight-lipped, shoulders shaking, Chuuya stared at the ceiling.

“Would your friend like us to bring another seat?” Winston asked, once Dazai had settled on one of the chairs at the other end of the table, eyeing the boy perched on his armrest. “If the other one isn’t to his liking?”

“My partner is a rather protective guy,” Dazai brushed the matter away, relishing in the sound of the boy’s teeth creaking. “He prefers to watch my back while I do the talking.”

The Director smiled. “Nothing to watch your back from. Weapons are not allowed on the island.”

“Do swords count as kitchen knives?” Chuuya asked, unimpressed, nodding towards her guards.

A glint haunted her eyes, over the edge of yellow rimmed glasses. While yet unsheathed, her men’s swords had a clear aim — and her gaze a searching whisper to it. *Schoolgirl*, he thought, *might only work to a certain point*.

“As long as they aren’t used,” she offered, “Yes.”

“Do forgive him,” Dazai concluded. “Better if he doesn’t sit. We don’t want him to look even shorter.”

Some scattered laughter. Chuuya sat up a bit, and pressed his heel against the healing wound on his shin.

Documents were passed down the table, touched by every hand, until they reached their side — a thick dossier of familiar contracts, like lighting on his slow visual comprehension and a *clear* object of pride to Chuuya’s lessons-acquired one. The Director talked in circles; her men and women did the same, naming accounts and savings and some English terminology they were sure they wouldn’t quite grasp.

“I hope you will know — our reticence to work with Mori Corporations was never borne out of any animosity,” the woman informed them, smile stuck to her face. “Weapon manufacturers are a complicated subject. Moreso, on an *Island* attempting to step away from all that leftover conflict. We tend to refuse those clients.”

“You have accounts for *GND*, though,” Dazai noted, eyes running down the lines. “And *Le Directeur*. And *Missile*. I’m assuming those vows of peace are polite enough not to restrain the countries that created the *Island*?”

“Precisely,” a man intervened. “Creating *Standard Island* was a complex, delicate balance of interests — many concessions were made by the founding countries. The International Council did not believe demanding more would be fair.”

“Japan had a — *certain* role in the Great War,” the Director added. “I will not hide it — we feared that granting economic support could be misinterpreted.”

“Mori Corps prides itself in autonomy,” Dazai reassured. “Our clientele is not limited to Japan. We are all but a Governmental agency, as our prior — *chairman* often informed you of.”

“We hear your latest head is superior to him in all ways,” she commented, carefully. “Great things have been said about him. We might be disconnected — if you’ll allow me the play on words — from the world, but we know all relevant pieces of information on the international scene.”

“Yes,” His lips curled. “You know who we are.”

All murmurs waned down.

It was imperceptible — not a bird stopped soaring through the darkening sky outside the windows; the grandfather clock at the end of the room kept ticking. The guards at the Director’s side tightened their grips on the blades; Chuuya lowered the papers in his hands, meeting their eyes with an open, *welcoming* stance.

Winston cleared her throat. “It’s certainly an unusual choice — sending someone so young to take care of the most important deal of the year.”

“We might have more important deals,” Dazai replied, “What do you know?”

“Do you two function as interns?”

“Not quite.”

“Ambassadors, then.”

“Clean-up duties,” Chuuya replied, eyes still on the papers. “Mostly.”

Glances were exchanged. The Director’s smile died down, slower than the sunset.

“Shall we speak freely, then?” she said. “If I am correct in my assumption of your acceptance, you might wish to discuss what *we* want in exchange for this — leap of faith.”

Dazai blinked. “Are we not speaking freely? Hatrack, have I been cautious?”

Chuuya considered it. “I’d say you’re the usual amount of condescending.”

“You’re free to drop pretenses,” Winston insisted, under the uncomfortably held breaths of her subordinates. All eyes but theirs were on the table — she held her spine with the grace of someone who had been at gunpoint. “Our clients are granted the utmost privacy. Nothing that enters *my* rooms is allowed to leave them.”

“Must be why every door was locked behind us,” Dazai said.

The Director stood up.

Chuuya's shoulders loosened.

"Discreet causes call for discrete measures. I have no trouble understanding," she observed, once again serene. "Your Boss should be proud of your leniency. Signing those papers is more than a formality, though; it's an alliance."

"And your first act of alliance will be to ask the Mafia to get rid of the *Ballerinas*, correct?"

Murmurs. The Director's smile widened.

"A mutually beneficial deal, I'd say," she confirmed. "*Standard Island* will remain near the Yokohama Bay for the rest of the season. Our Council scheduled it as such many years ago, and we wouldn't offend the *Island* spirit by changing its tides. This climatic mess, though —" She tilted her head to the side. "I must admit, I was surprised to hear the Port Mafia might be at fault for it."

"Haven't you read the news?" Chuuya scoffed. "The police are slowly beginning to reconsider their stance," *Not fast enough*, Dazai considered, thinking back to the News service insisting on the *Ballerinas* being, *too old of an enemy*. "A member of the *Ballerinas* was caught attacking a child from a nearby town, admitting to the syndicate's faults."

She hummed. "The Government must have believed that wholeheartedly, then."

"You know how powerful men are," Dazai shrugged. "Much like dogs, actually. They will scratch and scratch at the wound until it's infected, and then they'll begin to whine."

"And be put down?"

He crossed his legs on the seat. "Depends. Sometimes they learn to sit on command."

"Were that not to be the case, though," the woman continued, circling the table to approach their seat, despite the whispers of her subordinates, "Since the Government is still demanding *irksome* investigations — I'm sure your Boss understands how useful a testimony of continued good conduct from *Standard Island* could be."

"He's considering it."

"And his Demon Prodigy?" she asked. "Did he?"

Be it the rope around his throat, too *absent* and too *there*, from the moment his eyes had opened that morning — Dazai suddenly began to find the whole parade less funny.

The Director reached their chair. Wordlessly, without missing a beat, eyes stuck on hers — Chuuya's dangled a leg over Dazai's sat frame.

Her smile froze.



Taking a single step back seemed all but a conscious decision; it snapped her subordinates' gazes up, and her guards' attention to her. Dazai didn't know what kind of picture they made; what straw had shifted their age into a mindless void to fear, for the sake of emptiness. He knew what their reflection looked like in most blown out pupils — two lines, and the quiet cage of inevitability.

"I'd have to ask," he answered, all hilarity wiped off. "I could, if convinced of its necessity."

"No," the Director replied, in a thin voice. A theory, in the back of her eyes. "No need."

Dazai tapped his fingers on his knees. "You know," he started, "The Mafia has been offering deals for more than a decade, as of today. *Standard Island* has *had* enemies. A good number of them threatened you much more than some snowy nuisance. I don't quite believe you couldn't simply move the island, if the necessity came."

"Which means there's more to it," he continued. "You either want the *Ballerinas* gone for other reasons, or you think they're important enough to be worth going against a clear order of non-collaboration. What do you say?"

Winston worked her jaw.

"We offered you a deal," she spelled out. "Which will certainly require a good amount of *deception* to higher ups, on our side. Keeping our motivations hidden doesn't seem too extravagant."

"You might have to do better than that, if you want us to kill terrorists for you," Chuuya replied.

"The Mafia wouldn't let them live after they dragged them into this mess," the woman insisted. "We have followed the News closely — your weapon trading cover-up has lost millions, in only a few weeks. Your credibility is stumbling. The *Special Division* surrounds your base day and night."

"Maybe," Chuuya agreed. "But you're willing to *pay* for it. Why do the job for free?"

"So *what*," the Director said, disbelieving, "You would keep them alive out of *spite*?"

Dazai curled an eyebrow. "Should have thought about it before you expressed your desire to have them gone. For you to go as far as to ask *us* — it must mean you already tried and failed. Must mean you *need us*."

Silence draped across the room like the lid of a coffin.

*It used to be more interesting*, he considered. The feeling of having men under his thumb. These days — it was deaf; distant like a hopeful thought. These days they feared, and he sat, and he *waited*.

"So," Chuuya allowed his face to show all his bone-deep, hot-blooded boredom. "'You going to tell us *what* it is you want, or should we ask that guide of yours to bring us back to the ferry?"

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## Two days ago.

That same night, they were invited to a charity event hosted by the Gentlemen Bank.

“We should be *fashionably late*, or whatever Ane-san would say,” Chuuya planned, gathering water from the overflowing bathtub in his cupped hands. He tilted it back on his own head, raining it on reddened cheeks and amused eyes — and Dazai followed. “How in hell did you even know we had to bring suits, anyway?”

He opened his mouth to retort — something sharp, he thought; something *cutting*, where he couldn’t scratch. He wasn’t quite willing to hear what kind of sounds his exhausted mouth would have made, though; so he shrugged.

Chuuya hadn’t expected an answer. “Yeah,” he scoffed, mildly disgusted. His lips had been cobalt blue, when Dazai had finally managed to crawl to him through the ice — they’d stayed blue through the whole car ride back home. “As usual.”

The bathroom of the suite the Bank had given them was as pricey as every inch of that apartment — the lights didn’t flicker for a breath, and the porcelain was lined in what *might* have been gold. Heavy curtains and spacious beds and a wall-long TV — Dazai’s eyes had run across it all with the gloomy breathlessness of a prey, and then he’d key-locked himself in another bathroom and worn his clean suit.

Chuuya hadn’t questioned the sudden need for hard walls and overly covered skin. He hadn’t asked when Dazai had walked in *his* bathroom, tie choking him and jacket buttoned, and sat on the ground.

Wet fingers tapped the edge of the bathtub. *Every inch of this place is bugged, isn’t it?*

Dazai studied a wedge of his reflection from the mirror. The floor was cold; vapor rose from the water hiding the boy’s body. He tried to imagine peeling his skin off; wearing it backwards. He thought of Mori, and of Odasaku’s kids — never quite holding his hands if they could *not*.

*I destroyed the one in the living room, he traced on the condensation of the porcelain. They’ll think we know if I destroy the others.*

Chuuya hummed.

He poured some more water over himself. Dazai leaned his temple on the edge of the tub until it pounded, watching drops chase each other down the angles of his face. He blinked whenever they framed a freckle — breathed out whenever they landed in the water again.

*She thinks she has the upper hand, he said.*

Ripples in the water. The boy scrubbed his shoulders, and he watched his muscles move with it, pulse and burn. His Mafia tattoo, refusing to be washed away. *She seemed pretty scared to me.*

He shook his head. *She wanted us trapped in our own power trip. She expected everything we said. She wants to distract us.*

*From what?*

Dazai turned his head, just enough to settle his eyes on the dossier they had abandoned on one of the master beds. *The fact that these documents masterfully hide our permission to gain free reign over all of our accounts — included the Ability archives.*

Chuuya's eyes snapped up. "But that's —"

*What the Ballerinas want.*

*They're with them? Then why send us after them?*

*She knows we wouldn't win, as of now. The Special Division is waiting for us to attack. They're expecting us to come at them. Taunting us.*

"So what," he huffed, "We just leave winter in the city?"

*No, Dazai tapped. We act smart about it.*

His expression turned skeptical. Not exactly towards *him* — Dazai had yet to watch him doubt one of his plans, usual protests left aside. He munched on his lower lip, staring at the water as if it could be blamed for traitorous usurers.

From the bedroom, the grandfather clock ticked.

Clearly unconcerned about the possibility of cameras, Chuuya went back to his bath.

"Why didn't you wash?" he asked, at some point, wearing a soap beard. "All those snotty Englishmen will smell your *oriental sweat* from *miles*," A sharp grin. "Unless Westerners don't wash either, other than not bowing."

Dazai snorted, low. He didn't think it was heard. With some consideration, he offered: *you don't want me in any water, right now.*

A glance — darting, un-lingering; unwilling to become another one of the layers suffocating him. But Chuuya was alive in ways that he wasn't — noncommittally, one of his scarred

hands reached for the towels on the toilet. He dried his fingers; reached forward and pinched the space between Dazai's eyebrows.

Peeved, Dazai gestured to his unwrinkled forehead.

"Maybe not," Chuuya admitted. "But we gotta make sure you don't swallow your tongue."

The edge of the bathtub carved his cranium. It was a quiet suite — the windows hadn't been locked when they had arrived, but they were, by the time Dazai had reappeared from the bathroom. Mori would have called it *unprofessional*. Or maybe he would have played chess with him over it — because he was smart, and he knew longing when he saw it. Would have offered him a needle, *in case you want to sew it shut*.

A plan — a plan he could fix. A body, he could put a bullet in. Torture it until it sang. Dazai didn't know what to do with himself.

The rush of water; the scar on Chuuya's arm, from their first fight. "Boss will kill you if you do this on a mission."

Harsh, maybe, to kinder ears. Dazai would have told him the same; *had*, before — not one offered hand to the wrecked body on the concrete, because lateness was only funny when it wasn't a furrow on Mori's forehead.

*Finally*, he tapped.

Chuuya pushed his body forward, breaking ripples of water. Vivid crimson webs were stuck to his cheeks and neck, knotted in a way he knew to be more resolvable than his own. He leaned his chin mere inches from Dazai's abandoned cheek. The hand he'd dried tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, and it did not touch an ounce of skin, and Dazai's silence was *there* — in the shell and the vein pulsing at the side of his eye.

For a moment, it got stuck in his throat like an ache.

"Can you wait 'till we're home?" Chuuya asked, very professionally. His touch wasn't a 9 to 5, though — just a touch. When the predictable hum out of his mouth began, Dazai only felt the vibrations of it through the marble. Strangely comforting. "Mori's still fixing the cameras in my old neighborhood."

*A gas leak*, he listed off, pages of a book so well loved it was yellow. *A poisoned drink. A jump from the roof. A river deep enough. Two knots on the underside and three around the circle. A car — the floor; the ceiling; a drink in a bar; a man who won't kill but might if you beg him, a doctor, his hands, his hands, his hands.*

*A costume maker rented the next room*, Dazai tapped.

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. "Operation *Villan's Wife*?" He nodded. A huff. "After you got all fucking dressed up already?"

*I want to give Kouyou an aneurysm.*

His lips curled up. He searched his sole eye, deep and deeper, breaching through and foolishly missing one or two turns. Dazai wondered if asking him to tear his bandages off would be unwelcome — just to watch him face some ruined part of him he wouldn't be able to just *scoff and move past*.

“All right,” Chuuya stood up, dripping water all over, missing him with *purpose*. “Alright, you bastard. Just snap out of it.”

Dazai's gaze followed him. When he walked out of the tub and around the apartment, chin up and dripping, still, he could have laughed, almost.

He assumed Chuuya got dressed before leaving the room, but he didn't bet on it. The grandfather clock ticked some more, as he dragged his bones into the living room, two pairs of socks on, because the moquette made his fingers twitch. The windows were all still locked. The chandelier was too fragile. All the knives in the drawer had been stuck to the kitchen wall, in a phallic shape.

It was funny. Then it made him mad.

He checked all the windows again, and he thought about stealing a knife, but thought Chuuya would say, *told you the dicks drawn on my face aren't funny* — and then he couldn't.

The tie brushed against his neck bandages. Intolerable as it was, he widened the knot. He walked to the bathroom again, faced the mirror to untie it and re-do it again, the way Mori had taught him to — hands around his shoulders and the clinic mirror. *Don't you look nice and respectful, now*.

He stood in the middle of the bedroom and stared up at one of the bugs. Added another pair of socks. The grandfather clock ticked, and they were officially late.

The sound of the door opening was distant — muffled by the pillow of the living room couch, and Dazai's attempt to see stars on scratched eyelids. Bustle of overly long fabric and half-assed curses — all of them abandoned at the entrance. Steps, unmindful and known.

“Move,” Chuuya said, no matter the other couch, and then climbed over his curled up frame like it wasn't against every *promise number* they had not numbered.

Dazai had had to pull up his legs a bit to even fit — the boy had no such problems, and he deserved to be *reminded of his lacks*, in another lifetime.

“*Fashionably late* has a deadline in an hour,” he informed him, situating himself where he could watch the room in Dazai's stead. He'd been under the ice, two weeks ago. Dazai didn't even remember nullifying him. “If you're not up by then, I'm dragging you by a sleeping bag.”

His cheek landed on his same pillow. It hadn't been like that — not during the missions. Their knees knocked against each other, and *that* he *knew* — the hit and run of bones, inevitable by purpose of motion, quickly corrected by the wide beds they always selected, the

sea of space granted by a line of pillows they didn't own. Dazai was used to the *idea* of something he wouldn't get, and wouldn't ask, and didn't want.

The ricochet went nowhere. The couch was a tomb and no one ever got buried in pairs, not in the Mafia. His hands knocked against the boy's chest, and their legs could not swim back, and the grandfather clock *ticked*, and Dazai —

He only managed to meet his eyes because there was a plastic god behind them. Not quite permission and not quite longing — he recalled waking with Chuuya's soaked, bleeding, pale body on a snowy grounds, and wondering —

*Wondering* —

He wrapped his arms around him, over and under and *through* — obsessive in that way Mori found *transactional* and Odasaku *real* and Ango *reason enough to* — plastering himself against him, pressing until his ribcage was rattled, and whatever was left inside it did the same.

He sunk his nose half in the pillow and half in the leather of the choker he didn't know when he had worn again, and shut his eyes, and saw stars.

An *ooof* left Chuuya's mouth, ripped off his chest, and he *wondered*, for a moment — and then arms sneaked around his shoulders. Between them he had always been stronger, the brawn and the god and the dog and the first thing in his awoken field of vision and *Chuuya* — and he strangled him back, legs and arms, breathless and possessive; and how nauseating it was to be reminded only the real could be owned.

"You owe me a favor, asshole," he let him know, and Dazai knew he didn't.

*Nothing you want*, he tapped between his shoulders, or maybe traced it, or *bit*, or whatever would allow him not to let go, to hold on the way Kazuko did, *strangle* the life out of him, bash his skull in and steal whatever was inside it.

"We're going to a pompous aristocrats' ball," Chuuya reminded him, smelling of soap and the night and teenage boy; fingers digging into his clothes like stitches on flesh. His lips had been blue and he'd bled out so profusely in the backseat, his men had had to burn the car. He wasn't humming anymore. He kinda wanted him to. "I take the blood and you take the blame."

Dazai dropped his mouth on his shoulder. Fabric and bone, and bone and fabric, and the tie around his throat. *Don't you look nice*. "Sounds mutually advantageous," he spoke — in the name of a cleaner suicide, away from Mori's hands.

A pause.

A tightened grip; an apology, perhaps, if either of them had been naive enough to demand it — lips tracing the side of his face by mistake, settling on his ear, *pressing*, taunt and promise and the confidence of a webbed glass, towering upon the shards of a clock.

“There’s my prodigy,” he whispered, like an insult.

His bones creaked, rusty and too weak for the trial. His heard his heartbeat inside them, and he couldn’t breathe, so he didn’t; not until it got his neck nail-pinched — *yes, Chuuya*, he thought.

The grandfather clock ticked.

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### **Two days before.**

“Mr. Nakahara,” the Director was wearing azure satin from head to toe. She gestured towards the circle of suited men she’d been exchanging plastic pleasantries with. “Just in time for the intermission show. And —“

Her eyes landed on Dazai. The idea of words abruptly disappeared from her face.

Chuuya stared back, waiting.

“Ah,” Winston blinked. “And you are —“

“Miss Tsushima,” Dazai offered a lace-gloved hand, all the high-pitch from his voice-cracks days out. He secured the grip of his other hand around the shorter boy’s elbow; he felt him choke. “What a wonderful ballroom. Is that man on stage about to perform a suicide for us all?”

“That’s,” she stuttered, “That’s an aerial dancer—“

“Shame.”

“That’s a fucking wine fountain,” Chuuya gasped, eyes brighter than the chandeliers dangling from the frescoed ceiling. “Director — we’ll be back in a moment. Chuuya’s fine, by the way.”

“But what about Mr. Da—“

The crowd was quick to engulf them — hiding them from the woman’s speechless gaze with silk and papillons, between the *clank!* of champagne-filled glasses, fake laughter and dancing couples. The challenge of not getting shoes to step on his vibrantly red gown never got much

easier — by the time they reached the fountain table, only a quarter of the eyes were hesitating on his wig.

*Do try not to get drunk*, Dazai tapped on his shoulder, as Chuuya dragged his glass in the wine waterfall.

“Don’t ruin all the fun, dipshit,” Chuuya huffed. “*You* get to dress up — *I* get to drink a hundred-yen worth of wine. We all win,” He savored the taste. “Apart from the assassins at every corner of this room, I guess.”

He hummed, twirling a bit in the men's shoes he had preferred not to drop, studying the sturdier sets of shoulders near the floor-to-ceiling windows. On the stage at the end of the ballroom, a Japanese man and woman in skin-toned clothing were acting out some sort of two-way monologue.

“They’re from Yokohama,” Chuuya noted, cheeks red by the second glass. The table was filled by strangely colorful Western food, along with some variations Dazai had never heard of. “She’s an Opera singer, too. I was at their opening night with Kajii.”

“Fate or threat, is the question,” he murmured, blowing a strand of fake hair from his forehead. The wig was heavy and vaguely itchy, but similar enough to his own hair to fool the more distracted gazes.

He fixed the small tiara on top of it, curling an eyebrow in the face of Chuuya’s horrified stare.

“Your efforts to show me what a nightmare is meant to be are appreciated,” he said, simply.

*I think I look ravishing*, he tapped. He stole a piece of neon-pink food of sorts from the table, plastering it into his face.

“It’s the concept of it that’s terrifying,” Chuuya insisted, muffled through his furious munching. Dazai stole a piece for himself, gulping it down to try and open up his throat. “You. As a *girl*. You, and all your — shit. But a *chick*.”

*But*, Dazai insisted, tilting forward the way Kouyou’s girls did, showing off cleavage he didn’t have. *I do look ravishing*.

*You don’t*, he mouthed.

*You’re just jealous that every girl you know is taller than you*.

On the stage, the man fell to his knees, holding onto the woman’s gowns. Tears fell from her face — she begged, and begged again, but he wasn’t close enough to hear for *what*. On the other side of the ballroom, the Director had her eyes on them, and her lips on one of her guard’s ear.

Neither one of their gazes touched her; wordlessly aware, they moved towards the dancing circle of couples near the center, Chuuya’s hands unsightly — and much to the guests’ double-take stupor — holding onto his heavy gowns.



“Hey,” the boy hissed, as they walked a tad too close to the spinning duos, “What are you — No — don’t you *dare* —”

At the edge of his memories, before the red of a scarf and the neon sign of Bar Lupin, were old ballrooms and dimly lit living rooms — a harsh voice, hands fixing his posture, clammy fingers on his own. He had never enjoyed it much; the lack of finesse from his partner didn’t help.

“Why are you *leading*,” Chuuya hissed, over the quiet curse of his stepped-on feet, doing his best not to trip over his dress. “You’re the *girl*, you’re not supposed to—”

*Because you suck at it.* He slapped his hands away, and his hands were slapped back, and the other duos offered them their most politely disturbed glances. It was an uncomfortable deal; they stood too far, and they kept trying to hide behind moving frames, and Chuuya’s enviable learning curve had no time to flourish with Dazai’s purposefully confusing steps.

The Director’s eyes were still on them; her guard was nowhere to be seen.

“Does she actually want us dead, or just scared?” Chuuya questioned.

He shrugged. “Irrelevant,” he croaked out, close enough to his ear to stay tentative, “But she needs those documents to be signed by Mori. I’m assuming the *Ballerinas* might be holding something over the Bank.”

“I thought the Mafia being targeted was against what the *Ballerinas*’ latest *eye-opener* or whatever demanded.”

On stage, the man hugged the woman to his chest, howling in what might have been passion or pain. He thought he met her eyes, when he spun — her cheeks squished against his good cashmere, her gaze strangely vacant — but it was gone by the next set of words flooding from her mouth.

“Just because they don’t want us destroyed *yet*,” he replied, and traced, *doesn’t mean we wouldn’t be one bother less*. “Try not to step on the sweetheart’s feet, yes?”

Chuuya blinked. “What?”

When the next spin arrived, Dazai gracefully slipped away — hands grasping the wrist of a woman in red, around Tanaki’s age and his height, throwing her in the boy’s embrace.

He didn’t stay to observe his awkward politeness; he gathered his gowns and ran towards the rows of balconies on one side of the room, wondering if the dramatics of it all were the reason why Kouyou never wore pants.

The Director’s eyes stayed on the twirling duo — he slipped the elbow-length gloves off his bandages, abandoning them in the lap of some sleeping man by the balcony doors. Closing the curtains behind him, he threw the wig somewhere into the empty street not too far under the balcony — and then himself, after it.

Mere steps away from his landing point, a smoking tourist stared, speechless.

Dazai sighed.

Director Winston's office was still a storm of pastels and unlit chandeliers, but it stretched into the darkness with a ghastly sort of precision — table-seat distance measured by the inch. It was a familiar sight — Elise's dollhouses were always somewhat haunted.

Pulling up the three piece suit he had stolen from the now dead tourist, Dazai made a beeline for the computer behind one of the previously locked doors, carving his way in with every hairpin from his abandoned attire. The sound of distant classical music and steps knocked against the roof, too muffled to do more than rattle the windows.

*You might be the best hacker in the syndicate, Ango had often noted, following a mission he had been meant to do on his own. I don't know if leaving smiley faces is the standard procedure, though. Dazai. Dazai —*

*[The next day, Odasaku had ended up having to ring him up for help with a commission. All his client's National Security-level documents, it seemed, had been erased — nothing but smiley faces and tongue twisters left in their place].*

A copy of the contract the Director had woven for the Port Mafia rested in the depths of her archives; his eyes ran down pages and pages of nauseating lines, until he reached the paragraphs he had memorized.

He set to work.

The smell of smoke only reached his nostrils halfway through the printing of the corrected document.

An intermittent *beep* tickled his ears, over the red of the fire sprinkler systems. The printer stared back at him, unconcerned, unhurriedly moving through the last dozen lines. The sounds of steps on the roof quietened down — then, all at once, they grew into a desperate roar.

Something shifted in the air behind him, right as the printer vomited out the last paper. He grabbed the gun he had stolen from the guide, and —

The guard's eyes blew up, settled on him.

They rained down her cheeks in wet, pulposus coagulations, framed by the blood drooling from her nostrils and ears, as her skull *bent* to squash her brain into a void. She fell to her knees before Chuuya's hands could abandon her temples; the moment she landed on the wooden tiles, the fire alarms started ringing, raining water into the pastel furniture.

"Miss Elizabeth sends her regards," the boy panted, inefficiently wiping trails of blood off his face. "'Said I'm the *best dance partner she's had in decades.*"

Dazai tilted his head, blinking at the water drops that landed in his eyes. "So good you set the ballroom on fire to escape?"

“That wasn’t *me!*” Chuuya replied, ripping the papers off his hands and exchanging them with the copy of the dossier they’d been given during the meeting. He floated to the sprinkler system on the roof, drowning those other papers until they were intelligible. “There. Can we *go* now, before I get arrested on foreign territory for snapping all of the Director’s spies’ necks?”

“What do you *mean* it wasn’t you?” His legs stumbled, forcing him to cross the threshold with none of his usual lightness; a wave of nausea tightened his grip around the edge of the Director’s seat.

“*Skin-Clothes* actors decided to give a spin to their performance,” The boy searched around the room, blinking a tad too insistently, until his eyes landed on the closest window. A well aimed kick freed the way to unlock it; already halfway out, he called: “Come *on!*”

Dazai curled his fingers on the keyboard, typing a quick and probably slightly miswritten, *offer accepted* — *PM* at the end of the modified contract. The Director wouldn’t check it again, he knew; she had made the mistake of pre-signing it. “You do know there are no ferries at night, yes?”

Horror dawned upon his face. “We have to *swim?*”

Dazai felt his lips tingle. The resinous slumber sticking to his bones protested the snort ripped out of his throat — distantly, he munched on a sweet taste, stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“*Fuck!*” Chuuya’s voice lamented, as they clumsily crawled out of the window, flames engulfing the upper floors of the building. A small crowd had gathered at the entrance; the distant sound of sirens was growing closer by the second. “I told Albatross I would never swim home again! I *told him* — “

Before Dazai’s hands could let go of the window seal, feet dropping on the cobblestoned road, a piece of paper hung on the bulletin board caught his attention.

The foreign alphabet winked at his memory; the elegant handwriting he had only seen once grasped it by the throat, choking recognitional out of him. A letter on a grave. A nickname; a wish of good luck in the city’s latest game.

*From demon to demon*, the paper read, in neat Russian. *I will see you soon.*

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## Two days ago.

Despite the borderline knee-high roads of snow spreading through Yokohama, the *Sparkling Twilight* had been stubbornly kept in plannings.

*It brings almost a quarter of the season's gainings*, Ace had explained, sufficiently, the last time he had trapped Dazai in a room for a counsel of sorts. *Who knows — the novelty of a summer festival in a makeshift winter might just bring more tourists in.* Given how more than a quarter of the payments for public events in the Mafia's territory ended up in their pockets, it was clear Mori had no intention of pressuring his contacts to move the festival up.

All that it meant, currently, was that when Dazai and Chuuya managed to crawl out of the Bay, their breathless bodies landed on snow and fallen decorations, surrounded by the pulsing roar of traditional music and screaming children — a small group of which seemed *convinced* they were part of the ship parade.

Fireworks lit up the sky, painting the white ground in bright shadows. They walked on all fours, until they managed to hide behind a half abandoned tourist stand to catch their breath.

"I'm telling Iceman," Chuuya panted, face in the snow, seemingly too tired to tear him apart — as he had sworn he'd do when Dazai had clung to him in the water, keeping him from floating away. "I'm *so* telling him, he'll *bust your ass* —"

"Albatross is six feet underground," Dazai informed him, blinking at the sky. The fireworks had shapes, he knew — *things* his blurred vision couldn't quite grasp. Colors pulsed against his eyeballs, material like knocking fingers.

*Frogs*, he thought, *leap leap leap*.

"Something's wrong," he concluded.

"I think I just swallowed my tongue," the other boy moaned, reaching forward to grasp at the edge of the stand. He tried to sit up; the *thud!* his face made as it flopped back into the snow painted the world in shades of hot pink. "No, I *did* for *sure* —"

Dazai climbed to his feet — attempted to. His feet slipped on snow; he crashed against the stall, shattering the glass containers overflowing in candies on the ground.

"The *fuckin' Jiggly Man* is back," Chuuya whispered, horrified.

The intertwining threads of lights connecting the buildings danced under his eyelids; Dazai thought of Mori, and of days spent learning how to be awake before his mind was — and then he thought of Elise, her red dress; the dress *he* had left on the *Island*, and wasn't that a damn *shame* — Odasaku would have said something nice about it, and then asked if he could give it to Sakura for her future teenage school events.

*No*, Dazai would have told him, *but I can wear it and go to her dances with her.*

*That's nice of you*, Odasaku would have said. Odasaku was *nice*.

The marine rescue demonstration pretended to set their ship on fire. The crowd was wearing coats over their kimonos.

“We gotta —“ He sunk his nails in the wooden stand until it hurt. “The *Ballerinas*. ‘Gotta get rid of them. Winston will not re-read the contract, and we’ll have most of the shares of the bank. Plus — Leverage against them,” His mouth was pasty. “They hired *sycaries*. And no more winter.”

Chuuya’s hands grasped the nearest glass container, catapulting a good number of them to the ground in his haste. He threw up his weight inside it, pupils blown out.

“*Fuck’n*,” he muttered, “Kenta and his *bubbles*.”

Sweetness stuck to his teeth.

Dazai stilled.

“The street vendor,” he breathed out. “*The latest trend from the West*.”

Emptiness crowded the other boy’s gaze, as he did his very best to give a meaning to the sounds out of his mouth. *A limited offert*, he recalled, *they’ll be gone by the evening* — and then the tables in the ballroom, with the strangely colorful sweets, and the tourist traps —

“Are we *fucking high* right now?” Chuuya snapped.

“*Hey!*” a low growl breached through the silence. “What the *fuck* did you two do to my stand?”

Any true thread holding his limbs and mind together seemed to have been snapped by the buzz in his bones; Dazai only realized he had a gun in hand when the small crowd near the stand shrieked — and the *beast* of a man stalking towards them paused, eyes on his swaying, unstable legs and well-held weapon.

“A gun!” someone from the crowd shouted.

“It’s from the clay shooting stand —“

“Call the —“

“*No!*” Chuuya arms wrapped under his armpits, his terrified tone contrasting with his weak attempts to activate his Ability, immediately nullified. “Assface, why would you shoot Gramps — Boss is gonna hang us from our *asses* —“

“Shooting him at some point was *promise thirty seven!*” he screeched, fighting against his grip, legs kicking out. A bullet was fired; more screams ensued. “You *simpleton liar!*”

The vendor pushed through the crowd, festival clothes dragging onto the snow, seemingly uncaring of the bullets. “*Fuck* Gramps, where in god’s name are your brats’ *parents* —“

Both their heads snapped in his direction.

“Watch your mouth,” Chuuya snarled.

“Take that *back*, good sir,” Dazai whined, through the concrete-heavy cotton in his mouth, “So what if Hirotsu’s a bother? So what if he collects too many *A Gentleman’s Guide* magazines and sleeps in a nightgown?

“At least *he* doesn’t look like an acrobat’s *shit!*”

He eyed his hot pink sash. “Ever heard of color coordination?”

The pulsing in his skull got louder. It took some uncertain breaths and the added screams of the stubborn crowd, unwilling to leave, to realize the vendor had slammed him against one of the stone columns of the port, filling his vision with a visibly *dark* expression.

“We’re going to the Station,” he growled, close enough for his spit to land on him. “But *not* before I get some more fucking bandages on your sorry ass —”

One of the survived candy glass containers was smashed on the man’s head.

He fell to his knees with a curse, releasing the captive air in Dazai’s heaving lungs; Chuuya stood upon him with the bloodied remnants of the bottle, held like a baseball bat — expression downright murderous.

“I’m telling Miranda,” Dazai informed the vendor, face deep into the snow again, hand raised.

“*They’re here!*” someone from the crowd called out. “Agent, they’re —”

They ran.

They *staggered*. Stumbled and tripped, ripping off the hems of bystanders’ kimonos with their shoes, dragging entire rows of tourists down with their uncollaborative legs, losing sight of each other every three stands and painfully bumping into each other by the next exit. People knew better than to expect tranquillity during the drunkest night of the season — it hardly saved them from nasty glances and attempted fights.

“Get *down!*” some carriers hissed, watching Chuuya climb over the golden linings of the *mikoshi*, precariously balancing on the little space. One of the men set his eyes on Dazai, standing right in front of the carriage, and shrieked: “Move, kid! *Now!*”

“There’s a dragon,” he informed his partner, some undefined eternity later, perched on top of a streetlight. He’d had to climb with his arms and his legs — Chuuya *could* have floated up there, but he’d forgotten. “There,” He pointed a finger. “Kill it for me. Good dog. *Arf.*”

Chuuya squinted, eyes attempting to observe his own nose.

He swayed a bit with his search; ended up standing in a parallel line to the ground, feet on the pole. “That’s a cow costume, you umbrella,” he informed him. A gasp. “Elise wanted a stupid cow. What — how the fuck did the camera even *survive* the river?”

“Elise wanted a *pony*, silly,” Dazai raised said camera, snapping pictures in quick succession: the kaleidoscopic sky, the suffocating crowd, the vomit-pale face of the boy, “And it’s Ane-san’s. Of course it lived. Did you know the earth is flat?”

“No, it isn’t. I would have pushed you off the edge already. Is — no,” He frowned. Some kids in costume waved at them, pulling at their parents’ kimonos to get them to look at the *monkey men*; fireworks echoed in the sky, sparkles falling. Dazai offered his tongue, trying to taste. “Weren’t we meant to — kill someone?”

“Yes,” He sunk his nails in the rusty metal; tried to focus. “Yes, we need to — But we’re *always* killing someone,” Dazai whined. “Can’t we buy shaved ice? I bet they have,” He burped. “Crab! I like crab. Hatrack, the sky is falling —”

“I kind of want to kill someone.”

“Kill *me* — “

Chuuya opened his mouth. The yelp out of Dazai’s own cut him off — as a hand wrapped around his calf, pulling him down from the pole.

“*Child kidnapper!*” he screeched, convulsing in the embrace of arms around him. “Child kidnapper — he’s *kidnapping* me, I’m a *minor*, he’s *kidnapping a minor* —!”

“*Dazai!*” Detective Matsuda thundered, eyes wet from the kicks he angled between his legs. When he managed to land on the floor and ram his fists against the snow, crying out nonsense from the temper tantrums Mori had hated the most — a flash of red appeared out of nowhere, wrapping itself around the detective like a death embrace. “What the — Chuuya, let *go right now* —!”

“Stand down!” some woman in uniform called, laying one foot on Dazai’s shin to keep him on the ground, pulling at the back of Chuuya’s drenched coat. At the edge of the crowd was the colorful vendor, and his bleeding temple. “Are you two in possession of a weapon?”

“I’m in possession of your *mother* — “

Matsuda crashed Chuuya against the street light, keeping him in a headlock that might have appeared *playful*, almost — if not for his uniform.

Through the haze, he saw him take a look at the boy’s eyes and widen his own, “Are you — “

“That’s *thievery!*” Dazai protested, as the other Agent grabbed his gun from his coat, loudly ordering the crowd to make space. “That’s a *crime!* Taxes-eaters! State’s slaves! The working syndicates were *right about you* — “

“*Vive la révolution!*” Chuuya chanted.

“That’s the law! I read it! *Up to ten years of imprisonment or a 500,000 yen fine are to be issued against the crime of—* “

“*Vive la révolution!*”

Over the next fireworks to bloom in the sky, handcuffs were snapped around their hands.

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### **Two days before.**

No interrogation was attempted.

Dazai thought so, at least. The Yokohama PD was as empty as ever, almost all the agents on field — ensuring the unusually *candid* festival would not bring more victims than the unpredictable weather already had. Stained walls and monotone voices asking for *Security Numbers* all looked the same.

Plus, he had yet to stop giggling.

“You’re going to give yourself a stomach ache from another dimension,” Matsuda informed him, sitting sideways on a chair he’d dragged all the way to their cell. “Agent Todoroki suffers from a very mild case of Essential Tremor — stop laughing. No need to be mean because the cell keys fell *once*. How about —“

They stared, waiting.

“Alright,” His eyes searched the ceiling for a sky — and a god — who wasn’t there. “How about this: get out from under the bench, and I’ll ask Marco to bring you guys a pizza.”

“We can’t get pizza,” Chuuya wailed.

His voice echoed in his skull like a tin can down the empty trash. Dazai had yet to tell Ango where he had hidden his second favorite watch. He would need to search through the Bar Lupin trash, like those raccoons that skirted around the dumping site. *Unopposable thumbs*.

“Shitty *Daz*’i will lick all the slices to claim them,” A whine. “We can never get fuckin’ pizza,”

He choked on a chuckle, inconsequential and sweet, down his throat. Every thread linking his mind to his body was *snapped*, uncaring of the lingering panic such lightness would never cease giving his muscle.

The motion bumped his head against Chuuya’s own, but he decided not to kill him for it — space was already slightly problematic. Their curled up legs barely fit underneath the rusty



bench; the pressure of his cheek against the floor would probably give him a toothache.

Toothaches, unfortunately, meant that boring dentist Boss was obsessed with. They would only stuff him up with laughing gas *if* he behaved, which was *nice* — but then Elise would drag him to her room and dress him up — *green wasn't his color*, he kept telling her — while he could do nothing more than giggle at the pictures of corpses she had hung over her bed and try to bash his head against her doll house.

“*All that* considered,” the Detective said, and *oh*, had he been speaking out loud? “Wouldn’t it be better if you guys sat on the damn bench?”

“We *can't*!” Chuuya snarled, huddling closer to the wall. “The streetlights are coming.”

“Chuuya, what does that *mean* —“

“It’s too late for you.”

Dazai wailed. “Poor Matsuda!”

The man dragged two hands down his face. Distantly, fireworks tickled his ears, crystal sounds through the white noises and the buzz. The clinic table was much harder than usual. Chuuya wasn’t usually there, either.

“*Breaks me, breaks me apart,*” the boy hummed, his fingers drawing shapes on the dirt. “*The wind and all of the sky’s stars* — Police-san, do you like Hirose Fumiko?”

“I’m not a big fan,” Matsuda admitted. He threw a few cautious glances to both sides of the hallway; leaned closer. Dazai offered him his best finger guns.

The abhorrence abandoning their mouths in a gasp crashed both their skulls against the bench — the resounding thud almost startling the officer off of his chair. “Are you —“

“How can you *not be*?”

“She revolutionized Japan’s musical scene!”

“She’s the most awarded Asian woman in —“

“Is that why your wife fucking *divorced you*?”

“Alright,” Matsuda said. “There’s no need for—“

Dazai sucked his teeth in. “I think it is.”

“It’s most definitely not —“

“*Shit,*” Chuuya snickered. “That’s embarrassing.”

“That’s *so* embarrassing.”

“That’s *super* embarrassing.”

“For the last time,” the Detective snapped, voice just shy of a whisper. “My divorce has nothing to do — Why would it have something to do with a *singer*?”

“Oh,” Chuuya’s eyes lowered. “Was it actually because of your dick? That thing in your pocket is *actually* your gun?”

“I thought it would be because he smokes so much! Everyone knows women hate men who smell. I tested it —“

The man spluttered: “I don’t smoke —“

“He quit smoking after a thief tried to burn his eyes with the cig,” Chuuya explained. “Then restarted when some guy evaded the cell he was guarding right under his eyes. I *saw* him. You think the receding hairline might have something to do with it?”

“Now, don’t be rude,” Dazai tutted, “Bald men have a certain — *je ne sais quoi* to them. The kind of gruff appeal that blinds women.”

“Oh,” Matsuda reached for his head. “Well, I’m *not* — It’s kind of you to —“

“The clear skin must reflect the sun like a bitch.”

Chuuya snorted, a deep *growl* of sorts born from the depths of his chest. Dazai’s cheeks hurt; he giggled, aided by the gasping sounds coming out of the delirious boy, as his hands uselessly flagged around to beat the ground and avenge his hilarity. He laughed harder, painfully crashing his nose in his shoulder; Chuuya choked, eyes on the officer.

“Moon-san,” he whispered, except it was too loud, somewhere around his ear.

“*Cool-roof-san*, ” he agreed.

“*Short-hand-21-san*, ”

“*Bowling-ball-san*. ”

“Boys,” Matsuda sighed, “Listen.”

“*His-wife-took-the-kids-san*. ”

Chuuya screeched, tears in his eyes.

Lower, the man insisted: “Listen. I know enough about the Mafia code. You guys don’t deal in drugs. Is this seriously a teenage whim?”

“That’s just sugar, Officer,” Dazai swore.

“You pointed a gun at a street vendor,” His tone was severe. Chuuya was chewing on a strand of his hair. “Swam in the Port — do you even know how dirty those waters are? And the engines of the show ships — you caused a commotion. Permanently broke the system of

*three different* ships from the parade. Got no less than a dozen people walked over by the paper dragons — What are you *looking* at?”

He nodded to the space behind the man’s shoulder. “Is that a raccoon?”

A breath. “That’s our Employer of the Month plaque.”

“Your Employer of the Month is a *raco*on?”

Chuuya burped.

“That’s so cool,” Dazai continued, doing his best to clap his hands. “That is *so cool*. I have a dog partner. You guys have a raccoon. Senator Miyoshi has his brother’s corpse in his basement. The world is so omnifarious!”

“What — *what* did you say —“

“You’re a fucking omnivorous for *sure*, ” the other boy nodded, approvingly. Then, he frowned. Reached forward to poke at his cheek. “You eat *shit*, actually. Have you eaten? *No*? Shame. Maybe you’d have choked on some of it.”

Dazai thought about retorting. The food-mention had brought something to mind, though — something distant and floaty, as ephemeral as a failed sneeze. Mori would have —

“Matsuda,” an officer called. “The brats’ contact is here.”

The man blinked. “We didn’t call yet —“

“She says she received a call from them.”

Accusing eyes were turned on them. Chuuya widened his own, poking two fingers in Dazai’s uncovered eye in his attempt to point. “Asshole stole your phone.”

“You *told me to* —“

“I told you to *call Tanaki*. ”

“How am I *supposed*,” He hiccuped, “To call Tanaki without a phone? Ask your little fairies-cousins?”

“I’m an orphan!”

“You have a brother!”

“*A white man!* He blew the fuck *up!*”

The Detective stood up, sighing. “Just wait here.”

*The snow*, he thought, through the veil of numbness. The glass from the old interrogation room, at the end of the corridor — fogged up. Chuuya’s brother; the sound of music from the street, children laughing, wearing coats.

He crawled out of the bench.

Slapped his face.

“What the *fuck*, ” Chuuya groaned, face on the ground. “I wanted to do that.”

Dazai stumbled around, leaning on anything at reach to stand straighter. *Balance is more than body*, Mori would have warned; and, *no student of mine will trip*, Kouyou would have said—and he would have tutted, *not yours*, and she would have leaned down and whispered, *mine enough*.

He grasped Chuuya’s ankle and *pulled*. Through his yelps, Dazai clasped his hands on his cheeks, and forced his wandering gaze to settle on him.

“Listen to me,” he said, “The *Ballerinas*. ”

Chuuya’s eyes popped out of their sockets. “Oh my *God*. Mackerel.”

“*Slug*. ”

“We’re in the *Mafia*. ”

Slapping one hand on his mouth, he hissed: “Don’t say it that loud —“

“Say what?”

“That we’re *mafiosi* —“

“*Shush!*” A violent enough slap to crash his lips against his teeth landed on his mouth.

“That’s a secret,” He frowned. “You still have lipstick on,” Diligently, he smeared it off his mouth, uncaring of his various noises of protest, “You’ll never be a ballerina, when you look like a koala —“

“The *Ballerinas*, ” Dazai insisted, muffled, “We need to find them. Remember? Bank.”

Haze battled with stubbornness, spreading through the unmatching eclipses someone had dropped on the roads of his face, and then never picked up. If he focused, Dazai could hear Tanaki’s voice, distantly, making up excuses and sending looks their way, and *wondering*.

“Yeah,” Chuuya squinted. “They brought winter.”

“They *did*. ”

“But how do we find them?”

“I don’t know.” He deflated, immediately. “Let’s just give up and die.”

“Fuck *no*. They turned me into a glass porcupine.”

“That’s what *I* said,” His brain curled around itself. *Plans*, he thought, hard, *plans*, *you’re so very good at those*. “If they’re against the Mafia,” he drawled, eventually, “They must have at

least one contact in the city. One syndicate.”

“There’s so *many*, ” Chuuya noted, swaying along to him, carried by his anchoring hands, “The world is spinning. Did you stick yourself in Ane-san’s washing machine again? Are we *dying*?”

“*I’m not*. Not with you,” Dazai snapped, immediately. “Get a grip. How are you going to kill the *Ballerinas* for me in these conditions? You’re a beetle. A *slug*.”

“I’ve got enough to make you choke on your spine.”

“Enough *what*?”

“Enough —“ A pause. Frustration painted his whole face red; he rammed his fists against the bars, flapping his arms around. “*Enough*. Boss said we had a job. Let’s fucking *job*. We *never*,” He hiccuped, “Fail any stupid jobs. *Double Black* and shit.”

“So what?” Dazai whined. “Do we just go and knock on the door of every organization in Yokohama?”

From the entrance, came Madame Tanaki’s voice — something about the night of the festival. From the doors, the roar of engines.

Wordlessly, their eyes met.

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## **Two days ago.**

“If Matsuda isn’t around,” Chuuya roared, dragging the police car radio close to his mouth, his free hand clutching the wheel like an Arcade tool, “Tell him to drag his sorry ass to a seat! *This one’s for that poor wife of his!*”

Dazai flapped his arm until it landed on the horn. Right as the car swerved out of the Station’s parking lot, pointlessly hoarded by a small number of officers, screaming at them to *get out right now* — he pressed on it, long and hard, just to beat the lingering thunder of the festival music.

From the radio, a mess of questioning voices came from every channel. Chuuya backed, crashing against the nearest parked car, activating its alarms. A trash bin fell; judging by the

screech at their right, one of the wheels took a trip over an officer's feet.

Hirose Fumiko's *Bonnie & Clyde* started playing, shaking the whole car.

"*Get the getaway car,*" Dazai dragged Chuuya's wrist to his mouth to shout into the Station radio, "*I'll get every last of them out of our way —*"

"*To hell to their handcuffs, and to hell with my blues —*" the boy continued.

"*So fuck the police, and fuck you too!*"

Through one of the channels, Matsuda screamed something. With a *whoop!*, under the sound of Dazai's mismatching singing — Chuuya pressed on the accelerator, crashing into the street so violently the road shrieked. Uncaring of the warning bullets fired to the side of the car, they flew down the street.

The first stop was the *Hounds*.

"We ain't got no terrorists around, kid," one of their women — an imposing silhouette in black; barely distinguishable from the jumping crowd around the metal fence, screaming their throats rough to cheer on the quarter of dogs tearing each other apart. "You think any of us is stupid enough to ally against the Mafia again, after the *Nine Rings* disaster?"

"You have three infiltrates in our shipment unit," Dazai drawled, hanging upside down from one of the pipes. The woman paled. "And you're responsible for the territory breach from two weeks ago. I assume — *yes*. How much for those dogs to eat my partner?"

Fingers knotted through the fence, shaking it with viciousness, Chuuya cried out: "I'll get you out, gorgeous! *Do you hear me?*" The closest dog attempted to bite his middle finger off. "I'll kill everyone in this damn place, I will!"

He shone crimson.

The crowd gasped — the woman extracted a gun, gaping when Dazai jumped to the floor, disgracefully punching it out of her grasp.

"We didn't do *shit*," she growled, but caution littered every inch of her frame, her hands raised. He didn't quite have the presence of mind to verify if she had recognized them before that little show; the eyes tracing his bandages, though, were unmistakable. "We want no trouble with the Port Mafia. We don't know anything about the *Ballerinas* — Just that they're causing this mess."

He leaned the barrel of the gun to the wall, abandoning all his weight on it. It didn't quite work; with the next roar of the crowd and curse out of Chuuya's mouth, he slipped.

"How about the transports you stole?" he said, half smushed against the stone, "And that little shootout near Yamashita Park? And the fact that you're fucking your Boss' sister —"

Three of the six guards who had subtly been watching the woman's back stepped forward at the mere stiffening of her shoulders. Dazai pointed the gun to her face, unamused and

unbalanced — and rather *unsure* of the reason for both those things.

Then, “*Chuuya*, this is *boring* —“

The sound of metal tearing apart arose a terrified wave of screams from the crowd. Barking and growling and the echo of fear in his own bones — the *Hound* woman’s eyes had barely time to *widen*, before the quartet of fighting dogs set their unforgiving gazes on her.

A savage grin of sorts broke Chuuya’s face in two, as the crowd walked all over each other. Stalking to the woman, uncaring of the shoulders bumping against his, he drawled: “*Now*,” and stepped on the wrist of a gravity-crushed guard.

Empty-handed and neon-visioned, they abandoned the alley and its wet-squelching gnarls, stumbling back to the dented police car as one of the dogs jumped on her.

For good measure, they turned on the lights.

Next came Hirose’s *I Heard You Talk About Me*, since Dazai’s uncoordinated fingers had managed to remove the car’s microchip from the Station’s GPS.

While the Mafia held control over 80% of the clubs in Yokohama, more than a half of them — *for the sake of good relations*, Mori would say, with a smile — were considered neutral territory, and were freely swarmed by high and low names from all over the underground.

“*Good relations*, ” Dazai stuttered, leaning heavily into Chuuya’s side, as they stumbled down the entrance of some bar downtown. Bright lights in every color his eyes could not withstand flashed against his skull. “We need to keep — good relations. Chuuya, there’s *karaoke* —“

Some bouncer at the entrance of the VIP section got ready to tense his arms, the closer they tottered to the curtains — until the lights hit just right, and he took a good look at their faces.

His spine snapped up.

“Executive Dazai,” He bowed deeply. “Vice-Executive Nakahara. Welcome to the —“

“Bless you,” the boy sniffed, “My friend. Chuuya’s fine.”

“You didn’t reserve a box —“ the man muttered, as he scrolled down the list in his hands. Hesitant glances were sent to their silhouettes, unapologetically stepping on each other’s feet. A cough. “That’s fine, of course. We’ll free something for you immediately. Please, go in.”

“Thanks!” Dazai nodded, sternly, “I’ll dedicate a song to you at the *karaoke* machine.”

Had his brain been able to connect information more swiftly, the wave of silence that seemed to drool down the walls of the interior — claggy and *colder* than the corrupted season; *unimportant* , in the grand scheme of things, when framed by the dancing bodies and bright drinks; the rush of money on the counter and the ash of every man in that room and their hidden gun — might have ripped a smile off his face.

*Devotees to saints*, he thought. And then — *prisoners to the executioner*.

Given the circumstances, they easily mingled with the crowd, not quite dancing and not quite hearing their own conversation over the thunder of the music.

“*Ballerinas?*” a member of the *Spiders* asked, both his hands where they could see it, eyes settled on the knife Chuuya had begun playing with after the *karaoke* machine had been declared occupied. “No one in the city is daring enough to not just — sit and watch where this is going. The underground swears trying to frame the Mafia will get them killed.”

Dazai snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Three of the four couches had been freed, no matter if their bodies had casually spread out at the center of only *one* of them — the small circle of *Spiders* had reunited around their self-elected Boss.

*Three traitors*, his mind informed him, as he settled on his heels. *And she’s in line for the karaoke.*

“I’m not asking where your loyalties lie,” he managed to say. “I’m asking if you have any information on the whereabouts of two of them specifically.”

A scoff. “We don’t look for whispers that will only bring us trouble. We’re not about to fuck ourselves up, kids.”

Chuuya paused his fidgeting. Tip of the blade pointed towards the man and his entourage, he curled an eyebrow.

The Boss straightened.

Then, he cleared his voice. “We have nothing to withhold,” he promised, tone painfully more respectful. “And nothing to gain. The unplanned season has ruined many of our deals. We could promise assistance in — investigating. At the right price.”

Dazai’s lips quivered. Some of the armed men behind the speaker physically recoiled.

At the edge of the room, right behind a naked woman curling around a shimmering pole, the *karaoke* room line lost another client.

“The right price,” he echoed.

“The Government is involved,” the man insisted, eyes still stuck to the blade. Two of his lackeys kept their gazes on Dazai, though; a smart enough move. *It’s not polite to keep your gun where everyone can see it*, Mori would have said, hands on both of their shoulders, never teaching and never not. “We won’t put our necks out with nothing to gain.”

“No, I think you will,” Dazai replied.

His next scoff was more guarded. “I have no care for threats,” he swore. “*Double Black* or not *Double Black* — attacking another syndicate unprovoked is no gain. Not *right now*. Your Boss will have your heads.”

“I *think* our Boss knows about our gains more than you will ever do, asshole,” Chuuya intervened. “And I *think* it would do you better than to think we have time to waste with



threats.”

“Warnings,” Dazai picked up, seamlessly, “I think you should call them.”

“*Warnings?*” the man bared his teeth. His two lackeys reached forward, only shy of touching him.

“Somewhat,” he nodded, absorbed. The lights were starting to give him a headache; It was all terribly funny. It was all terribly *bright*. “The Port Mafia has never paid for information before. It surely won’t start now. No sensible man would ever pay for what it’s already his.”

“It *hasn’t*,” he continued, before someone could add anything, leaning clammy palms on the table between their couches, “I’m rather good at my job — and my partner here *hates* small talk. He can make your windpipe one with that dirty thing in your spine you will probably call *bravery*, when you tell the story to your little lackeys. I’ve seen the inside of most throats of the underground, and let me tell you — Yours is no different. Just less bloodied, as of now.”

The man paled. “You — You *dare* —“

“See,” Dazai sighed, “Most people want to *live*. I don’t get it either, but it’s irrelevant,” He tilted his head to the side. “Do *you?*”

If asked later, he wouldn’t be able to pinpoint who had started the fight.

Perhaps a drunken *Spider* had gotten tired of waiting out on that tension; perhaps the *karaoke* queue had freed, and Chuuya had gotten his priorities straight. Face pressed against the glass of the counter, Dazai couldn’t say he cared much for it — he smashed a *Jack Daniels* in the man’s face, and stuck the broken neck of it between his legs.

Eventually, he starfished on the sweaty ground, watching Chuuya slam *Spiders* into tables and over neon chandeliers with the glee of a child.

By the time the bouncers arrived, they had slipped away from the VIP area. The *karaoke* room there was, blessedly, free. Given the Hirose Fumiko catalogue, they got distracted.

“You crank up the echo —” Dazai groaned, face on the ground, as Chuuya jumped on his back to the rhythm of *Night and Day*, “— so *high!* Your voice is in my skull!”

Hours passed in a blur.

The *Red Set* had nothing to offer but stutters and bows and whispers about a god — they ended up stealing a good number of the briefcases in the secret warehouse base they had erupted in, spreading the money through the wind as they raced down the outskirts.

“*See*, Matsuda,” Chuuya screamed into the radio, “Helping out the poor and stuff!”

The *Sword of Shadow* only admitted to having met Kawabata after Chuuya dug the heel of his shoe through the skull of their boss’ second hand in command. They had offered information on a woman who might have known how to get him inside the Mafia.

The *Three of Spades* brought them to another bar; but apart from betting a jump in the pot on who would manage to steal more sips out of their Boss' drink while she was distracted —

*[“Concerning the rationale I spoke of earlier and how it manifests itself in the world,” Chuuya begun rambling, at one point, only to keep her eyes on him, “One’s thoughts are, at their core, composed of what we see, what surprises us —” Dazai sipped under the table, landing some of the drink the boy’s shoes, “— and how we regulate and control these surprises in a natural manner.”*

*“But these thoughts are mere formulations within our minds — so the social animal we call a human can only take these abstract formulations and reform them into words that encapsulate them and give them life,” Dazai confirmed, leaning on his elbows on the table, face brushing with the woman’s speechless own, “Which means it is precisely because we express our individualities as social animals in this way that the world is so awash in anachronisms —”]*

— and having to crush her entourage to the ground when they pointed all their rifles at them, they gained nothing.

Eventually, window shops accidentally destroyed and several festival stands turned upside down by the unsteady police car, Chuuya started driving with his door open, one leg outstretched to crash into every street lamp they encountered.

The peace wasn't long lasting — the *Blood Heretics*, did not take well to the invasion of their territory.

The sight of the police car scared the group of gamblers with almost too-efficient emergency; the moment Dazai leaned out of his window, and slobbered, “Has any of you gentlemen seen a former prostitute and her icy lover, or were you too busy trying to find a way inside the Port Mafia’s secret vault?” — their men jumped into the first free cars, and raised their rifles.

“You always have a *fucking way with words*, don’t you?” Chuuya screamed, dashing up and down the suburbs.

When the bullets began to tear holes in the back windshield, the haze in his mind subdued, then grew again, *then* —

“*Get off the roof!*” Chuuya shouted, doing his best to pull him back into the car by the window. “Boss will kill me if you break your fish neck, *get off the roof right now* —“

Confidently and uncoordinatedly kneeling behind the police lights, Dazai looked into the sight of the rifle, uncaring of the swerving of that untrustable floor — and sunk a quick sequence of bullets between one of the three drivers’ eyes.

The two cars exploded.

He saw it in a blurred corner of his gaze, tumbling down the concrete until his hands bled, watching their police car do an impossible turn on the now *two* punctured wheels.

It was a matter of mere, blinding seconds: the last car of the *Heretics* had already sped up to the limit, and had no time to attempt to step on the brake — the collision was only faintly louder than the fireworks filling up the sky, as both cars blew up in a column of vibrant gold.

Chuuya's polished shoes landed on the roof of a nearby parked car, cracking it. Hands in his pockets and body crunched down, he sent a wild grin in Dazai's direction.

"Well?" he asked. "What next?"

Dazai started laughing.

It wasn't quite a controlled reaction — he rolled through the abandoned pieces of cars spreading along to the dying fire, stomach hurting and nose sagged with the smell of smoke. The ship parade was right under the overpass they were on. Firemen in traditional clothing were climbing up a pretend-drowning ship, littered in fallen snow — bowing to the cheers of the amazed crowd.

"I'm gonna drown myself," he declared.

Chuuya nodded, like it was reasonable. His next jump landed him right next to him. "Let's check if the *Ballerinas* are at the shaved ice stand, first."

The idea tore a giggle out of him.

He didn't quite know how they walked there; didn't know if the explosion died down — if Chuuya was the shoulder knocking against his own as they stumbled forward or the stain of scarlet doing cartwheels at the edge of his vision. The crowd engulfed them before his eyes could catch up.

The hems of the colorful kimonos were deep in the calf-high snow; the women had no posture, the men no reservations about wrapping around them and spinning. He thought he heard someone laugh.

*People being people*, Odasaku had told him, once. Dazai couldn't quite remember what his question had been. *What do you want to write about*, maybe. *Why am I here, why do I breathe, why don't they say my name?*

He grasped Chuuya's gloved hand. His lips had been blue — when? He couldn't recall. "Let's see what you learned."

He hiccuped: "Not again —"

There were fireworks in the sky. He tilted his head to watch them, uncaring of stepping on his feet as they danced — knowing that he wouldn't, because manners were beaten and manners were learned. He didn't know if they fought for the lead; his hands were on the creases of Chuuya's coat, and then the scratchy fabric of his vest — and then the velvet of his gloves, the pulsing skin of his wrists, the hat he stole and wore, the hair he pulled, the fingers pushing his face away when he crashed his forehead against his and inhaled.

They twirled and stumbled. He didn't know the song, and his feet kept sinking into the snow and then *dragging*, and Dazai could have *cried*, he thought, could have screamed and could have never spoken again.

"If you slip, I'm not catching you," Chuuya warned him, half a growl and half an unwanted snort, as he did his best to dip him.

"Some trust in your partner," Dazai spat back, rising to cling to his shoulders again.

"In the next," A hiccup, "Lifetime."

"I'll calculate the landing," he swore, "You weigh less than a paperclip. A dog-shaped one. Microscopes all around the world are cursing your birth — you showed the need for technological development."

Chuuya squinted, lost. His eyes were glazed; his cheeks red and his lips bitten to blood. "I genuinely didn't get a word."

"Unsurprising. I'll get it for you."

"Fuckin' right you will," he drawled, feet slipping on an ice sheet. "We're in this goddamn mess because of you."

His head tilted back and back, until his neck creaked. "*What* mess?"

"I can *taste colors* —"

"That's just your design flaw."

"That's so funny," Chuuya swore, delirious and a bit desperate. "That's so *fucking funny* and I don't know why."

His bones sang. Mori said something; Odasaku said something else. He mused he should have worn more bandages; hidden his eyes until there was nothing for Chuuya too look into — no glint of *hunger* to anchor that needy loyalty of his to — because he had learned where Dazai was less knocked on, and had broken his knuckles over it in an effort to learn words that would have an *effect* on him.

Mori said something about that.

He always did — and then Chuuya threw his head back in hilarity when he began to chant *one-two-three-and-one-two-three* in Mori's voice and he *laughed*, and Dazai —

A woman's corpse landed on the concrete of the quay, mere feet from their dancing steps — and Dazai tried, *tried* to recall a single piece of dialogue she had recited in the *Gentleman's Bank* ballroom; but couldn't — cracking on impact.

### One day before.

They split up, at some point between the ambulances and the police cars. Chuuya stumbled towards the cemetery — towards any place, but he *knew*. Dazai, haunted and habitual like a curse, dragged himself at Odasaku's door.

It was locked, though — and breaking in seemed mean. He sat on his porch and spread his legs on the floor, and he thought about the last conversation they had had at Bar Lupin, the three of them — *what does smartly shaped even mean, in the context of a woman?*

He thought about knocking.

*Too proud*, he considered. Maybe dragging his nails down the door, wailing like an abandoned stray; maybe whining like a child some rifle had left in a pool of his parents' blood — maybe ringing the doorbell and offering a drink.

But Dazai hated dogs and was no orphan and wasn't quite brave enough to ask for more than what he was given. No one could blame him for losing what he had not taken.

Elise stole jewels from every woman she watched get executed. Then, she assigned one of them to all of her favorites. Dazai's necklace was golden and tight around the neck; its jewel black. *At least you could give me a color*, he hadn't said, because Mori hated it when he was mean to her. But the next time she had whined about him not playing with her, he had told her — *you're not even real*.

The heaters activated. The system over Odasaku's door buzzed and rumbled. He thought of the man's careful eyes, watching Dazai do tricks with the cards that were the one thing he couldn't understand about him.

He wondered what he would say at his funeral.

He climbed to his feet. Laid a hand on the doorknob and didn't pull; thought the man had probably heard it anyway. *You're my friend, too*, he would say, one day, because Mori had said he had to work on knowing more than his interlocutors, and there was no time, there was never enough time. *You're my friend, you're my friend*.

The door to Chuuya's first apartment opened with a single kick.

The boy's — nearly satirical — *WORKS IN PROCESS* sign was still stuck on it, forgotten and blurred. Albatross' apartment was still above them, and still empty. Sheets covered every wall and every piece of furniture; faded lines of highlighters and criminals' sheets were still printed on the ceiling; the two knife-carved lines of their heights slept next to the doorframe.

He thought he smelled blood — he knew there wasn't any. Just grief.

Odasaku's door. Mori's clinic; the bed he had given to him. The actress' corpse on the floor, and the look her burned features had worn. The letter in the Director's office. The old gunpowder stuck to his hands; the calluses from holding a gun. Chuuya's file, somewhere in the Archives. Dazai hadn't even read it.

*Inhuman*, he thought. She'd told him. *You don't know how to be anything else.*

The click of a camera.

He blinked, watching Chuuya dangle the developing picture with distracted motions.

When it unblurred, he snorted. *How are you here*, he wanted to ask — he didn't. "I'm printing a thousand copies of this," he swore.

Dazai's tongue was marble. The boy barked at him to remove his shoes, and he did, probably — his socks were still soaked in melted snow, and the floor was unbearably cold underneath them. Chuuya floated around — skipped and cursed as he fell and walked all over the walls, fixing the invisible but never taking the sheets off.

*Halved*, he recalled, locking the bathroom door. *Halved.*

He unbuttoned his shirt. It was too hot, at last; maybe they had truly solved the problem. It fell — his pants followed, and then those damned socks, and air came from a slot in the door, cold on his skin and gentle on his bones.

He took off his bandages, and they landed on the floor right as fireworks lit up the sky from behind the window.

*Halved*, he thought, because *unseen*, halved because Mori had said so — because Odasaku's door had been locked and he had woken up that morning and he'd wanted to die — wanted to be less seventeen and more of a killer and an organism — whichever would make him bleed faster.

*Bleed*, he thought. *Double Black* missions always went too well. Chuuya's arm was always outstretched. His hand on his nape, pulling him along, baring his teeth in the face of any and all that might just be *merciful* enough, and he *hated* him, at last, hated him *truly*, easily, the easiest thing he had ever done —

A hand knocking on the door. "Don't you dare use all the warm water," Chuuya called.

*[“I don't want you to die,” Odasaku said, once. It was either a reassurance or new information; it seemed obvious, when Dazai stopped and thought about it, flipping a collection coin he had stolen from Ango's coat.*

*“Of course,” he conceded. “But it happens anyway, doesn't it?”*

*“From what I've seen, yes.”*

*He sighed. “Isn’t life such a wonder?”*

*Odasaku tilted his head to the side. “Not quite,” he replied. “If it was, there would be no good reason to lose it.*

*“Is there?”*

*“I assume,” he shrugged. “Isn’t it kind of sad, otherwise?”]*

The ground was ice.

“I’m not looking,” Chuuya promised, in that honest way of his, between aching clenched teeth and misplaced understanding. There was a sound — a *tear-and-snap*, familiar; the smell of antiseptics and of rust, the feeling of watching his body from the outside. “Hell fucking curse you — I’m not looking.”

Dazai opened his mouth. There was a hum in the boy’s tone — the usual, but more frantic; as if hurrying through it would slow down the world.

He *thought* about opening his mouth — nothing seemed to change. His throat was on fire and his skin was freezing; the floor was stickier than drool. Water was being sucked in somewhere near; he recalled floating in waves less deep than he would have needed, and —

Chuuyas was wrapping bandages around him.

“Got,” he was mumbling, still, and if Dazai could have raised his head a bit he would have seen the top of his, red hair and sweat, hands working. Would have seen vapor on the walls, the fogged up mirror — the result of hasty splashes, he assumed; hands dragging his body out of the filled tub. “Got my damn eyes on it, but I’m not looking.”

“That’s not humanly possible,” he informed him, helpful until his last breath.

“*Humanity* is the last of my concerns,” Chuuya snapped, and his hands stayed gentle, stayed wrapping — they clenched around his cheeks, and his vision was all freckles, suddenly, all unmatching eyes and strands of hair, beautiful in the way that everything had to be, at the end. “Stop shaking.”

He attempted. Courteously, because it was nice of him to dirty those tacky clothes of his he *oh — so* liked. “I can’t,” he let him know. “Sorry,” he added, belatedly. He bit his tongue as he did it; his teeth were chattering. “You are.”

“I’m what?”

Rationality, amongst the delirium. *Human*. Some things were like the sun in the sky — a given. “What are you doing here?”

“Shut up,” The hands left, which wasn’t nice, not nice at all — the sound of a shower head, then, water drops on ceramic, and that hissing quality the pipes of that apartment had always had. “Hey. Eyes open.”

“Only have one,” he reminded him, vague. The ceiling was a thousand miles away; his shoulder blades were freezing. “I think. Chuuya.”

“Present.”

“I don’t,” The sound of his hands around him had stopped. Every inch of him was buzzing. “What are you doing? Chuuya.”

He undressed, jaw clenched. He saw him sink his teeth on the tips of his gloves, to remove those too; he felt resentful, for a moment — either of the sting of teeth, or of the squelch with which they landed on the floor — or of him. He heard his steps and stared at the ceiling, and didn’t quite know how to ask him not to leave.

“Oh,” he noted, surprised, when he felt arms shift under his armpits. “You’re here.”

“I don’t live here anymore,” Chuuya reminded him, and shouldered all of his weight, groaning under the ephemeral attempts of his heels to touch the ground. The curve of Dazai’s feet on the tiles was painful. “They’ll have my head if I leave a corpse on the floor.”

“Yes,” Dazai nodded, because that made sense. The boy’s hands were spread between his shoulder blades, dragging him into the shower on ever-so stable steps, and he thought *that* made less sense. “Why are you touching me?”

“Because you swallowed your own bones, idiot,” he reminded him. Ceramic under his heels; the shower rained down on his head and got stuck in his eyelids — he thought of Chuuya’s fingers, cupping warm water and pouring it down, and wondered if he could ask him to do the same to him. “I’d leave,” He said, and that, too, made sense; *if I could*, “I’m not watching.”

“I know you aren’t.”

“Good,” *Good*, he thought, brilliantly, that was good. People didn’t like touching Dazai. They wouldn’t have even if he hadn’t taken something away whenever they did it. Chuuya let go of his shoulders, tentatively, but not quite disgusted, which was new, and said: “Give me your arms.”

“They’re mine,” he replied. But the request seemed reasonable enough, so he offered them, *good*, very good — fell. “Sorry.”

“Hey,” Chuuya cursed, slipping on wet tiles, grasping at him the moment his legs gave out. “Hey. Fuck — *Hey*,” Dazai knees went to the floor, and then they were pulled up again, and Mori had colors for these kind of situations, for the valleys of skin that were red and the ones that were baby blue, “Dazai, *hey*,” and Chuuya’s hands trying to be keep him up, Dazai’s fingers leaving dentures on the scarred mosaics of his back.

“Sorry,” he attempted, his nose landing painfully on that old building-shaped scar on the boy’s shoulder, his own spine bumping against the cold walls, “I can’t,” he tried, throat dry, eyes pulsing, “You said—“



He slipped again — hurt his elbow on a rack, no shampoos or anchors, and Chuuya's arm tightened *painfully* across his back, fingers carving his ribs, "*Shh*," he hushed, almost coarse, and his free hand pushed drenched hair off his eyelashes — which was nice and *good* and unnecessary, but it plastered his clammy forehead on the boy's cooler one.

"Come on, I'm —" It let him watch water drops land on his lips much more closely, chapped and pursued, and he thought about killing him, right there, "— here, I'm —" with the nails he had stuck on his spine, but that would have been a child's whim and a wasted investment, and Mori had taught him better, *hold it until there is nothing left to grasp onto*, "Dazai. Hey."

He started laughing.

His hollow chest couldn't take it — neither could his throat, scratched to raw skin, the water rushing over them, *good* — he hadn't even *meant* to, would have stopped if he had had enough mind to remind himself that not breathing *hurt*, and pain wasn't worth it.

*You're naked*, he told himself, helpfully. That seemed important. Air was breathing over portions of skin he had carefully sealed away; and Chuuya wasn't looking, which was nice and was good and confusing, just like him — the Mafia's most loyal and the Mafia's most dangerous; Dazai's *least* and *most* chess piece of all of them.

"You're my partner," he mocked, mean, just in case Chuuya was being mean, too — but not too much, just in case he wasn't. Unprovoked meanness was a tell, and Dazai had none of those, too much, none, and Chuuya knew them all, "You should know me."

Through the curtains of water, his eyes hardened.

*Good*, he thought, and *nice*. "Fuck you," Chuuya said, and he was still holding him, had not even noticed; had known it would happen from the bleeding gash on his side underneath a cave facing the sea, because Dazai had brought him *in*, dragged him from martyrdom to a glorified cancer, and no dog would *ever forget*, "I do know you."

His mouth wrecked itself in a grin. Dazai thought about biting him, five seconds older and six times meaner. "Do you?"

He searched his eyes, both uncovered and both a bit useless, as if he could burn his truth into them. "I know you."

"I'm sure you believe so."

"Better than you think," Chuuya challenged, chin up, like his blood wasn't trailing down both their bodies. Nothing between them had ever managed not to be a *tug o'war*, and Dazai had rope burns on his hands to prove it, had his heartbeat memorized. "Better than I care for."

*Stupid*, he thought, amazed, *stupid, you're so stupid*. He laughed about it, maybe; or maybe his throat hurt just because. *Stupid, you're so stupid*.

"Look at them," he dared.

"No."

“Touching them is fine, but looking isn’t?”

“I’m not touching them,” the boy replied, stubborn, and manouvered him around, until his hands were on his ribs only — ticklish, barely enough to keep him standing.

“At least buy me dinner first,” he complained, sharp and empty, and the other didn’t lower his gaze; said: “I always buy you dinner.” His breath smelled of wine, just faintly, because Mori hated smoking — so Chuuya drowned his sorrows in revered water and new friends’ still beating hearts, and Dazai drowned him in his own.

“Look at them.”

“You can’t use me,” he snapped, not quite as unkind as he had probably wanted to, “Find you a sadist.”

Dazai waited. The *thud* of the shower was distant and close. “Look at them.”

Chuuya set his jaw. “Tell me to.”

He searched. Pitied what he found, but not really; pity and envy and confusion, *nice* and *good* and *deadly*. “Look at me,” he murmured.

His eyes fell on his skin.

No thunder and no gasping crowds; Dazai hadn’t been expecting them, but he thought his hollow bones might have. Empty they remained; they moved, questioning, and settled again, and he breathed *out*. Dazai could have laughed, that voice of deliriousness in his brain suggested — he could have screamed, just for the fun of it. Chuuya wouldn’t remember a thing in the morning.

His gaze roamed down candid lines, pinker at the edges, laying on a necessarily-paler layer of skin. They were a collar around his throat; then mazes of symbols down his arms, and occasional hills where his calves began. Rope burns and faded *kanjis* and surgical lines and his own fingers. Quiet.

He grabbed Chuuya’s wrists, rough and aimless, and settled his palms on the marred fields of his neck.

“Coward,” he said, easily.

Chuuya’s eyes hardened.

He snapped his teeth shut; set his shoulders in *that way* — the one that meant that if he didn’t get angry, he wouldn’t know what *else* to do with him. All at once, he spread his fingers across his throat, covering every inch of it; thumbs digging into the pulse point at the dead center of it.

Dazai stared back. Imperceptibly, he exhaled.

A switch was turned off — Chuuya's shoulders fell, and lips parted, and his hands grew magnetic. Nails down the furrows of older scars — digits fitting around the rope burns on his neck — fingertips running up and down the lines on his arms, turning them around, dragging them closer, pressing on it until the skin turned white.

He knew touch meant silence; he could see it in the overly relaxed and endlessly tense line of his shoulders, the fear of a void he didn't know and longed for. Touch meant silence, and he let him, even as the shower turned off, and nothing but the ricochet of drops and their stuttered breathing remained.

"There are words," Chuuya said, at some point.

His nails were carving a specific furrow down his left arm, holding it tightly, all business. Looking was a different kind of touch. "Yes," he confirmed, blinking at the redundancy.

His clear *pause* was filled with expectancy. His thumb ran down the carved *kanjis* like it could wipe them away — it was the softer touch he could recall, and he didn't quite *understand*, and Mori wasn't around, so Dazai said, "I don't understand."

"Did you do it?"

"No," he answered, honestly, because *yes or no* was always easier. "Why would I?"

Chuuya didn't quite glance at him, but almost. "Why words?" he insisted.

"She never ran out of paper," Dazai said. His flesh was amnesiac, and the memory of touch was nauseating or an obsession. "She thought I would understand, if I saw it from up close."

The boy stilled, again — as much as either of them could, bodies rattled by involuntary shivers, standing soaked in the unfavorable air of that bathroom. He felt the urge to blow air into one of his eyes, to see him blink — he did.

"What," Chuuya said, untouched and yet *gripping*, "What, 'cause of the reading thing?"

He thought about it. "Not *just* that. Different kind of understanding."

"Bullshit."

"How judgemental."

"Of bullshit?" His hands, bruised and calloused, dropped his arm. One of his thumbs rubbed at the corner of his lips; he wondered if the lipstick stain lingered. "Always."

Then, he asked: "Paper from the *Book*?"

"Chuuya," Dazai chirped. "*Hush*."

A flash of fury flared. He didn't let it reach the sky; join the fireworks he could hear, distantly, somewhere behind those sheeted walls, outside his rotting skin. He dropped to the

ground, as polite as the draining water under his uncomfortably soaked boxers would let him — and he could have grinned when Chuuya mirrored him, slowly, but didn't.

"It's just scars," he reminded him.

"You hate pain."

"I do."

"I don't," *get it*, Chuuya almost insisted, but seemed to think better of it. *Intermittently intuitive*, Dazai had described him as, once, to Mori's interested hands. He was naked and he had to make him pay for it, somehow. Not entirely *un-cruelly*, then, he asked, "Why do you hate when people call you Nakahara?"

His own adored devil in a white lab coat, he would have guessed — but Chuuya had been kicking honorifics away since the very first moment.

A huff. "I'm Chuuya."

"*Nakahara* Chuuya."

"Etiquette is aristocratic nonsense," he insisted — with sports cars and penthouses and foreign accounts to his name; and the tilt of his vowels that felt like the Suribachi sun. "In Suribachi, you were lucky if the city didn't know you as *Fat Butt Katsuki*. How are you meant to decide who's *worthy* of calling you what, anyway?"

"Average societal expectations," Dazai offered. His head was still heavy. "Desire to spite. Lack of shame. The short joy of having snotty adults kiss your shoes."

"First names are fine," A pause. A glance at his scars; his fingers spread, again, and it was almost gentle. "Might not even be mine, anyway."

"You licked all the slices," he said. "It's yours."

"There were no slices to lick," Chuuya rolled his eyes. "Only a brat melting in my arms."

*You're alive*, he wanted to say, but it would have made his face look puzzled, he knew, and that was too much honesty. *You're alive and you're breathing and you're eating and you're loved*.

"Did that hurt?" Dazai asked.

He glanced up. Met his eyes; disliked, clearly, what he saw as he roamed through them. "A part of me," Chuuya said, endlessly, as if he could spell it out forever and never have to hear the end of it. Dazai hadn't seen his clone. He couldn't quite imagine it. "Was relieved when I saw him die."

"Why?"

"*Don't buy a casket until you see the corpse*," he parroted. "Mori's words."

“Always one for economizing.”

“For blood, too.”

“You had to be *sure*,” Dazai pressured — because sometimes being a bundle of unanswered questions was safe, and sometimes it was entertaining to watch them all scramble for his clues. “Had to see it happen. Do it yourself, even. Or you’d never believe it.”

Chuuya’s lips parted.

“Oh,” he said.

That red-rimmed *disgust* that had been a constant, since the sun of Suribachi — he watched it straighten his shoulders and pull his lips down, as he rewarded Dazai with that sharp *difference* between them no one could quite describe.

“That’s bullshit,” he decided.

“You would think so,” Dazai conceded.

“With that fucking scrawny ass you have,” Chuuya insisted, pupils still blown and lips still curling, like the urge to laugh and start a war was still there, behind his teeth. “You should find the strenght to stand up and look the fuck around. Dead bodies don’t bleed.”

“Yes,” he confirmed, “They don’t.”

“So?”

“So,” Dazai continued, “You should become a seaside Gramps, just out of spite.”

Water drops fell from the rusty shower head. Chuuya stared. “What?”

“You could fish crabs and mackerels. Tip your hat to old ladies. Bark at the waves.”

An overwhelming amount of answers seemed ready to flow down; all that he managed to mumble was: “*You* don’t get to be there.”

“That’s mean.”

“You’ll act like a child even at eighty,” Chuuya made a face — something between terror and damnation. “Try to push grenades into old women’s purses with your cane. Break your fake femur in an effort to kneel and propose double suicide to some poor woman.”

Dazai scoffed. “Have some faith in my fake femur.”

“You’ll probably grow deaf, and refuse to wear shit for it — so you can make people repeat the same thing thirty times,” he continued, undeterred, and Dazai laid his nape on the cold edge of the tub and closed his eyes. “And you’ll be old and wrinkly and you’ll *stink*, and lazy like a mule, and I’ll have to cut your nails even with *my* fake femur.”

“Oh,” He wanted to smile; reprimand him, the way Mori did when he was particularly hopeful — particularly blind. “You have a fake femur too?”

“I’m *old*. Don’t they all do?”

“If you think names are stupid,” he asked. “Why do you call me Dazai?”

Chuuya’s eyebrow curled. “What,” he said, half a chuckle and half the voice that got mesmerized subordinates to stare, “Want me to call you,” A hiccup, “Fuckin’ ‘*Samu*?’ ”

He snorted, not truly affected and not truly haunted. The other boy did too, until his body swayed to the side — then forward, cheek on the tiles, by the bruises blooming on Dazai’s knees from his failed attempts at standing.

Dazai planted his chin on the edge of his rib. He looked down at his flushed face, hazed and revolting and familiar — pressed his lips on the bone and said, very quiet: “Shuuji.”

A frown. Two fingers pinched his chin. “Who the hell is Shuuji?”

A flower shaped firework bloomed right in the center of the window.

His blood on the floor. Mori’s hands on his shoulders. Odasaku’s door. The snow ground, outside. The woman’s eyes, lifeless, pointed at him. His body, bare and watched. *Touching is an act of violence*, Mori would say — *but then again, so is living*.

Abruptly, the pieces fell together.

“Chuuya,” he said, blinking. “We need to get arrested.”

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“*You*,” was the *snarl* out of Ace’s mouth, the moment they walked through the doors of the meeting room, “Oh, *you two*, I will end you —“

“Chuuya?” Kouyou breathed out, urgently, scratching the floor with her seat to stand — a sight as rare as the end of the world. Worry morphed into confusion — morphed into an ire so blatantly *deadly* Dazai felt the need to take a step back. “*Where* in God’s name have you *two* —“

“Respectfully, Ane-san,” Dazai interrupted, making a beeline for his seat. He slammed the envelope Matsuda had given them on the table; Chuuya grabbed the nearest paperweight and threw it to the door, its reddish light allowing it to slam it shut. He crashed his hand on the button to lower the walls of the windows. “Can we move the calligraphy hours to after we keep the *Ballerinas* from unleashing the *Special Division* on us?”

Her eyes widened.

Mori’s smiled. “Wonderful to have you back, boys.”

“Same here, Boss,” Chuuya assured, with a half bow. He had certainly smelled the threat lining his every vowel; because Dazai was a bad influence, he did his best to pretend he hadn’t. “Where did you put our supposed decapitated heads? I’d like to use Dazai’s as a centerpiece.”

“Elise asked to put them up in her room,” the man explained. “What’s this about the *Special Division*, then?”

Dazai offered them the crumpled up piece of paper. In the midst of their barely contained perplexity, he spread out the photographs he had taken on the table, connecting their most blurred edges by trial and error. Chuuya pointedly refused to meet Kouyou’s gaze — the longer her own lingered on the less than ideal situations pictured on paper.

“I thought you’d said Komako had been dealt with,” Ace said, eventually. “And Shimamura — our intel wasn’t even able to confirm if he *was* the glacial Ability User. What does the *Special Division* have to do with it?”

“You disappear for two days,” Kouyou highlighted, “With no memory of it, if Hirotsu’s word is to be trusted — and reappear out of nowhere with unexplained information?”

“We were *drugged*,” Chuuya hissed. “All thanks to this bastard right here.”

“Toxic substances from the West. I threw up at least three times on the way here,” Dazai swore. He turned to him. “What the hell do you mean *thanks to me*?”

“You mean to tell me someone got a needle in *you*?”

“It was —” A blush of sorts spread through the boy’s cheeks; he stomped his feet, “It was in the bread, alright? This stupid bread at the stupid ball — It was an accident, and — We solved this thing, anyway, so —“

“How did you get arrested the second time, anyway?” Mori asked, conversationally.

“It’s a bit blurry,” Dazai admitted. He fixed the last of the photographs in place — then began to turn them around, face down. “I think — I needed us to get to the station. Check on their archives for survivors from the fire near Yuzawa. Komako was there. I climbed the Ferris Wheel.”

“No, your ass tried to *jump* from the Ferris Wheel,” Chuuya replied. He squinted, rubbing his forehead. “And then — You made me stick you into a toy crane? I think you had someone at

gun-point. No. Was that before? Did I try to throw the Ferris Wheel into the Bay?”

Kouyou stared. “*Again?*”

“*Tried to!*”

“Questions are pointless,” Dazai informed. “We don’t remember anything,” At his side, Chuuya twitched; he stored that information for later. “You can torture it out of us, maybe, Ane-san. For now,” He leaned back, studying his handiwork. “I think you might be interested in just *who* the mysterious aider of *Ballerinas* is.”

Dried drops of blood — the result of a cut from Dazai’s own teeth to his fingers, he assumed; his hazed mind’s last resort to call his attention on something it had noticed on *Standard Island* — stained the back of every picture.

Once joined, a shaky outline appeared — a cartoon-like design of a rat’s head, hollow eyes and big ears taking up most of its shape.

At once, it was silence.

“*The Rats in the House of Dead*,” Mori recited. His grin had subdued, at last; when he stood and leaned over the table, all that his eyes had place for was a cunning taste for strategy. “They’re among the blacklisted syndicates from the *Order of the Clock Tower*,” He glanced at Dazai. “Why?”

“The *Gentlemen Bank*,” he said, “Did you sign and send the contract? I must have forwarded it to you.”

“I did.”

“I had to modify it,” he added. “They were trying to grant themselves access to our Ability Archives. They had assassins in the room for Chuuya and I. They had two performers on stage, purely to spy on us,” He tapped his fingers. “It was Yoko and Shimamura.”

“What?” Kouyou demanded. “How do you know?”

“Yoko jumped off one of the rescue ships at the festival,” Chuuya intervened. “I can’t really — I saw her face. I remember that. Thing is — the ships weren’t on fire. The demonstrations are only climbing shows.”

“Director Winston was trying to manipulate both of her supposed allies,” Dazai explained. “She promised the *Ballerinas* she would help them gain access to our Archive, presumably to sell us to the *Special Division*. At the same time, she asked us to get rid of Shimamura and Yoko — Thinking she would get to be the one to sell us out, at that point.”

“The *Special Division* would probably feel indebted enough to join the Bank,” Ace muttered, stealing the paper from Kouyou’s hands. “The French *Special Division* is already their client. Having two of them would grant them even more influence than they need.”



“But the Director wasn’t acting alone,” Dazai nodded towards the pictures. “I saw a letter in her office. It had the *Rats*’ symbol. They’re the ones who want us busy and surrounded.”

“With no *Ability Permit*, the *Division* could act on most of our properties, if they discovered we are using even a single Ability User,” Mori agreed. He reached forward, stealing one of the pictures; Dazai saw Chuuya’s vague outline, head thrown back in laughter. “We have good support from the Government, but even they have to be mindful of the *Division*. If they got the *Hunting Dogs* involved...”

Chuuya tightened his lips.

Kouyou met his eyes. Two fingers under her chin.

He set his jaw; straightened. “The ship caught fire because of Komako,” he said. “It was her power. Those flames weren’t natural. I don’t know if she pushed Yoko — she did seem to harbor hostility. She said her love for Shimamura is what brought this winter.”

“But you drowned Komako,” Ace insisted.

“Kawabata made sure she wouldn’t die.”

All eyes turned on Dazai.

“You put a bullet in that spy’s head,” Mori said.

“I did,” he confirmed. “And he used his own life as the bargaining chip to use his Ability on someone else. Our Intel had no knowledge about this possibility — we thought it would only work on Kawabata himself.”

“Wasn’t Sakaguchi tasked with his examination?” Kouyou intervened, surprised. “He’s the best of the team.”

“It was well-concealed,” Dazai replied — perhaps just a tad too defensive. Mori’s gaze was a weight. “It’s — rare, I admit, but Abilities tend to linger when they’re aided by resentment. It’s why some effects survive even after the User has been eliminated; they search for something to attach their power to.”

“They knew we would go to the town,” Chuuya added. “They knew Komako had no chance against me. So they made sure she could be saved. As for Yoko killing herself —“

“An act of violence,” Mori concluded. “Isn’t that what Komako’s Ability demands?”

“Are they getting rid of the glacial air?” Ace gasped. “A suicide must gather an incredible amount of violence. And by the same person who gave Shimamura the power to freeze the city —“ He reached for the remote control, clicking the button to remove the walls from the windows.

“But *why*,” Dazai muttered, frowning at the pictures. “The *Special Division* could still find a way to blame us for the weather Ability. Our alibi entirely relies on Komako’s footage — if

she's alive, she could change the narrative. If they simply wave the season away, *how* are they going to frame us?"

"The *Rats* have never openly shown interest in any of the organizations in Yokohama," Mori considered. "Even at the height of the *Dragon Head Conflict*, our Intel only registered their observance — not intervention. Perhaps this is their attempt to disconcert us."

"A scare-technique," Kouyou agreed. "Let us know they have the power to act whenever they wish."

Chuuya scoffed. "Rats in a cage."

The windows were freed.

Light bathed one side of the Boss' face; the wrinkles on the sides of his eyes. He knew what had happened wouldn't be forgotten; knew there were a thousand possibilities. Mori had always enjoyed playing in attack.

*Waiting to be wounded might be peaceful, at times*, he would say, two chess pieces between his fingers. *But wars — you can start and end those when you like. Sustain your people in blood, rather than in fear.*

*Fear of what?*, Dazai would ask.

He would tilt his head to the side. It was a shared habit. Dazai didn't know who had picked it up from whom. *Of the strike, of course.*

"Ace," he called, in a voice barely his own. "Get those walls down *right* —"

The glass shattered in a single breath — louder than any of the fireworks at the edge of his memories. His feet were stuck to the ground; he saw the glint of Kouyou's sword, and the blink of Mori's eyes, always too dry — always forgetting to take his drops if Dazai wasn't there.

Before all of it, he saw Chuuya jump to the table, his hands crimson, throwing himself in front of the man without an ounce of hesitation.

It was pointless.

The bullet pierced right through the red scarf, right where Mori's pocket and his pen rested, the habit of a doctor — touching the tiled floors in a crystal *plink!*, stained and sticky, after it went cleanly through his heart.

*Mori*, Dazai thought he might have called.

Before he landed on the floor, the relentless *thud* of it never ending, he met Dazai's eyes, as if he'd heard nonetheless — surprised, almost, in that split second of conscience.

His lips, divided by blood-stained teeth, shaped his name. Then he fell.

## end of act two, part one.

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### Chapter End Notes

chuuya: its not hard dealing with dazai's Bad Days

x: oh what do you do to help :((

chuuya:

chuuya: i mean homoeroticism and ballgowns usually help

“concerning the rationale [...]” is an actual nakahara chuuya speech, one that asagiri himself framed (in some journal bsd interview, i think) as proof of irl nakahara being a guy who really liked using big words to say not very much. fun fact!

sapphirestormout when it's about the Yearning. when it's about the Do You See Me Touch Me Then. anyway.

hey there!! nice to see you again if you're still reading, and wonderful to meet you if this is the first time you read a comment. uni is still following me like the ghost of past christmases and work wants me dead, but here's another chapter! fun fact for you guys i almost got ran over this morning. anyway! we are fine. not dazai but. yk.

i hope you liked this chapter, and thank you so so so much again for all the nice comments and the kudos! i hope you have a wonderful day, and a great week, and the best life. see you soon! <333

keep warm, and see you with the (very particular; you'll see) interlude!!

# DOG

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!! :)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

### interlude.

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*“She’s beautiful,” Dazai said. “Did you kill her?”*

*The framed picture had never truly been hidden; Mori only hid the things he wanted him to find. It stood, faintly dusty, abandoned on the left corner of the third shelf — the one with the pinned butterflies, and the plastic bones.*

*A teacher’s equipment; Mori had never had a penchant for learning, though.*

*“Hm?” the doctor asked, seemingly distracted by some vials — which meant, inevitably, that he didn’t quite have the answer to that question. He knew Dazai disliked his humming.*

*And his pondering. And his smiling. And his weighting, his watching, his assessing, his making, that red scarf that meant something more than a statement, the locks on his cabinets, the polystyrene from a box left outside he had stuck to every sharp corner of the clinic, the brand of canned crab he bought, the stick he pushed on his tongue whenever his throat hurt, that he won at chess, that he lost, that he said good morning, that he wasn’t there in the evenings and —*

*“Elise was prettier as an adult,” he insisted, studying the second subject of the picture.*

*“Less adorable, though,” Mori replied.*

*The cabin of some rusty ship, Dazai assumed, studying the background of the photograph. Pipes and wet blankets; that greyish, filthy, texture that lumped all of the man’s wartime*

*stories together. Elise, taller than even Dazai himself had ever presumed to be, cheeks unrounded and lipstick stained smile — hands on a child's shoulders.*

*She looked like Mori, he thought. All the way to the smile.*

*"If you didn't kill her," he presumed, moving from the most rational into the least probable. "Then why did she leave?"*

*Another hum. Mori smiled, as if he knew.*

*He laid his tools down, leaning back into his seat. Pulling an all nighter was both endlessly tedious and overwhelmingly exciting — Dazai had never gotten permission to stay up so late, before. If he was lucky, they might play chess. Maybe Mori would even leave before sunrise, and he would get to snoop around his most lethal potions.*

*"I believe," Mori decided, not glancing at the picture once, "That the little angel began to fear death."*

*He blinked. Felt like reprimanding that pretty picture. I trusted you, and you're just like everyone else? "That's stupid."*

*"It made sense," Mori replied, "For the circumstances. She was a close acquaintance to it. Despising friends is infinitely easier than despising enemies. You end up knowing them much deeper."*

*Dazai gathered his conclusions. He dragged slightly numb legs forward, sat on the hospital bed, squashed his cheek on the pillow to keep his eyes on the doctor. Said: "Are you death?"*

*His grin widened. A laugh of sorts escaped his mouth — a graceless sound, like a dying goose or a breaking glass; one those subordinates of his were certainly not allowed to hear. Laughing made him look older — it dug the chasms of his face deeper. Dazai thought he had to have laughed tons, at some point of his life, before deciding it was undignified.*

*I laugh, he'd said, offended, the one time he had offered him his considerations.*

*No, Dazai had muttered, rubbing the spot of his forehead the man had pinched. No, you chuckle evilly.*

*Dear. How do I fix that?*

*"I wouldn't presume," Mori answered, hands intertwined. "But it would certainly explain why you came here and stayed."*

*He frowned. "Don't try and be mean."*

*"Sorry," he offered, easily. "Oh. It's later than I thought."*

*Dazai waited, holding his breath.*

*Mori tilted his head to the side. "Want to play chess?"*

*He hummed — because when they lived in the same room, it was inevitable they would end up hating the same things. “As you wish, Boss.”*

*They played, holed up in that rusty desk of his. Mori offered unwanted advice on his hair — in need of a cut — whenever Dazai got too close to winning. That one busker that always came around with his trumpet played, outside. We’re not locked here, Mori liked to say, whenever they were. A Mafia Boss was never locked anywhere; his right hand man had it slightly more complicated. But want to play?*

*“This move,” the man illustrated, helpfully, under Dazai’s most uninterested gaze, “Is called Zugzwang. No matter what you do, it will end in your adversary’s checkmate.”*

*“I know,” he said.*

*Surprise made him blink. “Then why let me?”*

*“I thought you deserved to win at least one game,” Dazai shrugged. “You always knew the angel would leave, didn’t you?”*

*Untouched by the abrupt change of subject, Mori went on with his strategy. “She had that light in her.”*

*“That light?”*

*“Hard to recognize when you don’t have it,” He stole one of his black pieces; settled it on top of the pile of weapon-supply deals he kept procrastinating looking at. “I knew a man just like that. She was a good student; a mouthwatering Ability User. She could have saved this nation with her own hands, during the Great War.”*

*Dazai tilted his head. “Saved?”*

*“Does that surprise you?”*

*“She was with you.”*

*“Everyone wants to save something,” Mori reminded him. “Changes with the season, though. Her priorities shifted with the death of a man she cared much for. Diesel to a fire already there. I could not take the risk of it burning everything surrounding us, too.”*

*“But you knew she would leave, at some point,” he insisted. He had always liked Mori’s war stories; perhaps that was why the man never offered them. “So why take her in?”*

*“Is a starving man in the habit of demanding a meal, instead of crumbs?”*

*“I’m not in the habit of talking with the starving.”*

*“Liar,” the man chirped. “I saw you sneak in during our Ozaki’s interrogation.”*

*His fingers curled around his queen, not an inch of hurry. As planned, he won. Dazai tried to find a common ground. Steal it, he considered. Steal it all, and then some more.*

*“Some research is better than no research,” the man concluded, at last. Then he blinked at the board, genuinely startled. “How unusual. Checkmate.”*

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Mori’s oxygen max had a star-shaped sticker on it.

*It’s what Elise would have done, Dazai would have said, had the nurses questioned it. Many of the staff had wondered about the absence of the adorable little girl, who the Boss had never forfeited bringing along. He would rather she doesn’t see him like this, Dazai had said.*

Because an Hospital didn’t associate itself with the Mafia by asking too many questions, they’d only said — *Understandable. She is his child.*

Dazai stood from the plastic chair, and got to work.

The door of the room slipped open — creaking with the precision of a swift-footed grace that could do nothing about rust. As white as the low-quality sheets of his bed, connected to more tubes than Dazai swore were needed, Mori didn’t even twitch.

“Ace locked himself up again,” Kouyou informed him, closing the door. He could have told her that there was no need; cleaning services came by ten sharp, everyday. “He’s playing the part of the comatose puppet rather well, I must say. Perhaps we should consider leaving him there.”

*They saw a bullet pierce through, had been the general consensus regarding the mafiosi — or the crowd of uneasy, confrontational bunch they had turned into in the last few weeks — in the hurried, half hostile meetings the three of them had had. They know it hit someone.*

The idea to hospitalize Ace as a cover up had been, surprisingly enough, not Kouyou’s own.

He had thought the man would refuse any and all strategies coming from his dearly detested *Double Black* — but he had complied, obediently enough. *I keep telling you he’s good at being loyal, Dazai had said, in the face of Chuuya’s skepticism.*

*He would stab Boss himself for a dime. He’s not reliable.*

Perhaps he had withered under the perspective of the Boss’ eventual praise. Perhaps he had been inebriated by the idea of bearing the burden of a wound meant for the most powerful

man in the city — at least in name. Perhaps the paradoxical sight of Mori's body on the floor had startled him.

*That's not what I said.*

Kouyou walked to the bed, unassumingly light. He kept his eyes on his current endeavors.

"They might put another stent in, this afternoon," she said, after a drop of water or two had spread ripples in the nearby basin. "The bullet grazed the aorta. They don't want to take any risks. He's lucky to be alive, as of now," A pause. Then, "You missed a spot."

He blinked, searching through the layers of foam on the man's impossibly still face. A small uncovered area, at the edge of the oxygen mask — where he had skirted around, not interested in the nurses' reaction if he were to move the mask.

A hum. He gathered some more foam from the basin counter; then he gripped the razor, leaned his knee on the side of the bed, and began dragging it down.

"That's a terrible performance," Kouyou commented, at last, not unkindly. She circled the bed, leaning over Mori's other side. "Straighter. Start from the top."

"I think," he said, pretending not to see her fingers hesitate at the unused texture of his voice, "I *might* know what to do better than you."

"One would doubt it. Did he teach you?"

"Tried to," A square of shaved skin appeared under the blade, only faintly reddened. Someone had spread the man's hair on the pillow, moving them away from the scars he had on his forehead — *torture*, he had told him, once, but not much else. "He's not very good at doing to others what he does to himself. Hirotsu had to come to the rescue."

Kouyou made a face. Her kimono was among the most colorful ones he had ever seen her wear — a clear violation of Mafia etiquette, only gently saved by the black underdress he saw peek from her shoulder. "Certainly a crowded bathroom."

Dazai cleaned another layer. "My condolences, Ane-san."

Her grip around the railing painted her knuckles white. "*Hush*, now, lad. He is no corpse."

"No healthy thing, either. I know you care for him."

"Selfishly," She glanced to the basin as he washed the blade, as if waiting for the water to turn red. "I wish I could say the same for you."

He thought he smiled. Outside the window, the sun was at its most blinding; if he had turned the small television on, he would have heard stuttering reports of the warmest weather Yokohama had experienced in almost five years.

Mori's breath fogged up the mask.



[“Help me press on the wound,” someone barked. Chuuya, he thought. Kouyou’s Demon was warding off upcoming bullets, and Ace had run off somewhere, and Mori was nowhere to be seen — which was unusual; eyes and ears in every corner in this world. There was blood on his shoes. “Press fucking harder —”]

“You truly have no loyalty.”

“Do I not?” he asked, distractedly.

“It matters next to nothing to me,” Kouyou insisted, eyes searching his gaze in a way that said the opposite. But the Port Mafia was a starved feast, and it would have made no sense not to eat the biteable. “He might not appreciate it, one day. Not at the price of success.”

“Success,” Whatever his tone did, it got her shoulders to harden. “I would know about that. And you?”

She worked her jaw, surprise muffled. “If you already know, no point in me telling.”

“Tell me anyway.”

Her hesitancy was short lived — two strikes of razor, and then: “The News and the Cabinet are aware that someone from the company has been hit. A helicopter News service was passing by, directing a service on the melting, and — they’re calling it the latest of *the terroristic attacks plaguing our city*,” A scoff. “The Police is half convinced we might have staged this one ourselves. They’re still wary of believing the *Ballerinas* have hands in it.”

“And?”

“They found Komako and Shimamura’s corpses.”

Dazai’s razor paused. The more of Mori’s face appeared, the less vacant he seemed — blame, nonetheless, was a too convenient expression for a nearby-corpse to wear. “Where?”

Kouyou sighed. “On the stairs of *Building One*. Three bullets in their chests, jaw broken against the curb.”

He considered. Washed the blade into the basin one last time; let it float in the dirty water, grabbing a fairy patterned blanket of Elise’s — one of the items in Mori’s *serious emergencies bags*, which only Dazai knew where to find — and dried his face. “Chuuya,” he concluded.

She seemed genuinely taken aback — which was incredibly stupid.

[His hands pressed. Chuuya’s cheek bled — the bullets had only managed to graze him.]

“That’s good,” Dazai said. “For everyone. No one wanted terrorists roaming free, correct?”

“No,” Her hands intertwined on the handle of her umbrella. He had the weird mental image of someone at the entrance attempting to put it in the drying basket. “Problem is, more than a

quarter of our supporters at the City Council are growing — handsy. Saying we're not being careful enough. The *Special Division* is on our tails."

"I didn't think the Government had to answer to the *Special Division*."

"Not once, no," Very gently, she tapped one of Mori's abandoned hands. *Ozaki, dear, if you could kill him for me?* "Then, our valiant Boss decided to create a project to get Users involved in the war, and now Abilities are — valued."

Dazai settled back on the guest chair. Mori slept — grazed aorta and unnatural bullet and Ability-affected wound and Elise, he presumed, somewhere in his dreams. Or nightmares. If it was fair.

"So what?" he asked. "Are we to expect the *Hunting Dogs* at our doors?"

"They hardly have enough proof for that," Kouyou shook her head. "They *could*, on the other hand, act on many of our assets. If the *Special Division* got permission to open an investigation on us, or an inquiry — If they found a single business connected to Abilities —"

"I doubt anyone in this city is stupid enough not to know."

"Not *legally*. We could be ordered to get tested. We're resourceful, but not enough to hide every Ability User in our ranks," She munched on her lip, pensive. The lipstick stayed right where it was. "Our facade is weapon manufacture. The last time Abilities were involved in that field, the *Great War* was at its worst. There are *armies* of lawyers all over the Prefecture waiting for us to slip up."

"This isn't us slipping," Dazai let her know, helpful in that way that always got guns in men's hands. "This is Mori getting shot in the chest, in an effort to take him out of this game. The *Special Division* knows he's the heart of it all."

Kouyou's head snapped up. "Are you *saying* —"

"They have collaborated with terrorists in an effort to protect this city, before," He shrugged. "I hardly doubt they wouldn't do it again. If they genuinely believe whoever had the *Ballerinas* change their ideology could get rid of us once and for all — I don't see why they wouldn't risk it all to cut the head off."

"Which means *you're* the head, now."

Dazai stared at the floor.

*[A hand in his hair — pushing his face closer. A bubbling sound, like blood down a drying throat or viscera squashing around a bullet. Words, in between — codes he already knew and places he remembered how to find, and secrets only the head of a crimson empire had a right to know, "I know," he tried to say, pushing Mori down, "I know, Mori, don't be boring —"].*

"Please, Ane-san," he attempted, offering half a bow. "You're his second in command, aren't you?"

“I am,” Kouyou said. “Always have been. He appeared from a massacre of the former Boss’ supporters, coat still lined in blood, and asked — *Do you want power, or do you want life?*”

“How come not the second? Last I checked, you lost it all in an attempt to gain it.”

It was mean, in a disgustingly *teenagerish* way. She took it all in stride, though — and he recalled their first meeting, her fingers under his chin, her smile frozen on her face. *It certainly has been a while, little demon.*

“Lad,” she started, “If I told you to leave this room and go wherever you wanted — would you do it?”

He settled his chin on his hand. “I don’t care for the Mafia,” he reminded her, “Not the way you do.”

“I’m not talking about the Mafia,” she insisted. “I’m talking about this room. I’m talking about *him*.”

*Of course*, Dazai said. It was only when the sun from the window hit the sleeping man’s hand just right, painting his veins cobalt, that he realized his mouth was closed. The woman leaned over the railing, with *purpose* — the reminder that he had once been as tall as her shoulder, and he still was missing that *inch* to be as tall as her.

“You’re all but stupid, little demon,” Kouyou said. “I know you know what he’s doing with you.”

“Ah,” He laughed, low and unamused, “Well. Picking an heir amongst the so-rare crowd of suicidal children doesn’t seem as wise as Mori is known for. Forgive me the skepticism.”

She didn’t falter. “Talk with that friend of yours, the one from Intel. Sakaguchi. Tell him to find a way to get us a meeting with the *Special Division*.”

Eyes obnoxiously wide, he gasped: “You want us to *talk* with the enemy?”

“It was already your plan,” Kouyou squinted. “I know it was. I don’t know if it was Mori’s, also — or if you two are just more similar than you will ever be willing to admit. Frankly, it hardly matters,” She wore her solemnity with the ease of a statue; used to the touches of believers and rusting a bit more under each one.

Dazai remembered longing, once. Not quite for her. Maybe for her sword; that Demon Ability of hers, something so flashy and separate — not intertwined with her very *veins*. She had seemed nice, until she had tortured a man in front of him. Then she had just looked like all the damned he had met.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and he almost believed her, “But *you* are going to have to get us out of this bother, lad. No one else Mori would want to.”

On the heart monitor, the rhythmic *beep* seemed to falter.

*Stand up and go*, he thought. *She would let you.*

Go where?

“Ane-san.”

He kept his eyes on Mori; *felt* the way her body tilted to him, immediate and instinctive, curling around those syllables. She had hated them from the moment Chuuya had first uttered them — then Dazai had joined in, and she had hated them a bit more. Then nothing. “Yes?”

Somewhat a waste, not quite curious, he questioned: “Do you hate me because of him, or is that irrelevant?”

Her breath caught. Dazai watched Mori’s hand, pale and wrinkled and ungloved. Wondered, *this one time, just this one time*, as useless as it was, *could it be the blood’s fault and not mine?*

He watched her walk around the bed, lithe steps and the drag of her kimono on the floor. She crouched down in front of his seat, balancing on the ball of her feet. No inch of them came into contact — and yet he had to lower his eyes to meet hers, and that was a burst of youth he did not have a place for.

She’d let her hair down — quiet mourning, subtle enough no subordinate would murmur. When she spoke, the strands fell on one of her eyes, and he thought about saying, *look who talked*.

“Everytime I see blood on your hands,” Kouyou said, “I see his face.” Her fingers tightened around the fabric of her clothes, near her knee — the one she had broken, when he was fourteen. She had been stuck in a wheelchair for a while, and he had carried her, only once, while she threatened to call Mori. “Calling me a *traitor*,” she spat, one side of her lips curling up.

“I’m thankful for him, at times,” she added, once she realized Dazai would only keep staring.

“A character defect,” he commented. “A sign of early senile delirium.”

“The truth,” she corrected him, simply. “I’m thankful to him. For showing me how foolish I was being. *Blinded*, he called me. Thinking I could ever —“

Her jaw set. He thought of Beatrice’s face, bloodied and frowned up in despise, staring up at the last person to ever hold her.

“You know,” she added. “Not of — you actually remind me of Kanechi a bit more.”

Dazai twitched.

*Ah*, he thought. *That* he hadn’t expected.

“The *truth*,” Kouyou repeated, “Is that every person in this world is born to be content. I doubt it, at times, until I end up stumbling on a sunrise,” She sighed. “I don’t know if I was happy, before — or if I could have been happier. But I am content now. *Here*.”

Her gaze laid on Mori, a blink; then him again. “Here,” she insisted, as if he could learn, “Surrounded by blood and by demons.”

“How flattering,” Dazai commented, and didn’t point out that her shadow was golden and sword-wielding.

“What would the world make of me, if I climbed out of these shadows?” Kouyou asked, and it didn’t require an answer — not with the sunlight streaming from the window, and the traces of dried blood on a spot behind her ear. “Do you think I would be *welcomed*? That I would walk through a crowd and feel like anything but an intruder?”

He hummed. “Did that speech have our Chuuya starry eyed when you gave it to him?”

“I’m thankful to the old Boss,” she concluded, undeterred. “If he ever were to return, to haunt all of us from whatever Hell we will one day meet him in again — I would rip his heart out with my hands. You?” She didn’t move; if she had ever dared to touch him, Dazai thought she might have seized him in a grip tight enough to bruise. “You are your mistakes. Not your best intentions.”

“That’s not an answer,” Dazai noted. “And I have none of those.”

“Aren’t you a prodigy?”

“Don’t be blind.”

“Occasionally, I believe it a wonderful endeavor,” She raised one hand, torturously slow; tapped the bundle of bandages on his face with a single finger, right where his shut eye rested. “The demon who goes around all bandaged must know something about it.”

Vacantly, he stared back.

[No, *he said. Perhaps he just thought about it. There was blood on his shoes, still, and the room was empty.* No, what would it be of him if —]

Kouyou shifted. Not quite kneeling; not with the body next to them still warm. Not quite anything else.

“If you need to be like him,” she told him, still defiant in that threat of loyalty, unwanted and undecided, but *owed* — because Mori had locked the door in her room of shadows when she would have never managed to be brave enough to leave, and she owed him everything. “Then take every *ounce* of bloodthirst he tried to drown us into, and use it to keep us afloat.”

The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept. He waited.

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The *Dining Hall* was almost empty, by the time the evening rolled in. When Dazai dropped his tray in front of the two occupants of one of the endless tables — he did so loudly enough to startle every anxiously silent soul.

“Ango!” he exclaimed, smiling — only faintly genuine, but more than another face would have painted on his own. “And Tanaki! Why wasn’t I invited to the *Round Glasses Meeting*? I’m hurt.”

Halfway through a meal as bland as ever, the woman offered him some warmth — brighter than the diamond of the engagement ring on her finger. “Might have something to do with your lack of glasses.”

“She doesn’t have them either,” Ango replied, meekly professional, tracing aimless codes with his chopsticks and the leftover sauce. A trace of ink stained his face; he prayed Odasaku had been around, just to get a photograph out of it. “This is the *Saltless Noodles Meeting*, at best.”

“I have complained to the kitchens,” the woman said, with the tone of someone who had had that discussion a bit too often. “Everybody is in a frenzy, with Executive Ace’s situation. They have no time to raise the quality.”

“Did the Executive’s blood end up in the damn soup, or what?” the man grunted.

Dazai hadn’t seen him this drained out since the *Dragon Head Conflict*; chances were, the grateful look he sent his way meant Tanaki had sat next to him in an effort to cheer him up — as she had steadily been attempting to do with every gray-faced mafioso crossing her desk.

He sank his teeth in his food with more enthusiasm than either his body or the situation demanded. “How very hypocritical of them. I know at least *ten* people in this room who would have gladly torn him apart for a promotion.”

“That’s how the syndicate has always worked,” Tanaki replied, pensive. “Last time I saw our men celebrate a new Executive with sincerity in their hearts was — Well.”

With a pointed tone doing its best not to appear so, Ango said: “They seemed pretty glad when Vice-Executive Nakahara was promoted.”

“He had to deal with five assassination attempts in two months,” Dazai perked up, excitedly. “So that’s only partially true. And *I* only sent *two* of them his way. According to my *Chuuya’s Sore Loser* Newsletter’s responses, it’s just the right amount to —” He toppled the pike of his rice mountain with his chopsticks. “Tip the scale very easily.”

“Did you just say you sent assassins to —“

“No one here is in dismay because Executive Ace got hurt,” Ango fixed up his glasses. “They fear that information might be being withheld. Someone would have attempted an insurrection for the seat already, otherwise,” His mouth tilted down. “It’s the whispers we must fear.”

Dazai widened his eyes, *wooah*-ing. “You’re so very smart, Ango. I did hear whispers that Tomura from Intel will attempt to shoot you, so that she may become my new favorite informant.” Wiggling his eyebrows towards his friend, he asked, loudly: “So, Tanaki! How are the wedding preparations going?”

Ango’s expression grew horrified. The woman lit up.

Given the urgent circumstances, and the fading afternoon behind the floor-to-ceiling windows, he only let her enthusiastically ramble about flower arrangements for twenty five minutes longer, after the first twitch of Ango’s eye.

Pointed glances were sent in their direction, each of them settled on Dazai’s coat. They searched his hands, too. He had been waiting for terrified hope for weeks — voices of *coups*, of celebration, of the former Boss’s supporters. All he had seen had been loyal, knee-sunk worry.

*How boring*, he had thought. *How predictable*.

“You’ll forgive me,” he said, eventually, kissing both of Tanaki’s tattooed knuckles, “Ango and I have to discuss some matters. I’m still waiting on my formal best man invite, by the way.”

“You and Chuuya both,” she sighed, seemingly having given up on convincing either of them the role would be given to someone else. “Let’s watch some more *Spider Eyes* when this hellish time is over, yes? The three of us.”

*Fireworks in the sky*, he thought. The delirious ecstasy in his lungs and in his brain, a wall he couldn’t scratch hard enough to stop his traitorous hands from *reaching*. Unmatching eyes, far too close and far too real, dripping down carefully tucked corners of his flesh, only —

*Kind*. Chuuya had put his bandages back on in silence. *Unneeded. Fruitless; and as such* —

“We’ll see,” he offered.

They walked their way to the underground parking lot of the building, and Dazai didn’t nod to each body that bowed at his passage — didn’t listen to the pointed whispers he had not heard in two years, because he knew better.

Ango had a dossier in his hands; he didn’t protest when Dazai linked their arms, nor did he immediately call out the too cheerful skip in his steps.

“You’re good,” he told him, though, as they slipped into one of the cars. The parking lot was empty; Dazai knew where every visible and secret camera was situated — as he had been in charge of putting them up. “But not every grunt in this syndicate is overwhelmingly stupid.”

“No,” he agreed, “Just a good half.”

“You need to calm down.”

“I am.”

A man passing by bowed. Dazai offered them a smile so wide he paled. “Calm down.”

“*And settle your heart, my firefly,*” he sang. “Is *firefly* tragic or comic?”

“Tragic,” Ango said. “Odasaku says that wrapping you up in a blanket and waiting it out works. Would you like me to find you a blanket?”

Something in the absolute vacancy of his tone — *prepared*, he thought, for efficiency, no matter the intricacies his jobs would demand — made him laugh. “I missed one day at the Bar, and you nasty guys started exchanging *handling Dazai tips?*”

“You’re not a *thing*, Dazai,” the man scoffed, “There’s no handling involved.”

That was most certainly a lie, but Dazai liked him and the shimmering wrist watch he wore — similar to Hirotsu’s one, still around his wrist. He kept quiet. “How long would it take you to organize a meeting with the *Special Division?*”

Ango’s face fell.

“I know it’s somewhat unwise,” he assured, reclining his seat until it was parallel to the ground. “As long as we don’t search for them, we’re not openly giving them excuses to intervene. But they *know* Mori was the one hit; no doubt about it. We have reasons to believe a small part of them might have allied with the governmental quarter that supports whoever helped the *Ballerinas.*”

The man was quiet for a long time. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, he said: “You think there might be factions inside the *Special Division?*”

Dazai shrugged. “Boss always acted like receiving a *Permit* was a necessity — but not receiving it *not* a death sentence. There must be some deal at work; someone at the head of



the *Division* who understands that the Port Mafia helps keep the underground in check,” He thought of a basin; bloodless water. “Whoever did it *must* have done it for their *own* benefit.”

“Is that related to the researches on the *Rats in the House of the Dead* you had us doing?” Ango questioned.

“Partly,” he replied. “I think that’s a lead — but the true syndicate the Government is supporting, the one who gave the *Ballerinas* the idea to simply get rid of Abilities all together... Connected to the *Rats*, but not the same.”

“It makes no sense,” the man observed. “What would the *Special Division* do without Abilities?”

He offered him a smile, faint. “Some ideals are more important than a job, Ango. I’m sure Odasaku would tell you the same thing.”

A glint went through his eyes; something just slightly unprofessional. “Have you been to the Hospital?” Ango asked, eventually.

“Ah, everyday,” Dazai put two fingers to his forehead, saluting. “Assiduous like a first born.”

He gave him a strange look.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Then, “You know, some sincerely believe you put that bullet in him.”

He rolled his eyes. “Have been since the first day.”

“Would you?”

“Too boring,” he replied. Then, because Ango was one of two friends, he added: “Not a point in it. It might bring his supporters’ guns on me, but —” He shrugged. “Being haunted by that old man’s ghost doesn’t sound painless at all. *Once* was one time too many.”

Ango frowned. “What does that mean?”

Dazai winked. “Fun story of a man and his dog. Check it out in the *Double Black* file, when you have time.”

A car left the parking lot, blasting Opera music from the stereos. He considered giving Kajii a scare, just to make sure that project he had him working on would actually come to a conclusion — reconsidered it, recalling the glance he had sent his way the last time he had requested a painless bomb.

*If our most essential Executive truly has to snap his own neck*, he had heard him mumble, half drunk, the last time he had been asked to go drag Chuuya away from a bar — and wasn’t

it fun, he had thought, that a man so enamoured with death would never meet his eyes? — *could he not at least make sure the blood doesn't stain our shoes?*

“Boss,” Ango asked, very quiet, staring right over the steering wheel. “Will he recover?”

Dazai paused. “Hey,” he said, just to call his attention. The man was hardly one to take badly to corrections; but he was one of two friends he had had his whole life — so he waited, patient and tidy, gently willing him to correct his own mistake.

“We will send an invitation,” Ango said, then, some eternity later. Clever man he was; came to conclusions all on his own. “I’m assuming you want it to be all out in the open? No Mori Corp?”

Dazai yawned. “We will refrain from belittling the little intellect they have, yes.”

“And if they say they want to speak to the Boss?”

A spider dangled from a thread on the window, unconcernedly light. Dazai recalled Kazuko’s dirt-stained scales, as she intertwined up his leg and laid her chin on his knee.

Affection was too human of a sentiment; perhaps it was why the lack of it kept them both warm; soiling the ground with the scratches her fangs had given him and the times he had opened the door again after casting her out. He could never leave her out when it rained.

*[“To care is not to weaken,” Mori reminded him. His shoe was covered in blood. The leather of it was Italian, he thought, or maybe Indian. Pressed against Kazuko’s throat, it was just dark. “But to care is to be weakened,” Then, “I did tell you two to stay away from doctors.”*

*Odasaku isn’t a doctor, he could have said, and Chuuya was dying. Instead, mildly curious, he asked: “Are you disappointed?”*

*“No,” A wet squelch; lifeless eyes and thirteen panels and grasshoppers under Elise’s shoes. Mori did always think the two of them similar. “Never.”]*

“Tell them he’s busy,” Dazai concluded, straightening the seat again. “But they can have a chat with a Demon, if it fits them.”

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The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept.

He waited.

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Two halves of a bonsai laid side by side, rained on by the sunlight burning the window.

“Look at that poor thing,” Dazai mused, woodenly, as his fingers patted the lifeless leaves. Back to the door, Akutagawa didn’t say a word. “And right as the warm season started, too. It would have certainly enjoyed it more than any of us,” The little branch was thrown aside, rootless — unnecessary, as such. “Such a clean cut, too. Sort of reminds me of *Rashomon*.”

“It wasn’t me —“

“Quiet.”

The hard press of his teeth could have shattered even the concrete. Dazai ran his hands across the window seal, shoulders straight the way Mori liked them. He hummed again.

“Unfastened,” He snapped the seals of the window on. “A bit surprising, for someone who grew up in the streets. One would assume you would take better care of the things you own.”

Akutagawa didn’t breathe.

“So,” Dazai’s inspection had woken him up; the bundle of clothing underneath his ever-present coat was too large on his starved-raised bones. His mind rarely lingered on him — when it did, Dazai couldn’t quite decide if he looked young or grey for his age. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, sir,” he breathed out, all in one go, like holding it behind his teeth had been cutting his tongue. “I’ve been keeping my eyes on it every waking moment — I entered the room and it was — I’ve been looking for the culprit. No one but me and my sister knows of this room —“

“Your sister,” Dazai echoed.

Whatever he heard in his tone trailed the rest of his explanations off, disappearing with the echoes from the traffic outside. The sheer quantity of melted snow had left the streets wet.

*Both summer and winter are dead*, he had commented, pupils blown and a grin, as his men carried the two corpses off the stairs. Shimamura had been an unremarkable man; Dazai had

never even gotten to hear him talk. *The gods are grieving, for sure.*

“Her surgery went well.”

Dazai stared at the bug-littered glass of the chandelier, nape tilted back.

“No side effects,” Akutagawa added, with that ancient desperation of his, crawling on his knees like that Ability of his couldn’t shatter space. “Not even a scar. She’s as good as new.”

Imperceptibly — *knowing* it was so, because when had it ever not been — he stilled. “Is that so?”

Akutagawa stared at the floor, breathing shallowly. “Boss said I was to show my gratitude to you for that,” was his confirmation. “He said you personally asked him to take part in her surgery, to ensure its success. It was — *kind* of you. No matter my failures. I deeply appreciate it,” Dazai felt a giggle bubble up in his throat. “We owe you much.”

His teeth breached in his lower lip; then his cheek, then his tongue. The urge to laugh shook his spine all the way to the smallest bones of his hands; he thought of a red scarf and hospital beds, the glint in a man’s eyes whenever he was about to take a wrong turn on the chessboard.

*I’m still winning*, he would note, each time. With a blink, Mori had turned Akutagawa into an ever even more grateful — *devoted* — fool than before.

*Certainly. Maybe I simply enjoy watching you trip, once in a while*, Mori would wink.

“For someone so attentive over the last relative he has left,” Dazai said, eventually, “You surely take some time to recognize her handiwork.”

Confusion kept his head down for endless instants; understanding snapped it up, a fire in his gaze that he had been hopelessly waiting to see at its most vicious for *months*. “Gin would *never* —“

“Gin wants you out of my grasp,” Dazai interrupted, too easy and too complicated and too fruitless but not *quite* — not enough to waste it. “I won’t pretend not to understand. Nonetheless, it *is* a dangerous obsession for her to have.”

“Sir —“

“You know, this isn’t a school,” He widened his eyes, blinking owlshly. He stood from the desk; pretended not to see the half step back Akutagawa *almost* took. “Everyday she learns how to survive with the best assassin in the syndicate — a man *so* very priceless, she is amongst the few to meet him. Everyday, he teaches her *exactly* how to escape —“

“She’s not going to,” the boy swore. “We talked. The Executive talked to her —“

“Akutagawa.”

It was impossible to discern which made the lines of his face tense up further — the notion of his name leaving Dazai's mouth, or the hand he put on his shoulder.

"Listen to me," he ordered, unnecessarily, attuned to every movement of his mouth as the boy looked, "You do not leave the Port Mafia, if not in a casket."

"And if you *do*," he continued, easily, because some things had to be clear — victory was only so if everyone knew what to do. *Victory is only so if you win*, Odasaku might have replied. "With the way things work around here, *I'm* the one who buys the belated casket and puts you in it."

His chin moved, as if to nod. He didn't.

Dazai did, though; he motioned towards the shattered plant. "Don't you trust me?" His lips parted; he insisted: "That's your sister's work. She hopes I will end up disapproving of you — enough to throw you aside. What she doesn't understand — is that there is no *throwing aside*. Not here. You should understand it as well, and *maybe* begin to put some effort in the orders I give you, because — all gods' *forbid*, Akutagawa," He tightened his grip on his shoulder, "I do *not* bring useless assets in."

The boy's body seemed to shake. Rage peeked where ancient fear always slept — *Rashomon* slept, pliant under his touch. Pointless blood, as it went — but blood was blood, and hunger was hunger, and children needed to feast.

"I'm not useless," Akutagawa whispered, through his teeth.

He curled an eyebrow. "And what have you and your Ability done until now?"

"You *promised* you would teach me —"

"I *have* been teaching you," Dazai scoffed. He let go of him; the ricochet sent him against the door, the *thud* of it soft. "Don't be so naive. You think I spend all this time with you because I somehow enjoy your insufferably whiny presence? You think I brought you along to a *Double Black mission* to have you stand around and grieve your sister —"

"I *heard* you talk with Boss," he accused, high on some suicidal sort of adrenaline, "You said you needed more Ability Users — weren't sure if Chuuya would manage to —"

"Swallow whatever rubbish you're about to spit out before I make you regret it," he warned, unimpressed, stepping close enough to tear a gasp out of his throat. "Spill a *quarter* of the pathetic amount of blood Chuuya has spilled in the name of this organization, and then I might allow you to *think* about his name in relation to the likes of *you*. Address your superiors with their titles or I'll *make you*."

Harsh breathing climbed up and down his chest. He didn't speak.

Dazai let go. Cleaned his hands on his coat. "Do you even know why Gin was hit?"

"It was —" Akutagawa licked his lips, shoulders stuck to the door, "She said you ordered her to attack the woman — get herself hurt, so we could bring proof to the police —"

“Orders,” he confirmed. “*Orders*, yes, but she’s a clever one. She understands bargaining better than you will ever do. I told her to risk her life. She told me she would be allowed to join the Black Lizards — and *you* to train with me — with no need for siblingly duels.”

He stared.

In a dull voice, he asked: “What?”

“See, that’s the thing,” Dazai walked aimlessly in that hole of a room, wondering how people could sleep on a warm bed and then stand in front of a gun with no fear. “You think you’re protecting her, but so far — she’s done a lot more than *you* have to protect the both of you. A clever girl. We just need to get her by the throat of that faulty loyalty of hers, and then she’ll be powerful.”

“Hirotzu is a good starting point. She will learn,” He tilted his head. “As I see it, *you* are her only obstacle. Considering she has proved herself a much better investment than you, for all but your Ability — we *do* live in a classist world, after all — it’s not long before I get asked *why* I should hold her back.”

“I do wonder,” he added, “If the same reasoning would work backwards for you.”

Akutagawa’s jaw settled.

He waited; he waited some more. Rebuttal or attack or a tantrum; he couldn’t pinpoint how he would react to any of them, so he waited to find out — he thought of a hospital room and files on his desk and Odasaku’s kids, drawing him a city in flames and a man who didn’t want to kill saving it.

*Unrealistic*, the man had shrugged. *I might want to be a good man, but the world wouldn’t last if they all were.*

He waited; nothing came.

Dazai nodded. Circled over him until he moved away from the door.

His fists were clenched so hard his knuckles took the place of the melted snow, rattling his shoulders just *so*, quivering in anticipation and the nearby ire of the last passing train. He didn’t move.

Behind the door was Hirotzu, cigarette in hand and a politely curious expression.

Dazai waved, and said: “Formal training will begin as soon as this bother of a situation is over. Good news for you too, Commander! You get a new recruit. Congratulations —“

“Make us duel anyway.”

Hirotzu cigarette got stuck inches from his mouth.

One foot out of the room, nose brushing the chilling air of the hallway — Dazai moved a piece forward, met Mori’s eyes and said, *I’ll let you know when I trip, then.*

“What?” he asked, feigning confusion. He could feel the man’s eyes on him; the accusation in them, neither kind nor mean — simply there.

“Make us duel anyway,” Akutagawa’s expression was borderline *fervent*. “I can — I can prove myself to you.”

*Can you*, he didn’t ask. Odasaku would have thought it mean; Ango would have sneered at the waste if it.

“As you said — I have an Ability. I can beat her. I know I can. Your orders aren’t pointless — If you demanded a duel, there must be something you can take away from it. Something to evaluate,” He gulped, frantically, knees bent as if to drop to the floor, body hardwired for a fight he wouldn’t get. “We can’t take that right away from you.”

Dazai crossed his arms. “After all she did, just to ensure you wouldn’t have to fight?”

“I appreciate her efforts,” he snapped. His eyes darted over his shoulder; whatever he saw in Hirotsu’s quietly observing own, only made him angrier. “She was not required to waste them, though. She should have asked me.”

“She won’t accept.”

“I’ll convince her. I can. And,” He raised his chin. “If it’s a direct order, she can’t refuse to obey. Not here.”

“Not here,” Dazai echoed. Then, because Odasaku would have thought it was nice, and Chuuya would have shattered his nose into pieces for it, “Don’t you think she might end up harboring some animosity, after she went through all that trouble for you? *Risked* her life?”

A flare of hesitation passed through his eyes. It was gone with the passing clouds, and a distant glance to the fallen branch of that bonsai of his.

“There’s no place for familiar affection in the Mafia,” Akutagawa concluded, each syllable stolen. “The Mafia *is* our family. That’s where our loyalties should lay, before than to each other. To you,” He met his gaze, nearly fumbling, *intense*, “I would have no life or purpose without you. It’s time we — set our personal feelings aside, and act for the best of the syndicate. *Earn* this existence.”

Dazai watched.

Gulped down a bitter taste — wondered, a bit distantly, if spitting at his feet would be too mean on that nice lady that came to clean those rooms everyday.

“Very well,” he said, at last. “We’ll prepare a duel.”

Akutagawa stood his ground. He thought he ought to praise him for it, and to kill him for a thousand reasons more, and decided doing neither would be enough for that day.

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The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept. He waited.

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He was in the hospital room, cheek sunk in a space of the mattress Mori's hand had not stolen, when Chuuya's entered through the window.

It was with startling, unavoidable certainty — not unfamiliar, not ever; but maybe dormant, as a leftover of drugged hysteria and the way his eyes had looked underneath fireworks — that Dazai realized he didn't want to see him.

“Do you remember *anything* from the shit we pulled after we decided to get arrested a second time?” Chuuya asked, as he perched on the railing at the foot of the bed, like a bird of ill omen.

He didn't have to turn to feel the poignancy of the gaze he laid on Mori. Mercifully, Dazai didn't point out, *promise forty seven*.

It had hardly been discussed, after all — apart from the glances Chuuya refused to send to his bandaged limbs and the hum Dazai did not let out whenever a *Vice-Executive Nakahara* escaped some lips. Avoidance would imply relevance. They sat next to each other at Boss-less Executive meetings and walked out of different doors. They watched *Spider Eyes* at different turns. Dazai wore one layer more of bandages for a single day — then he took it off, as if the boy would somehow know.

He wondered if Chuuya had dared to look at the pictures, or if he knew *Corruption* marks peeked through the blurred ink — his eyes a tad too bright.



“Some guy at the *konbini* near the HQ fell to his knees the moment he saw me,” Chuuya continued, undeterred. His voice was as grating as a creaking door; not one to demand silence for the resting, Dazai wondered if he could demand it for the dying. “Gave me free cigarettes, if I just promised not to debate the benefits of parking machines with, *that bandaged buddy of yours* in front of him ever again.”

Nothing truly came to mind — the sticky screech of cart wheels, maybe, and sticking his head in the fridges of the frozen food aisle.

“We’ll need to add it to the list,” Dazai commented, some eternity later. Mori’s breath fogged up his oxygen mask. “The lawyers keep saying the Court date is getting closer.”

*[“Car theft,” they had recited, under Hirotzu’s watchful gaze and Kouyou’s barely contained hysteria, “Destruction of property, breaking and entering, armed robbery, assault, public indecency and disturbance, assault on numerous police officers — If we want to go deeper and into simpler terms, though, it becomes somewhat more — unusual.”]*

*“You joined an illegal fighting ring,” the other lawyer had picked up. “Which explains your bruises, Executive Dazai. Graffitied the City Hall, shattered four windows of the Armed Detective Agency building — one of the Detective claims you landed on his desk during his night shifts, and broke his glasses — rode a motorcycle over the walls of the Kanagawa Arts Theatre — “*

*“Smashed some more street lamps — not the ones from before — stole a koala from the Zoo and then returned it wearing some jewels from a jewelry of our property — luckily — rode a shopping cart on the highway — stole a karaoke machine and projected it on the wall of the local prison, offering the neighborhood an almost hour long show — spray painted an enormous graffiti of — I think it’s supposed to be Hirose Fumiko?”*

*“You ought to return the streetlight you stole, by the way.”*

*They exchanged a glance.*

*“Tell me you know where you hid it,” Kouyou begged.*

*Dazai shook his head. “I did get this picture from the guy who swore we tried to steal the Arcade sign, though.”*

*Like all the photographs from the woman’s camera, it was somewhat blurred at the edges — the road it portrayed barely brightened by street lamps. At the center of it were — presumably — Dazai and Chuuya themselves, wearing street cones as either hats or weapons, throwing themselves at each other in a blur.]*

The heart monitor beeped.

He wondered if Mori could hear. At the very least — he knew — Mori had never left him alone in a room full of blades. Courtesy was to be repaid; wills to be left empty.

While he was in surgery, Dazai had sat by the vending machine, playing shadow games in the blue light, and he had pointlessly waited for Elise to whine about it. Eventually, they had dragged him away. *Next of kin*, the nurses had sworn. *Only name in his registers. You're not an adult yet, though, are you?*

“The closed eyes freak me the fuck out,” Chuuya said, stupidly, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen the man *blink*.”

Not even peeking at the silhouette — quite literally *parked* on the wall next to their window, defying all laws of gravity — he asked: “Did you park your bike outside so that he would break the coma to roll his eyes?”

*I had his life in my hands at fourteen*, Dazai hadn’t told the nurses, because they wouldn’t have cared about the dried blood on a bedroom wall. *It’s mine. You can’t have it.*

“Will you ever quit asking questions in response to other questions?” he noted.

“I’m all but inconsistent, Chuuya.”

“I wouldn’t let you.”

“You couldn’t stop me.”

Chuuya scoffed.

He stepped to the other side of the bed. Gloved fingers tapped Mori’s knuckles; he felt ugly, *whimsical* jealousy up every inch of his bones — and then he felt that they were nothing more than two boys breaking visiting hours, and then he felt nothing at all.

The stone-like quality of his unmatching eyes was as pained as it was severe. *Loyalty*, he thought, because *always* — and something else.

“Be careful,” Dazai advised. “Your outrageous lack of a father figure is showing.”

His recoil was physical; revolted. “Says the one who is two merry fucking hops from sleeping in his bed.”

“I’m merely waiting to give him an earful,” He pushed himself off the scratchy sheets, crossing his legs on the guest seat. “The fool spends all these years promising to find me a peaceful way to die, only to walk steps from death himself? Irresponsible.”

“You make me vomit.”

“What are the highest success rates in the shortest times from your *Guerrilla*?”

Chuuya’s eyebrows fluttered. He fixed up a petal from Madame Tanaki’s flower vase on the night table. “You know them already.”

He did. “Humor me.”

He rattled them off, efficient to the bone; they didn't change from the never ending lines of ink Dazai had forced his eye to memorize.

He listened. Tapped two fingers on his knee. Traced the crooked line of Mori's nose, broken once before. *Some of the soldiers on board thought they could bully me into giving them more drugs than necessary*, he had explained, flippantly. Then he'd chuckled. *Remind you of something?*

*I haven't touched you*, Dazai hadn't reminded him, just as flippant. He rose from the seat, and stuck his arms in the sleeves of his coat.

"Tell the nurses to put salt in his IV," he chirped, with his most obnoxious pat to the man's forehead. "You know how he hates bland food. One would think the Army would have made him less picky," He sighed. "Try not to get lost in the faucet. I have a meeting with the *Special Division*."

Impossible as it was, Chuuya stiffened a bit further. "Just you?"

"Why? My dog wants to come along?" He blinked. "It's no walk to the park, Slug. Literally."

"Cut it off. You can't meet the assholes one on one."

"I have my men."

"Your *men*," he pointed out, "Aren't *me*."

"No," Dazai agreed. "They all reach the national average height."

The boy stepped over the bed — walked right up to his face. How very expected of him, not to bother the sick; how very expected of him to want a front line while every soul in the syndicate dug bunkers in the tension-shaken air.

"Mori wouldn't bring Kouyou," he made him notice.

"I'm not your second," Chuuya reminded him. *Leave*, he thought, as if it would be rational — as if Mori would not shake his head, gently chide, *if you had to silence all who saw you bare you may need to kill God first*. "I'm your partner."

"And dangling *you*, their lost prize, right in their face might just make the meeting more tense than it needs to be. That is, if the smell of dog doesn't throw them off first —"

Hands wrapped around the sides of his coat. The floor of the Hospital room was too clean — the soles of his shoes screeched against it, as he was pulled forward.

"I'm not a prize," Chuuya snarled, and *there* it was — the spark of ire he had seen pass him by all those weeks, too busy and too concerned to linger. Dazai didn't think there was any real reason to — was sure he did a better job at hiding the discomfort of his own bones at the sight of him.

Despite his skin's nauseous protests, he raised two fingers, and tapped them on his temple. "Whatever telltale they left in your skin when they put liquified destruction inside it is, though."

It only took three beeps from the heart monitor for him to hiss, "*Fuck you.*" His grip tightened; close enough for the sunlight streaming from the window to paint his eyes almost the same color, he spat: "Want to talk about what happened when Mori was hit —"

"Be very careful, Chuuya," He blinked, very fast and very innocent, because he wasn't surprised and yet his face had *almost* twitched. "Haven't you heard? Flies *everywhere.*"

"You couldn't care less if he dies," he snapped. The quiet quality of his voice was at odds with the rigid lines of his frame. "He almost bled out on that damn floor — and *you* froze. *You.* Want me to believe it's out of some sort of loyalty? You don't have shit like that. I know you don't."

"You know," Dazai echoed, amused.

"Personal entertainment is the only reason why you keep stepping away from the edge at the last minute. Nothing else."

"I don't know," he mused, tilting his head to the side. "Isn't it somewhat jarring — watching someone like him die? Makes you stop and believe there truly isn't any way out."

Confusion only existed for a moment — he barked a humorless laugh. "What, you thought if he was gone no one would do you the favor of killing you?"

"Irrelevant," Dazai smiled. "It doesn't matter, Chuuya, does it? We have *you* — to effortlessly jump in front of him and take a bullet to your chest with zest and enthusiasm," The corner of his mouth pulled; the stretch burned. "No *matter* that *no one* would attempt to murder the Boss of the Port Mafia without an Ability-enchanted bullet. No *matter* if it would make us lose the greatest asset of the organization —"

"Boss *is* the organization —"

"No, no, *we,*" Dazai put his hands on his shoulders and *shook*, rattled that empty skull of his, lips trembling with amusement, "*We*, every man under his thumb — *We're* the organization. And Mori is comatose in a Hospital bed. The bullets were governmental weapons. From the *War!* I know you realized it too — that a part of them is behind the *Ballerinas.*"

Chuuya's set his jaw. His eyes fluttered in the man's direction.

"You wouldn't have done a thing if you had been hit that bullet," he insisted, mocking. "Except *die.* Instead — you stayed alive and you killed Komako and Shimamura. Kajii has been studying the weapon archives from the *Great War*; Sergeant Maresuke's Ability-made bullets — they *always* find their target," He sighed, so very fake. "How come I'm the suicidal one between us?"

“I was *trying*, ” he spelled out, pulling him close enough he could see drool and hatred seethe between his teeth, “To save my superior.”

“Why?” Dazai dared. “Because he gave you a new life? People to love? To *lose*?”

The monitor beeped.

The grip grew nearly unbearable; circling his throat until he couldn’t breathe, suffocating between fabric almost as familiar as his bandages, and Dazai thought, *you don’t know a thing and you’ll never know a thing and I will never let you and you will never know*, and how to explain, truly, that doctors were for the sick and the sick were for the doctors, the two of them in a clinic and in an attic and in a tombstone —

Chuuya said: “Lie to my face when it isn’t the first time you wear that damn coat.”

His smile fell.

*You don’t know a thing*, he thought, as devoid as a page. “You —“

With a painful screech, the door opened.

“Oh,” one of the nurses said. Blond hair and a distracted smile; Dazai had memorized each of them, because they fumbled with Mori’s overly whiny bones, and he didn’t want to deal with the aftermath of his age pains when he woke up. “Oh, I — Doctor Komoto is coming up for his daily checks.”

Dazai bowed slightly, stepping back from his grasp. Chuuya let him; didn’t do anything but watch as he grinned, utmost polite. “We’ll leave, then. We wouldn’t want to breathe on her neck. Just let us tidy up.”

“Sure thing,” then, she reprimanded: “As long as you don’t steal the poor man’s flowers to offer them to the nurses again.”

Brilliantly, he bowed again. “If you wanted one more than your friends, all you had to do was ask.”

She closed the door again, maybe; he didn’t check — didn’t listen to any sound by the rush of thoughts in his ears, louder than any door, as stable as the ripples through the water.

He leaned over to pick up the dossiers he had brought over from the Boss’ office, biting down a glare of irritation when the other boy didn’t move — allowing him to brush his lips on his ear.

“I want every single friend of the *Ballerinas* in the City Hall to bear the crux of a slit throat,” Dazai whispered, easily. “Every single one. I don’t care what hole you have to infiltrate to get them, or how long it will take. Your *Guerrilla* is the most valuable armed team of the syndicate, right? Mori said so,” He moved away, just enough to meet his gaze. “Prove it, or I’ll ask *you* to pull the old man’s plug out.”

A feral kind of warning lined the sharp line of his mouth. “Get down from your fucking high horse. You don’t have the authority to do that.”

“I’m the only one who does, currently, actually,” he let him know. He felt himself smile; knew it was one of those ugly, not quite human sights, because Chuuya didn’t falter a bit — just raised his chin until their noses almost brushed, uncaring of the inches that had grown between them, or of the fabric weight on his shoulders, or Mori, sleeping and listening and *dying*.

“What?” Dazai purred, with the eyes that would get him a bloodied nose. “You know me, *better than you care for*,” he quoted. “And you’re not willing to kneel at my feet?”

*You already did*, his lips traced, still as his spine, *you already did, I saw it, I saw it first so it’s mine*. Something about rage had to be human, he could swear — no other reason for it to feel like a stranger on well-loved flesh.

“I’d rather tear my heart out myself,” Chuuya replied, untouched. “And you would too. So stop lying to me.”

“Why,” he insisted, “Because you know me?”

“Yes,” No hesitation faltered his breath of an answer; if only Dazai had dangled forward, he could have bitten him until he bled. “You can fool them all you want. You’re not fooling me,” he said. Snow to his calves as they danced; his laughter against the explosion of a car; his hands — scarred by a *thing* who hated it all but Dazai the most — on the shattered skin he did not care for and did not want him to see and *who else if not him and anyone but*. “Let me know when you get tired of pretending you’re even whole enough to want any of this.”

Imperceptibly, Mori’s fingers seemed to twitch.

His own followed.

“You get a month to kill them all,” Dazai ordered, when he heard him reach the window. “I’m sure you’ll do a good job. You hardly have any other way of giving Boss a reason to let you stay.”

His sigh could have been a chuckle; his chuckle could have been disgust spat on the ground. The latest firefly to get caught in the net — the latest bruised knees on the ground at a doctor’s feet, walking all over the ash of the fools to come before him.

“Sure thing,” Chuuya mocked back, frame bathed in liquified scarlet. “Partner.”

The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept. He waited.

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The moment the four-people embassy got a good look at him — under the flickering lights of a parking lot — all of their guards' rifles were raised.

“Well,” Dazai commented. The suited silhouettes of the *Unit* were a glint at the edge of his vision, shouldered by the less usual one of a *Black Lizards*' wing; their own weapons carefully hidden. “That's not very polite.”

“Sending the Demon Prodigy to an alleged peaceful meeting isn't, either,” Agent Minami replied, eyes set in an unforgivable line. Ango had provided general info on the Agents flaunting her sides; just enough to know she was the only one worthy of attention. “I thought the Port Mafia wanted to plead innocence.”

He smiled, just a bit — enough for their fingers to settle more firmly on the trigger, and for Hirotsu to grow more cautious at his back. “Don't I elicit trust?”

“You've made yourself a name.”

“And I'm sure you have it in your archives,” he agreed, hands crossed at the small of his back. The faint sway of his bored frame gathered some *gazes* from the other side. “Some numbers, some letters. Question marks in my alleged Ability section? You're stubborn, not to leave it empty.”

“Most of you people may lack proper registration,” Minami said, standing in that way of good men — a confidence of sorts, well-earned, only *mean*. “But that cannot change open secrets.”

“I've never met someone with an Ability. Are they as cool as you guys?”

“That redhead of yours might tell you.”

“You mean your daughter’s saviour?” Her face was devoid in a second; Dazai felt his grin sharpen. “Wonder what she would think of the torture your perfectly lawful group put him through, just some months ago.”

“*Torture*,” the woman scoffed, carefully contained. “We aren’t criminals. We’re not *you*.”

“No,” he agreed — and because confessions would be damning on the thousands of bugs he could bet they were wearing, he added: “Criminals usually don’t have that easy of an access to Ability bullets of Governmental origin.”

Minami paused.

“*I stand in the settling sun*,” Dazai recited, as he took a step forward. The Division’s weapons rose with him; Hirotsu’s eyes flickered to him, as if willing to pull him back. “Sergeant Maresuke Ability. The *Gentlemen Bank* is in possession of all of his enchanted projectiles — that was the peace deal that was made with the Japanese Government.”

“And how would you know?” she asked.

“I had a chance to take a look at the *Bank*’s archives,” He shrugged. “All begs the question: how did one of those bullets, *willingly* given up by the now-Senator — end up in my Boss’ chest?”

In a collective breath, air left every man’s lungs. If Hirotsu could have pulled his ear again — he guessed he would have. Behind his outstretched arm the *Black Lizards*’ nostrils flared; even Dazai’s men seemed not to know how to act in the face of that information.

*No one is to know he has fallen*, Kouyou had said, when the man’s body was still warm and soaked in blood — and Dazai’s shoes were dirty, but his ears never quite unlistening. *Especially not outside of these walls*.

To a kinder eye, Minami’s gelid stillness might have been plain surprise.

“The seat is vacant?” she questioned.

“Ah, no,” He offered his most apologetic look. “As you know, Ability-inflicted wounds tend to be conundrums. It means that until we find whoever shot that stolen bullet — the Sergeant and his people, we assume — he lives in his limbo,” Her gaze filled with understanding. “Which is precisely why we’re here.”

“And why would we help you?” the woman noted. “Cut off the head, and the body might not find a way to stand up again. It’s an opportunity.”

Dazai chuckled. “How inhuman of you.”

“My Commander believes in the safety of thousands at the price of few,” Minami corrected. She had never looked much like a fighter; more like someone who belonged behind a desk, maybe — who let others dip their hands in blood and wrote it down in endlessly lifeless numbers. “After many years ensuring the safety of Yokohama, I tend to agree.”



He hummed. “And what would happen to your Commander, were the Government were to find out he has been funding a *whole faction* of his *Division* into collaborating with the *Ballerinas*, and the foreign terrorists behind them?”

A flare of shocked hesitation rattled their weapons in their hands — even Minami’s facade seemed to tremble, soaked in genuine confusion. Her colleagues snapped: “The *Special Division* has protected Abilities since its first day —“

“How dare you accuse Commander Taneda —“

“I’m not saying your Commander wasn’t fooled as well,” Dazai hurried to correct, waving his hands around, “No, no, no — You see, whoever was aiding the *Ballerinas* is very, very smart. Much smarter than even your saint Taneda! Yokohama is clearly a center of some importance for them; Abilities are something they don’t particularly like. So, what do they do? Plant a seed in the place with the most control over Abilities in Yokohama.”

“You’re weaving a trap for yourself,” Minami said — interest unignorable in her tone. “If, as you said, we were to find a mole faction in the *Special Division*, the Government wouldn’t blame the Commander. They would just ask him to eradicate them.”

“Yes,” He sucked air between his teeth; elbowed the still-stiffened side of Hirotsu’s frame, pretending to whisper: “Except the Government doesn’t really *like* you guys, does it?”

Her eyes squinted. “You —“

“Oh, it *needs* you, of course it does. You’re more than necessary. Unregulated Abilities would drown the city into its deepest despair since they were first aided for the *War*,” He put his hands on his hips. “But does that mean they would really be so unwilling to start over, should it come out *what* your egregious Commander was blind enough to let fester? I mean,” Dazai blinked. “With the gelid weeks, do you know how many of those Senators had to give up on their summer crusades?”

“Many of them,” Hirotsu answered, once Dazai *psst-ed*. Blank-faced, he added: “The *Division* is inevitably connected to the Government. Were it to come out either one of you was the cause for this attack — the other would go down as well.”

“And a new wave of anti-Ability propaganda would probably begin,” he sighed. “Which might just demand the dismantlement of you guys’ towers.”

Minami set her jaw. “This isn’t simply a matter of this or that organization. Should Abilities be restricted more severely *again*, all Users would *all* take the fall —“

Dazai shrugged. “That’s fine, then. It’s not like Mori Corp employs people with Abilities, don’t you know? It’s illegal, or something,” He tilted his head to the side. “Ah, it’s about Abilities and weapons, I believe. They’re not meant to go together; that’s what the *high floors* say.”

“Nothing would change for you,” the woman hissed, slowly, as pieces settled into place in front of her eyes. “You were in the shadows before — you will be once again.”

“Personally, I much prefer sunny days.”

“What is it that you want?”

“That’s very easy,” He swayed forward, uncaring of the ocean between them. “We want a free pass to take care of that traitorous faction of yours.”

Distantly, came the rumble of a car’s engine. It did not shatter the silence that had fallen — for the first time since they had entered the parking lot, Dazai saw nothing but honesty on Agent Minami’s face.

Deadly calm, she asked: “You want us to look away as you murder our men?”

“You could call it an execution.”

“We have better methods,” she snapped, brusque. “We have more than enough proof that the *Ballerinas* and their aider have received help from the Government itself — we could bargain. You think we will allow you to go on a murder spree on this city’s pillars?”

“It was about time this city got rid of some lingering germs, wasn’t it?” Dazai commented. “We all want the same thing: for Yokohama to stand. As long as its roots are steadily being poisoned, that will not happen,” He clicked his tongue. “I can’t say I particularly care about this matter, but my Boss seemed concerned. And so do you. Not that you will be able to protect anything, once you get dismantled.”

Minami’s eyes searched through him.

Her chests did not rise and fall; her gaze roamed up and down the black silhouettes in front of her, unharmed — and Dazai had long learned to recognize a caged prey.

“Why,” she questioned, — cautiously quiet, breaking each syllable, studying the darkness underneath. “Ask for this, and not a *Permit*?”

“Because we don’t need one,” Dazai offered — and he saw it, as clear as an arrow breaking through bone; heard the wet squelch of viscera around the tip, as Minami looked at the world decided her own *truth* — that the Port Mafia was a careless, vainglorious hydra, and that even while regrowing heads it would get distracted, *at some point*. “Not more than we need our Boss.”

“Plus,” He smiled again. “Isn’t it better if you owe us two favors, instead of one?”

Her shoulders molded themselves into a new shape. He heard the hitch in Hirotsu’s breath — the instinctive violence, the unwillingness to see the imperceptible glint of victory. Minami wore the mask of a loser; Dazai saw her plan behind it, as her men’s grasp on their weapons grew steadier.

“Alright then,” she conceded, nodding. “You have it. As for the Sergeant — he works in close proximity with our higher ups. We won’t be able to close the Government’s eyes, too. And then no *deus ex machina* will save you.”

“No, need,” Dazai waved the matter away. From the distance, a car engine. “I’ve got my own gods to pray to for a cleanse.”

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The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept. He waited.

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Odasaku’s car was waiting.

“Ango will get super *super* mad if you keep hot wiring his baby,” Dazai let him know, fidgeting on the passenger seat. “He says *it upsets her stomach*, whatever that means.”

“Engine metaphors,” the man replied, keeping a calm pace as they roamed down the Port. Heat and darkness were an unhealthy mixture through the lowered window, threatening to split his chapped lips and bite off the hand he was dangling out. “And that’s why I slipped his keys off at the Bar, last night.”

“Ah,” He nodded. “That will certainly make him more amendable.”

“Is *amendable* —“

“Comic,” he answered, immediately.

“Would the poets agree?”

“I haven’t got the faintest,” he admitted. “We can ask, the next time Pops is feeling up for it.”

He rolled his window up and down; set his feet on the dashboard and lowered them again. He'd worn three pairs of socks today, and the gathering sweat on the soles made his eyes twitch intermittently. Odasaku graciously allowed him to take his watch to compare it with Hirotsu's own, and move its time back and forward.

"Why did you ask me to come with you, anyway?"

Dazai gave him a funny look. "Who else?"

"I'm not going to help you kill anyone," Odasaku reminded him. "Anyone but me would have sufficed."

"No one as talented as you," he corrected. "Remember what I told you? Would you rather eat from a cook who put too many spices in their curry by *mistake*, or one who put them in because they know just the right amount to kill a man?"

"Why is a man dying, in this metaphor?"

"The cook works for the Government. Or it's me."

"Oh," He paused. "Your *Unit* could have helped more, still. I don't think there's anything remarkable about eating curry."

Dazai toasted an invisible glass in his direction. "Everyone is remarkable in their own way."

"Are you?"

"Most certainly," He nodded. "And when the author of *The Complete Guide To Suicide* features me in his sequel, you will know it as well."

"That doesn't seem like the kind of book that would warrant a sequel," Odasaku noted.

"*You* write it for me, then!"

"I'm afraid I've got other stories in mind."

"Ones where I don't die?" he whined.

A glance. "I don't think that's the point."

He sighed. "It never is."

"And Chuuya?"

*And Chuuya, what?*, Dazai could have said. He didn't. *And Chuuya?* All they seemed to ask. The swelling of him was a curse down his throat, insisting he said his name, sometimes, to an uninterested audience or an empty room. Vocalize the itch in his lungs; exorcise the urge to. Dazzling and distracting and good and *unkeepable*, for it. *And Chuuya*.

"Is *he* remarkable?" the man clarified.

Something about his tone made him grunt. He slipped down his seat, watching the city lights blur behind the dirty windshield. Ango was always too busy to tidy up after himself; Odasaku always got his car washed after he stole it.

“Remarkable,” he spelled out. “Intuitive awareness, I suppose, might tell you so. He would make the gold on the ground remarkable by commutative property of him having touched it,” He put on the stolen watch; tightened the leather around his bony wrist, next to Hirotsu’s broken one. “Mori’s greatest investment.”

Something about the look he sent his way made him smile — almost, but he didn’t. He was a good man, before he was many things — cunning men could hardly be good, but Odasaku did his best. He knew Dazai had cards and had tricks.

*Better me using him than Mori*, Dazai would rationalize, when Chuuya was involuntarily kind — shared a snack, shared Arcade tickets, shared his bed. But he couldn’t quite say why.

“Isn’t that you?” Odasaku commented.

He laughed. “I’m not an investment.”

“What are you, then?”

The flickering, weak lights of a neon sign appeared at the edge of the road — a building of bricks and rotten ivy, as there was at the every end of the Port area; a lair of overworked shadows and dead-eyed women, soaking the air in a smell of alcohol so thick it was suffocating.

Dazai set his hands on the door; winked. “A bet.”

Inside, the bar was just as unassumingly rudimental as the outside — old tables and creaking seats; empty bottles in the wall behind the counter; the low hum of undirnesible music; the unmistakable toasts of the most drunk men around, sluggish and ear-piercing.

He sighed, leaning into the doorframe. “Can’t we go do literally anything else? *Anything*. We could sneak into the movies and watch that one biopic Ango wanted to see — and then go to watch it again, and make him wonder how we’re so *good* at guessing all the plot twists.”

“You’re the one who said this was important, though,” Odasaku replied.

“Or, or — you said your Katsumi wants to learn how to skateboard, didn’t you? We could teach him!”

A curious blink. “You know how to skate?”

“Well, *no*. But how hard can it be? What if — Let’s use your Ability at one of Ace’s Casinos. We can make enough money to dig a hole in the ground.”

“That’s not how my Ability works,” the man informed him. “Couldn’t we dig it even with no money?”

“We *could*, but what’s the fun in that?”

He hummed, conceding. “What do we do with it?”

Dazai tapped his chin. “Bury me?”

Odasaku surveyed the intoxicated crowd, hands in his pockets. He had the shoulders of someone who had never quite lost a fight if he hadn’t asked for it; sometimes, Dazai wanted to pry. He never did. He was content, most days, with that layer of certainty — that before being *light*, Odasaku had looked at blood and marveled as much as Dazai did.

“How do you know the men who shot Boss are in here?”

Warmth vanished with the breeze; the door closed behind them. Dazai swallowed a smile — intertwined his fingers behind his back, attempting not to flinch at his inability to put his arms under the coat. *Blood on his shoes.*

“One of the guards of the *Division*’s embassy from today was a mole from the traitor faction,” he explained. “I let him know Mori is currently in an unstable condition. He’s the one I asked you to track, before you came to get me. You know what moles and Governmental traitors do after a job well done?”

The man tilted his head like an owl. He still had to crank his neck to meet his eyes; but he was getting closer and closer everyday.

“What all men do,” Dazai shrugged, at his questioning eyebrows. “Get drunk.”

He extracted his gun from the back of his pants, and fired three bullets to the ceiling.

The resounding *bang!* startled shoulders out of their seats, tearing screams out of unfocused throats. Only him and Odasaku stayed still, watching eyes struggle to settle on the silhouettes disturbing their fun.

“Good evening,” he greeted. “This sure is a tasteless location to bring estimated men of the *Special Division* to, Sergeant.”

Very subtly, Odasaku licked his lips — always dry after he *saw*, with *Flawless* — and he pulled him a bit to the side. Less than five seconds later, a stray glass shattered on the wall next to his face.

Senator Maresuke was a tall man, bearing the features of someone who might have been attractive, before he had started to try too hard. A mixture of the distracted eyes he could remember seeing the Colonel wear, and a dangerous lack of sobetry, made his steps through the tables a mere staggering forward.

He raised a clumsy hand; tried to point at him, specifically, accusing.

“Put that shit down, brat,” he warned, a curl of gulped letters, barely understandable. “We don’t *wan*’ troubles.”

“I’m sure,” He nodded.

“If you know *me*, you know better than to annoy me on such a great night.”

“Ah,” Dazai lowered his arm; considered, for some inexplicable reason, shooting his own foot to see if it really hurt. He was brought back on track by the subtly — or *attempting* at subtlety — rising bodies from the tables. “Because you’re *someone*, or because of your Ability?”

The man squinted. “You want to know which one could get you arrested if you don’t *put that gun down?*”

As a game, for the sake of entertainment — he imagined him on some leather seat, polished nails and a collection of medals, a whole wing of Senators and of the Division willing to follow him. Throwing bullets in the air; watching the clear windows of the Headquarters, humming.

Then blood on his shoes.

A squeak escaped Dazai’s throat.

He thought, distantly, that it had been meant to be a laugh. It was more of a gasp for air, though — a wave of hot, *burning* hilarity that made his teeth ache for the sake of sinking into *something*. Odasaku’s eyes, in his peripheral; a hospital bed and a bonsai tree and the smoke rising from Hirotsu’s cigarette —

*[“He bought me these,” he said. He thought he did. His mouth was anesthetized; the idea of speaking was blasphemous.*

*Mori’s eyes were open, eyelashes sticking to the pool of blood that had reached his neck. Dazai felt it all through the haze of confusion — at why he wouldn’t stand up, or blink, or move a bit to the left, or stop looking at Elise like that, or stop putting him back together just because doctors could never leave well enough alone — or why he was on the ground, dying, as if Yokohama could stand without him, as if he could die in a world where Dazai didn’t sink his nails in his skull and laughed as he killed him, killed him just like he had killed —*

*“He’ll get mad I got blood on them,” he swore.]*

“No,” Dazai said. “I don’t really care.”

A blur — a choked sound and a hand around a throat and knees hitting the ground. Dazai wondered if Senator Maresuke had liked the *Great War* more than Mori had — and then he smashed his shoe in his windpipe.

The after was red and clammy; loud like particularly bad video games. The smell of gunpowder reached his nostrils; the sticky texture of blood stuck to his fingers, to his chin, to his teeth — Dazai *pushed* and he *pulled* and he fired and he settled on top of a man and he grabbed his skull and smashed it against the ground, once, twice, thrice —

“Stop,” the man between his hands begged, voice a thread, drool pooling down his chin, one eye shaking against the barrel of the gun he had pressed into it, “Stop, *stop*,” Drunkenly, he swayed, “Stop, I know — Powerful friends, they — I know the Port Mafia —”

“That’s nice,” he offered, polite until the very end, and shot a hole through his eyeball, and said, as he shrieked, “I am the Port Mafia.”

Blood rained from the ceiling; he tore hair out and smashed jaws open against the counter, because there was no curb — charged his gun with a flick of the wrist, and he fired and fired and fired again, empty glass bottles imploding, windows shattering, wet squelch of flesh entering his ear and forgetting to leave.

*They’ll make a story about this, too*, he considered, in some distant world — and then they would come up with a name — they came up with names for *everything* in the shadows — and Dazai would be greeted with bows and Mori would die in a Hospital room — and Dazai would wear a red scarf and he’d never get to take it off, never get to leave, never get to understand, never get to *die*, never get to leave, and what would change even if he did, what difference was there between good and bad, never get to leave, *never get to* —

A hand closed around his gun, and Dazai fired a bullet straight through Odasaku’s palm.

There wasn’t air in his lungs; he panted, his chest raising and falling so fast it was numbing — the silence utterly devastating. The weapon landed on the ground with a sharp *clank!*

“Ah,” he started. Odasaku’s hand bled; the drops landed on the floor without a sound.

A bleeding hand grasped his nape and *slammed* his forehead to the ground, none the gentler, knotted into his hair to keep his chest against the floor — and then something warm, *warm*, pressing onto his back, holding him.

“Breathe,” the voice ordered. “You can’t get up until you breathe.”

*I am*, he attempted to let the voice know, but it was pushed back by the next bark of whistling air climbing up his throat, drool pooling on the ground, mere inches from the rest of his face, and that was *disgusting*, he said, offered his greatest temper tantrum — forehead *pulsing*, body convulsing, and Dazai was doomed, was doomed, couldn’t let them see him like this, they couldn’t know, *Mori couldn’t know* —

“That’s fine,” Odasaku said, easily. “I won’t tell him.”

Abruptly, he felt nothing.

“Oh,” Dazai blinked. “Thank you, then.”

A pause. The hand on his back slid down; enough to listen to the rise and fall between his shoulders, trustful but never too much — and how he *loved* being trusted, the way people did.

Another pause. “You’re welcome.”



A wet trail pooled down his throat. “You’re bleeding,” he said. Ignoring the corpses all around them, the horrifying sight of blood splattered all over every wall and ceiling, he echoed: “You’re bleeding.”

Odasaku was a canva waiting to be filled; nothing like the thirteen tiles he had painted and Mori had made him wash off, least the colors got to his brain. Paper and possibility; he blinked at his wounded hand with the tranquility of the sea, and Dazai *ached* with the desire to keep him.

*Sorry*, he thought about saying, but he didn’t. *Sorry, sorry, I touched it and —*

“It’s fine,” Odasaku said, still. If the pool of blood he was sitting on bothered him, he didn’t show it. “Barely grazed me.”

The back of his skull hit the ground. It was damp and too hot; there were runaway intestines on the floor, mere feet from him, and not nearly enough space to climb into one of the twenty, thirty, forty carcasses he had carved.

He said: “I’m bothering you, Odasaku, aren’t I?”

The man thought about it. Eventually, he shook his head. “You never do.”

“You’re too kind,” Dazai decided, because he did not believe him one bit. “To everyone. To all things — halved things. I just had to go and stumble on you, didn’t I?”

“Dazai.”

“I don’t even believe in fate all that much,” He licked his lips and winced at the burn, staring at the ceiling. “More than I used to. Someone I knew used to tell me it was a cat.”

Old pants on a stained floor; Odasaku’s eyes on him — a man who didn’t want to kill sitting in blood for him. “Why a cat?”

“Just a cat,” he replied. “It would like you. It never says a word when I beg it to talk. I don’t know why.”

He stayed quiet.

Blood rained from the ceiling. He didn’t watch it land on a crimson puddle on the ground, because memory was to be crowded by more precious things than the habitual.

“I want to be like you, sometimes.”

Odasaku made a funny face. “Me?”

“Feel like,” Words escaped; he tried to give them a meaning, because he owed it to him — something realer than the flare in his chest whenever he walked down the stairs of Bar Lupin; the timid, *desperate* feeling that he wouldn’t mind living the little time he had left. “Feel like I’m making up for it. I’ll die, someday. I know I will. It sounds like the most human thing this world will ever get out of me.”

“I *want*, ” he insisted, “I want to — what if this is it? I’m so rarely scared. Mori said even *he* is scared of the dark, but I never was. Dogs are scary, but — what if this is it, Odasaku — what if this is it? Isn’t that *terrifying*?” The shuffle of fabric on the ground; the man’s knees against the side of his ribcage. “I’m not scared of dying at all, how is that *fair*?” Hands on his chest — callused fingers down the blood stains of his jacket, expression emptily focused. “What are you doing?”

Odasaku’s blinks were slow — and he thought he saw it, perched on a shattered window, that old cat that always curled his tail where Dazai could see. Odasaku paused the finger he had been running down his chest; nodded towards his own.

“It’s twenty four,” he informed him.

There was blood stuck to his hair; his eye could not see through it. “Twenty four what?”

“Ribs,” A shrug. “You don’t seem halved to me.”

Dazai stared.

“Oh,” he said, a bit lost, centuries later.

Very seriously, Odasaku nodded.

Dazai’s lips quivered.

“Ah,” he echoed. Cleared his throat; felt smaller than any room and any sky, and then too wide to keep silent. “Do you want to play *Guess The Card*?”

Odasaku ripped a cloth off the nearest table, dragging a corpse’s brains down with it. He laid it on the river under their legs; threw the deck he always brought along on it. “You might want to keep a finger on my calf,” he told him, as easy as the road outside, the few pieces of furniture in his shipping container. As quiet as a beggar, Dazai *ached*. “Or I’m afraid I will definitely cheat.”

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The door of the Hospital room opened with a screech. Dazai sat on the guest seat; Mori slept. He waited.

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The moment Dazai entered the room, Elise ran like she wanted to strangle him — she stopped right before their shoes touched.

“There you are,” she whined. *Attempted* to; her voice had a strange quality to it — something like a vinyl spinning on the wrong side; echoing at the wrong parts and splitting in two tones near the end of a verse. Her eyes, settled on his face with the viciousness of a thief, had never been as vacant. “Tell those stupid nurses to bring me my dolls. I’m so bored.”

“I don’t think the nurses are supposed to know you’re here,” he replied. “And comatose men are unlikely to play with dolls.”

“I know,” she grunted. “That’s what Master said.”

A pause.

From the bed he had refused to lay his eyes on, Mori chided, strangely brusque: “Elise.”

She blinked — once, twice. Clarity broke through the marbles-like haze in her eyes — Dazai thought he could see the pieces rearranging themselves, subtly, in every muscle of her face and every straightening bone of her spine, obeying the mere idea of the doctor’s wishes.

High-pitched and bratty, she snapped: “*What* do you want, Rintarou? I’m trying to get myself my *dolls*, like you didn’t manage to!”

The first time Dazai met Mori’s open eyes in a month, he saw him nod, approving.

“Be glad I didn’t dye your hair red,” were the words out of his mouth. The sight of his back, more or less leaning on the pillows — of the fingers running down the pages of his own clinical record, unavoidably weak from a month of immobility — was disorientating. “The nurses insisted on being the ones to wash you.”

A smile stretched Mori’s face. It closed his eyes, too, and Dazai had no chance to see if it reached them. “I truly don’t know if Kouyou would appreciate the hairstyle competition.”

Last time they had talked, the Executive was as busy as a business woman — jumping from right to left to fix up things for the Boss’ return; organizing alibis for the cleanse Chuuya and his squad were methodically going through.

“Come here.”

Dazai did.

The man's eyes raked down his coat — taking notice of it being worn properly with a pointedly empty expression. Someone had raised the hospital bed; even half sat and with ruffled hair, Mori managed to imperceptibly tower upon his standing frame.

*Seventeen seems like a good time to hit a growth spurt*, he had told him, some time ago.

Mori studied his face, as if time had passed for him, too. He hummed.

“By the way,” the man said. Cuddled up near his feet was Elise, braiding strands of her own hair with a distracted, confused gaze. “I forgot to wish you a happy birthday, back in June.”

Dazai raised his shoulders in a half shrug; intertwined his hands behind his back. “Don’t tell me the coma fumbled with your memories. You never do.”

“You’ve never been a *birthday party* guy,” His sigh was almost sincere. Outside the windows, the sun was falling, and the room was golden with it. “Elise gave up on the party hats by the time you were fifteen. Is that why you don’t tell people?”

Dazai sighed back, deep. “I wouldn’t mind a gift or two. But why would I want people to make a big deal about the life I can’t leave?”

“When you reach my age — you’ll regret not having had some more fun with functioning limbs.”

“Don’t start talking like an old man,” he huffed. “You can make cartwheels in the *Hall of Light and Darkness*, if you want, as soon as you’re out. It would certainly make Elise laugh.”

The man made a face. “You truly have no idea what my joints look like right now.”

“Well, obviously,” Dazai nudged the bed. “You’ve been lazing around for almost a month now.”

“Oh, they’ll trap me into physical therapy,” Mori tapped his own cheeks, staring at the ceiling. “What will the men think of me? Having to leave meetings early because I can’t move my knees?”

“I’m sure the men will rejoy when they see you.”

A hopeful look. “Are you?”

“Sure. They all think you’ve been ignoring them. Got all whiny about it, too.”

“That won’t do.”

“No,” he agreed, “I suppose it won’t.”

He nodded, mechanically, once; then again.

“Then,” Mori intertwined his hands. “Is the *Special Division* where it’s supposed to be?”

“At the bottom of underestimation, yes,” he answered, imperceptibly late to a cunning eye — felt the instinct to take a step back, and then didn’t. “For someone who isn’t you to show up to their first unofficial meeting with the thorn in their side — they’ve made their own conclusions. And Agent Minami has witnessed us pass up the opportunity to gain a *Permit* twice, now.”

“If they believe we’re minimizing how viciously the lack of a *Permit* could hit us, they will certainly focus all of their efforts into catching us without it,” the man mused, picking at the dirt under his nails. He had a vague, slumber-traced memory of seeing Chuuya sit next to him and clean them. “Which means *we* must focus all of *our* efforts into trapping them where they won’t have a choice but to give the key out to us.”

“The *Guerrilla* squad is currently taking care of the mole faction in the City Hall,” Dazai offered. “My plans are on the table.”

“Ever so reliable, you *Double Black*.”

“It should take a little over a month to make them all disappear. And a bit more to blame it on the *Ballerinas* — though we’re not sure of the other members yet,” He scrunched his nose up. “Which means we’ll need to put new people in the empty place.”

“I’ll read some resumes,” Mori waved the matter away. “Elections are coming soon, anyway. One powerful man is worth the other, as long as he doesn’t speak too much. You can take care of teaching them where loyalty is meant to lay, yes?”

“That sounds boring.”

“That’s just how power is,” The man reached forward again, and he fixed up the collar of his jacket. “Have you been keeping my seat warm?”

“You know I prefer the floor under a desk.”

“I haven’t seen you perched under there in a while, now that I think about it.”

“Come back,” Dazai replied, “And I will.”

*Your walls are your skeleton*, Mori had said, once, and he’d believed him — because he would always be pinned butterflies in a glass cabinet, and the flickering medical lights upon the bed Dazai slept tied to.

“Maybe it’s time we start worrying about the future,” the man said, eventually, like the old-as-time foundations of his own personal decay. Dazai swore to walk out of that room and take his arms out of that coat. “Give you some clearer direction.”

“That would be inconvenient,” Dazai let him know.

“Why?”

“Plant where you can reap,” he recited. Perched on the window seal was a cat; Dazai watched it blink at him. “Invest in the durable. Don’t feed a dead man walking. How many metaphors

do you need?”

“I think they will suffice,” Mori replied, easily, in that tone that only meant being ignored where it mattered. “Say. You *planned* for Chuuya to get hurt at the lake, didn’t you?”

He picked at the bandages on his wrist — kept his eyes on the cat’s tail, swaying gently.

“Part of it was Akutagawa, I’m assuming,” the doctor continued, undeterred, still focused on his nails. “You had been expecting me to act upon him in some way, so you created a situation where you would be able to gain both his contempt and desire to push *harder*. You expected me to scar his sister, adding to the reasons why he *should* despise you,” He tilted his head to the side. “Do you expect him to hate himself less, if he focuses all of his loathing on *you*?”

“You’re overestimating the situation,” Dazai replied. “I just wish for my weapons to be sharp. Unfortunately, you only made him more sticky, with that saving stunt of yours.”

“Then why let Chuuya get hurt?”

Chuuya had sat at Mori’s death bed like a *person* would have — Mori had no space for affection that could not be soil. His lips had been blue and his *Corruption* scars covered in frost — and Dazai had known he’d get him out. Dazai could not imagine not — “To verify something.”

“Verify,” he repeated.

“I needed him to end up under your blades,” he explained. “But you never treat him personally if it’s something non-life threatening.”

“And why did you need that?”

Dazai made a sound. Something petty; something unfit, but escaping his mouth all the same.

A smile spread through the man’s face, slower than that cursed season. “Ah,” he guessed, “You wanted to see if I would let him die.”

A hum.

“And if I had?”

A shrug.

“You know better than to lie to me.”

“Careful,” Dazai nodded towards the IV — dripping in carelessness; in something Mori would not want to linger on. “You don’t have enough iron in your body to threaten silly little me.”

“Not a threat,” he replied. “A conclusion.”

“*Fascination is good as long as it is selfless*,” he recited, undeterred. “Despite your best efforts to pair us up, I have no particularly personal care for his existence. He’s the one who was stupid enough to lay it in my hands.”

His eyes searched. Dazai held them.

“That,” he added, tilting his head to the side. “Or I just know you.”

“He’s the strongest User in our ranks, Dazai,” the man reminded him, tone obnoxiously patronizing. “I’m not a fool.”

“We were powerful before him, too,” he insisted. “And I know you’re growing desperate about that *Permit*. I’ve seen the plans in your office. The letters, the favors — you aren’t willing to wait anymore.”

“You broke in, you mean.”

“Should have thought about it before making me the brain of every security item in your syndicate,” He shrugged. “If he had died by the hands of an unregistered Ability User like Komako, we could have pinned it on the *Division’s* incapacity — could have used his old testimony on what they did to him as an ulterior motive. To get a *Permit*. He won’t let us, as long as Yuan is safe with Minami.”

“Loyalty is not worthy of punishment.”

“When it’s to *you*.”

“It is,” Mori’s smile grew kind. “He threw himself in front of a bullet for me, didn’t he?”

Dazai removed his coat.

He sat on the guest seat, abandoning it on its back; pretended not to see the amusement on Mori features. *I know I lie*, he thought, *but don’t you lie too?*

“Listen to me,” the doctor said. “Some losses make you gain more than a victory would, in the long run. As long as Chuuya feels the weight of a *Permit* lost in his name, he will die for the sake of granting us another.”

“You really don’t have to teach me how to make my dog roll.”

“But,” Mori admitted, “I still don’t quite know if you’d make for a good leader.”

Dazai paused.

He recalled being younger, hand on a bloodied chest — shaking it and whining until he passed out, *insistent* and spoiled. The cat on the window had waited, patiently, because cats had too many lives not to grow attuned to the sound of a child losing it all. And then there had been the men in the white clothes, and the room with the rusted metal bed — and they kept telling him to *cry, if he wanted to*; to be more human about the blood on his too young hands.



*There's a man who needs to die*, the cat had explained, hands on his cane, as Dazai burned his white clothes. *Not yet. I will tell you when. You will see me.*

*I don't know if I want to kill him*, he had replied.

*You won't have to*, had been his promise. His fingers twitched — he thought about a letter, hidden under his desk. *Only to witness it.*

Mori clasped his hands. “Well. Why don't you go grab a chess board? No better place to start a lesson.”

*Dear Dazai Osamu,*

*I beg you to forgive my Japanese, however lacking. I have been learning the language since I was very young, under the proper encouragement of a shared acquaintance of ours. Of course, my little knowledge of her is nothing compared to your own — but I did bear some semblance of curiosity regarding her, along to a never ending interest in the boy she always talked about. In a way, I truly feel like we already met.*

*I have heard they call me the “Demon of the North”, in those lands of yours. You may use this title, however funny it sounds to me. Perhaps talking from one demon to another would make this more fascinating to you, and convince you not to burn this letter the moment you see my organization’s seal. You should be sixteen, when you receive this, if my calculations are correct. Still so very young. The perfect age to burn.*

*Before I forget my manners: Merry Christmas.*

*Or Happy New Year? I have been told Japanese people are much more interested in the beginning of a new time. You may send your well wishes back to me, once you decide answering this letter is worth the effort. In the time I have had to study you, I have come to the conclusion that we are rather similar: I give you a few months.*

*Ten, I will say. That's how old you were when you killed her, correct?*

*It surely turned your life around. In my lands, some dare to call you the backbone of that syndicate of yours. And your Ability — I hear you need touch, to use it. Another thing the two of us have in common.*

*Here's another: aren't you bored, Dazai?*

*You must be. Your life seems terribly boring: a procession led by the most hidebound, uninteresting ants this world has to offer — and then you, trailing behind them, ten feet taller and with more eyes than you would even need, watching them crawl towards the unreachable and the unnecessary. Even that little redhead I hear you enjoy dragging around — he's rather blind. But powerful. I will give you that. Incredibly so.*

*Your life seems terribly boring; but more than that, it seems terribly lonely.*

*You don't need to worry. I am here now.*

*As a show of trust, I will give you this: when the summer comes to your city, it will come with unlikely candor. We're moving to the city more permanently, after my short visit during that conflict of yours. We are going to look for — it. Given the circumstances, I am sure no one but you or me would be able to find it.*

*A race of sorts. Something to make days lighter.*

*Your Boss will be our first target.*

*I do not presume to shoot him down with a single hit. Yet, I have found interesting allies who might just know how to attempt to. I am giving you this knowledge as a token; I am quite interested in seeing if you will attempt to save him — or simply stand and watch.*

*I truly do feel like I know you, Dazai. I cannot wait for us to sit in a room and talk, finally, about it all. Perhaps we can exchange tips. Perhaps we can meet in Hell, if you do not have prior engagements.*

*I will await your response with great enthusiasm. I know it will come. I am as patient as they come. For what is worth, know that I would gladly keep Yokohama from burning — if ashes did not tend to be very useful.*

*But do not worry. It is nothing blood won't warm up.*

*Respectfully,*

*Fyodor Dostoyevsky.*

## Chapter End Notes

dazai: fate is actually a cat

odasaku, just got shot and dealt with the dazai version of a panic attack all in the span of 3 minutes: man it might as well be

“as long as Chuuya feels the weight of a Permit lost in his name, he will die for the sake of granting us another.” i’m just saying u guys might want to remember that..... anyway.

nice to see you again guys! thank you so much for reading and i hope you enjoyed this! going back to chuuya next chapter... also i’m slowly realizing just how close we’re kinda getting to the end of this fic and ? wow. just the work of four years of my life. that’s cool. that’s fine. i can’t thank you guys enough for all the love you’ve given this until now!!

i hope you’re having the best day and i hope you stay warm, and i hope to see you soon! much love <33

see you!!

# TRULY

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

### *act two*

*[mais il s'agit de se faire l'âme monstrueuse]*

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The *Haunted Floors* — because Dazai said things, and they tended to stick — were unusually quiet. *It was bound to happen*, Chuuya mused, twirling the crimson scarf abandoned on the desk — being that their most usual ghost was nothing but a barely breathing thing in a Hospital bed.

He had never quite learned the mourning etiquette for the undead, but he knew snooping around their possessions was probably not it.

*Kouyou would box his ears*, he considered, tapping the drawers Elise had filled in stickers. Tanaki had been too busy — dealing with the worrying amount of commercial contacts demanding their alliances to be called off immediately, given Mori Corp's, *rather worrying accusations, lately* — to notice him sneaking through her wall passages. Chuuya vowed to to lay off with the, *stepping on her fiancé's foot with heightened gravity*, as a reward.

Stillness was a veil of dust on every piece of furniture in the sunbathed room, lined in gold; no one, though, would have allowed any inch of that place to grow dirty.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” a voice peeked, terribly polite, “But shouldn’t the *Guerrilla* squad be all the way to Senator Takagi’s house, by now?”

Knives made an unmistakably peculiar sound when they sank in the fortified walls of the Headquarters; Kouyou, through sagacious training sessions and calligraphy lessons, had efficiently proved so.

Hirotsu didn't even flinch.

"You always put a spin on traditional methods," the man commented, not bothering with extracting the knife from the wall. "Throwing weapons is somewhat barbaric, but using your Ability to do so bestows innovation."

"You goin' give me a zero to ten rate too, Gramps?" he muttered, closing the drawers.

"If you'd like. Dazai gave you orders."

"*Dazai* can sit on a cactus and spin, as far as I'm concerned. I'm Ane-san's vice, until Boss decides otherwise. Not his," A pause. "Shouldn't *you* be guarding the Hospital?"

"Boss will survive my men's turnations," Hirotsu tilted his head to the side. "I'm hardly the only competent man around. Insubordination, on the other hand —"

"Hey," Chuuya warned. "I'm still your superior."

"Which is why I would expect you to know better."

"Elise has this cookie recipe that would make a cow shit rainbows," He waved his hands around, obnoxiously. "I'm sure looking for doses of flour is not an insubordination."

The Commander made a face. It was a familiar face, as most pieces of existence in the Headquarters tended to be — the drag of Kouyou's umbrella on the carpet; the indent of Mori's hand on his shoulder; the nose-raised glance Ace used as a greeting; the Opera from Kajii's laboratory; the lionel around Tanaki's arms from a new tattoo; the pain of a neck bent back to fully meet Dazai's eyes — the realization that the space next to him seemed *taller* everyday — wider, emptier, *blacker*.

*Perhaps it was a character defect*, he considered. He had never been one for unnecessary feelings. He had never been one for homesickness, either.

*Homesick*, he munched, through the hum of a song he didn't quite know. Shirase would have laughed at him; then he would have asked, *were we not home?* Albatross would have understood, with that secret tattoo of the outline of Yokohama he had gotten done on a drunken night, on his left thigh. Noguchi had been fidgety and irritated for the entirety of their mission in France.

He attempted to recall the last time he had visited Rimbaud's grave, and couldn't.

Hirotsu was the first to get tired of the stare-off. "You know, Boss never valued pointless cruelty."

"He's too clever for that."

"He is," he agreed. "Keeping us on a leash is all but pointless. I know you understand."

"I'm not trying to steal leverage," Chuuya reminded him. The papers in the drawers had all been boring; economic balances and scribbles Elise called drawings. The belief he would find

what he was looking for had been a fragile thing. “My life is not leverage. It’s just mine.”

A step forward. Then another, and another — the road of a crimson carpet every dead man walking would walk, at least once in their life. Even Hirotsu, with his wrinkled hands and his endless towering frame, seemed *small* on the other side of that desk.

Abruptly, he felt violently out of place.

“Everything is leverage, Chuuya,” Hirotsu reminded him, not unkindly, “If it burns at the touch.”

Once, he’d made a bet with Tanaki that the Commander went around with a broom tied to his back. He always smelled of smoke; his monocle was never fogged up and never stained with blood. The first time he had invited him to drink with him, the man’s motivation had been: *perhaps I would like to know who you are when destruction isn’t involved.*

“If he dies,” Chuuya said, very slowly, very brusquely, “I lose it all.”

Under the knocking sunlight — a recent victory, the warmth; not that it truly felt so — Hirotsu’s eyes grew gentler.

There was something *insisting* under Chuuya’s nails — not the brains and the viscera he had washed off in the communal bathrooms, from the latest of the high floors’ extermination he had been ordered. He had bitten his tongue to blood not to smash Dazai’s skull against the Hospital bed frame — and then he had eaten the food he always forced himself to make, in the too-fancy stove of Albatross’ apartment, where he wasn’t supposed to be, because *someone has to smack some sense into you*, Iceman would have said — and then he had tried to understand *why* he felt so —

“Chuuya,” Hirotsu called. “It’s not your fault.”

He stilled.

*I’m not angry*, he swore, lips shut. *I’m not angry*. He truly wasn’t. They looked at him and swore that he was, and Chuuya thought he ought to be, and he *wasn’t*.

Anger was supposed to be louder, he knew — was meant to fill up any four-walls space and leave it emptier than before. Not necessarily something to be proud of. Rotten, but his to have.

Virgil would have snorted — because he despised the kind of poetry Chuuya read in secret, like a shameful thing of a quality a boy who had eaten cockroaches didn’t deserve. Lippman would have written it down. Chuuya had never quite intended to grow himself a chorus of tombstones — unwanted commentary and background hum, too *rusted* to be grief and too *sharp* to be a memory — but, still —

*Useful*, he reminded himself. *Not real, but useful.*

He threw the drawers’ key on the table. “Dazai knew Mori was going to be targeted.”

Hirotsu straightened — a cautious glint in his eyes.

“He knew,” Chuuya echoed. “And I figured it out too late. I *know* how he works. If I had —“

“Do you truly believe,” the man mused, “That Dazai would allow something Mori hadn’t planned for?”

“Do you *hear* what they’re saying?” he hissed. “It’s in every damn corner of the syndicate — *History repeating itself*. They think the bastard has his eyes on the throne, and with the fucked up way he’s been acting — I’m not surprised.”

“And you believe them?”

Chuuya stared at the floor, jaw clenched.

Rinse and repeat. *Teenager and killer* was a strange enough combination. On blurred days, the lights of the Arcade were everything like blood set on fire. Every other night, Dazai Osamu was the closest thing to a focus that Chuuya had the luxury of carrying around.

*Your loyalty*, the Colonel had asked, once — before he was debris in the sea. The Mafia’s Demon’s hands were abandoned on his lap, splintered and ruined from his constant hold on a gun; his back was to him, as was his blindside, as was his sleep, and Chuuya had never been anything more than a hoarder. *Is it worth your flesh? You cannot have both.*

“No,” he admitted. Then, more to himself than any ear: “I know how he works.”

Hirotsu’s finger moved one of the lined up pens on the desk. He fixed it immediately, quiet. “Better than us.”

“Not enough.”

“Chuuya.”

“I’m *tired* —“ he insisted, “— of having masterminds do their bindings with the ones of us who are just trying to live. I have bled for this organization, haven’t I? The least it could it’s trust me *back*. I’m not going to run off the moment I get an inkling of what happened before Suribachi —“

“*And* if it’s people, you find?”

“*What?*”

“A family,” the Commander leaned forward. Sunlight reflected off his monocle; his features had a certain softness to them, like molded clay — too ancient to pretend there was pride in impenetrableness. “Parents, who were robbed of a child. Loved ones ready to welcome you with open arms. If you find *people*, will you choose them?”

“No,” he scoffed. “No, why would I —“

*Why would they choose me?*, he didn’t ask.



There was no lingering desire; only the guilt — the cowardly inability to look strangers in the eyes and *exist*. To let them know he might be their child, or the puppet made out of his corpse. The only ones who wouldn't care — the ones who had sacrificed Ability Users, men, and *everything* just to keep him from Verlaine — “Hirotsu, the Mafia *is* my people.”

“Then trust it,” the man said. “You believe Mori’s too clever for pointlessness — *trust* that belief. Trust *him*. He chose you. Chuuya, he will not take his word away only because you failed to save him once.”

*It already happened, he thought. What if it happens again?*

“He gave up on an *Ability Permit* for me,” Papers had been abandoned on that desk for a month; maps of the building, take-out orders, lists of men who did not deserve protection any longer. If he breathed slowly enough, he could feel Elise’s hand around his fingers — could see a glint in the darkest eyes of the city. *He is, frankly, invaluable.*

“You have a lifetime to repay him,” Hirotsu said. “We all do.”

*Not enough.* He had targets to kill; a squad to lead; the ephemeral hope of keeping all their pulses afloat. He had something to prove — to the scratches down his arms, and the hum in the back of his skull — never words and never feelings and never anything but a promise. Chuuya wasn’t even meant to be alive, and *someone* had to be blamed for it. *Not enough.*

*Your birth was a mistake. As was mine.*

He sank his nails in the wood. *Fuck you.*

“Yeah,” Chuuya cleared his voice; stood up straighter. “I guess. Good speech — or whatever. Miranda would be proud.”

“I don’t know about that,” Hirotsu replied, an imperceptible pause later. His shoulders had deflated; the old broom of his lost bet was still there, though. Chuuya wondered if he would tell him where he’d found it, some day — the longing of a child, stretching on his tiptoes to reach the adult table. “She dislikes words vividly. A creature of action.”

“Too good for you.”

“Certainly,” A hand on his shoulder. He flinched. He pressed his heels on the ground until the crimson edge of his silhouette disappeared, and met the man’s eyes, and did not ask himself how many people were *too many* to be willing to die for. “Chuuya,” he said, “It’s not your fault.”

“I know.”

“*Chuuya,*” His fingers printed themselves on his flesh. He didn’t even know how old the man was. Had they been two years younger and three times meaner, he might have killed him. “Listen to me.”

“I am.”

“It’s not,” he spelled out. “Your fault.”

Chuuya set his jaw — violent, because instinct was a given. *Who are you when destruction is not involved?*

*I don’t know*, he thought. *I don’t need to.*

He nodded.

Hirotsu did, too. Chuuya shrugged the grip off, not unkindly — and was not surprised when the man acquiesced. He set his eyes on the desk again; studied the *Corruption* scar at the beginning of his left wrist until his teeth didn’t ache.

Frowned. “Old man.”

A blink. “Yes?”

“The Secret Executive,” he asked, picking up one of the documents. Hirotsu’s eyes roamed through the lines of ink; landed on the signature, and widened. “Why did he present a request to leave his training grounds?”

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## TWO MONTHS LATER

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### *chapter xvi.*

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*Case number: 89826788*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black]  
brought the Cleanse to [...]*

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The *Yokohama Northern Juvenile Prison* was only unlike every other penal institution in the state by a dot — no one was meant to know it existed.

“A private school in the Alps,” Taguchi, one of the inmates — among the few to meet Chuuya’s eyes and understand that trying to scare him off wouldn’t be wise; consequently, among the few not to sport black eyes three weeks later — told him. “A musical institute upon some British hill. You pick. As long as every senator to birth one of us fuckers gets to preen with every other senator whose kid set a cop car on fire.”

“Did *you* set a cop car on fire?” Chuuya asked.

“No,” He made a face. “I’m fourteen. I tried to set my math teacher on fire.”

It took him the entirety of his first week there to conclude that the kids weren’t all that bad. Not as bad as the food. They had certainly never experienced anything graver than their own stunts — Chuuya had watched one of them pass out at the sight of their own blood.

When the guy in the cell next to his was brought a violin for his *weekly lessons*, *he truly cannot miss them* — he nodded at his apologetical smile, covering his ears, and reminded himself that blaming the luckier, *posh*ier ones was senseless.

*Worthy of a Sheep, though*, Shirase would have rebutted.

“Dude,” Koyama — the guy who had asked him his father’s name on his first day, and recoiled when Chuuya had offered his cover — gasped, whenever they bumped against each other. “How do you even heal *that* fast? Is it a skin routine?”

He had started a fight in the cafeteria on his second day, not bothering with making his way to the snickering group of boys who had made sure he would wake up in a bed full of cockroaches — they had been the ones to come to him.

It was how Chuuya had known none of them were *bad kids* in the way that Murase and Matsuda would have enjoyed — not one person who had grown up on the street and met his eyes would have kept walking towards him.

*(The kids weren’t that bad, no. They weren’t that good either — their eyes were sticky, in the way of the warmest days, when plastically good-willed adults brought snotty children who*

*had never eaten dirt to the slums, for the sake of a good action to add on their guaranteed resume and never ending bank accounts.*

*One of them had offered him an apple, once; he had been stunned at the punch Chuuya had cracked his nose with, when faced with the scientifically interested expression staining his perfect, unmarred face — the way his fingers had almost, almost reached for the camera hanging from his neck, as if nothing could fit a research paper on generosity more than a child who had not eaten in days.*

*So he had punched him. And he'd taken the apple.*

*“This place isn't that bad,” one of the inmates said, once — a lost comment between lost comments, unaccented voices that always made a face when Chuuya got rougher and his own larger vowels slipped out. Something he learned to ignore, no matter if it felt like betrayal, because he lived in a penthouse and had more bank accounts than any Sheep would have trusted him for. “Imagine if they had sent us to live with the Suribachi trash.”*

*So, Chuuya had punched him.].*

He was sent in solitary for three days for the number of sprained wrists he left behind — and Chuuya didn't want to fight brats, not really, but he knew better than to let them believe so. By the time he came out of that room with no windows and a strangely-sticky Bible, he had to find a way to decline offers to sit on some guy's back during push-ups, and he always got one apple more than deserved at lunch.

“You know,” Araya, his roommate — a guy with a blond buzzcut, a tendency to sleepwalk, and his side of the room littered in chalk drawings of dicks — let him know, as his second week there rolled around. “They've given you a nickname.”

“Have they?” Chuuya wondered, using the side of his bed as a chin-up bar. The rooms weren't all that bad either, if small; he was used to sharing, and Araya was too busy scribbling to bother him.

Still, the toilets were a proper disgrace — he had written three different complaints since he had arrived, and where threats had not gone forward, *that* efficiency had gathered the other boys' starry eyes.

*It was just toilets*, he considered. It didn't justify their enthusiasm or hero-worship, but he had mistakenly created a haze of interest around himself — the straight spine that Kouyou had beaten into him; the knife he had stolen from the kitchen in a purposefully noticeable way, so that an Ability wouldn't pass through their minds.

But Chuuya had been nothing at all before he had been needed. He would be nothing again once there was no one left to need him.

*Most of the group thinks you're damn cool*, Taguchi had explained, after he had saved him from some guys' petty revenge for a stolen pack of cigarettes. *It pisses them off, of course. They've never received a burp in the face after challenging someone to a spelling game.*

*Wait, they were serious about that?*

A weird look. It was strange, Chuuya couldn't help but think — being perceived as both exceedingly commoner-like, and yet mysteriously posh. He had never been anything but Suribachi trash; after, he'd been —

*You're really not from here, are you?*

"*The Dog*," Araya sighed, adding hair to his latest phallic masterpiece. "You know what they called *me* when I first came? *The Cocksucker*," A pause; he stared at the wall. "That might have been my fault. Hey, what are you doing on the ground?"

While it was sometimes easy to forget, between one bully dealt with and one official complaint to make the lives of those fools a bit less miserable — Chuuya sneaked out from the grey stone walls every night, offering *lines* over *lines* of information on the next generation of the city's elite to the Port Mafia-bought guard.

"You will be out of here soon, sir," the woman never failed to tell him — after pocketing the thesis on those rich kids and the spiders they kept asking Chuuya to kill for them. "According to Executive Dazai, phase one of the *Cleanse* will be over before you know it."

He wasn't aware they had given it a name.

When he'd stormed out of Mori's Hospital room and gathered the *Guerrilla* squad, he had spent an endlessly busy month murdering every big name they could afford to bleed out without too many suspicions — and then, along to the latest number of the *Chuuya Is A Sore Loser* newsletter, had come the order of infiltration.

"Executive Dazai," he echoed. "Do you communicate with him personally?"

"No, sir."

Chuuya stuck his hands in the pockets he had sewn in the inmate suit, making his way down the abandoned corridor of the secret wing. "Then tell whoever *does* that his partner said — *revenge method 123*."

Being on field was hardly ever something he didn't enjoy; the more days passed with nothing to sink his teeth into, though — the more restless he grew. The juvie kids had no qualms whatsoever about boasting their hearts out — be it about their possessions, their parents' power, or the number of things one could see through and *grasp*, if armed with a malice they clearly weren't considering.

It wouldn't last long. Chuuya let them.

*Loyalty is a bit like a tumor*, Kouyou had said, when they'd bumped into each other on their way to the Hospital. He'd offered her an arm, because he was grown now, and the sight of her loose hair was nothing short of a funeral. *The former Boss used to say so. It festers. If the body falls, it falls with it.*

“Have you heard?” Taguchi hissed, the morning that began his fourth week in that place. “The new kid got locked on suicide watch not even ten minutes in.”

He had stopped giving him weird looks for the morning paper Chuuya always requested at breakfast — perhaps assuming they had something to do with the formal complaints he kept directing to the guards; being on the quality of the food or on the broken beds of the kids in the cell next to his. *You’re efficient*, he would say, *I’ll give you that*.

When Chuuya only hummed, he stole one of his pens, balancing it on his upper lip, and then added: “They said he tried to stick his head right through a corner of his bed.”

“Sucks to be him.”

“I *know*. The metal in that stuff probably carries the bubonic plague,” A pause. “Hey, could you maybe write a complaint about that, too?”

Another matter was the guards themselves — locked between the obligation to respect the sons of high society, and the unmissable chance to torment people whose network was higher than what they would make in their entire lives. Chuuya, luckily, was used to bullying adults.

“You’re so cool, *nii-san*, ” a small circle of kids, twelve at most, let him know, the first time he kicked the shit out of a guard who had torn their drawings into pieces. “You’re our age, but you’re so much braver!”

His eye twitched. “I’m seventeen, brats.”

Genuine confusion made them exchange gazes. One of them tightened his hands around the waist of his suit, muttering: “But *he* said —“

The guard woke up. Chuuya was locked up in solitary again.

If there existed a time limit on fame — it seemed it would be around three and a half weeks. On his fourth cycle, voices began to shift from the *Dog* to a new phenomena haunting the piss-smelly halls of the institution: the *Weirdo*.

“How can you get locked up in solitary *so* often without ever showing your face around?” Araya mused, by the time the new kid got himself thrust into solitary for the fifth consecutive time. It seemed he was unable to wait more than a few hours before doing something that warranted a new damnation; the voices were dying to know *what* could be worth the struggle. “They said he was caught with Miss Emi in the Infirmary.”

He curled an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t they throw *her* in solitary, then?”

“It’s probably a lie,” Araya shrugged. He had sleep-talked the whole previous night — some convo on the importance of toads for the ecosystem. “The new batch of porn magazines must have started going around. Most agree that it was the, *sticking a stapler in Guard Takagi’s crotch* that did it, this time around.”

Chuuya would have gladly taken advantage of that saving grace — *The Dog’s* nickname dying out, the kids’ starry eyes blurring when he entered the cafeteria. If the *Weirdo* was so

eager to switch the suicide watch to the the solitary confinement, creating myths around a face no one had seen, he could gladly devour his days away.

Until he began to be targeted.

“I’m sorry, Dog,” Guard Sunada said, one morning, handing the formal complaint on the *severe lack of hygienic products in the communal baths* back. “We received a conflicting complaint. Very well worded, too! The higher ups believe you might be asking for rations to waste on a prank.”

“Want to let *them* take a shit in the bathrooms?” Chuuya replied, unimpressed. “I caught Haru wiping his ass with one of the Violin Brat’s music sheets the other day.”

A shrug. “That’s not what the other report said.”

It happened with overwhelming insistence — every complaint was sent back, framed by the assurance that conflicting, *more convincing* information had been sent the *minute* Chuuya had done the same.

The food grew barely withstandable to the boys’ delicate tongues, again; the water left the sink in vaguely brownish shades. Chuuya was gawked at again; this time, for his easy acceptance of those living conditions.

“This is masochism,” he snapped, by the end of the week, pacing back and forth in the small square of his room. Some guys in the sports room had offered him their backs again, as they worked through push-ups; he had been stressed enough to *almost* accept. “I get that the asshole is constantly locked in solitary, but I’m pretty sure we all shit in the same hole —”

“You think it’s the *Weirdo*?” Araya blinked.

“Who else? Everyone else in this place is a spineless coward in cashmere.”

“But *why*?”

That, he didn’t know. *Nor* would he have concerned himself with it — hadn’t it been for the boredom of a job no one was telling him when it would be over. There was hardly anything else to suck out of the rich kids — they were too busy crying over salt-less rice and two-layers toilet paper.

Chuuya didn’t enjoy being targeted. He barely had time to reach that conclusion — before the pranks started.

It was innocent enough, at first — the few belongings he had gathered from admiring brats and the guards’ pockets began to disappear, and to suddenly turn up in the most unlikely places. His night walks were interrupted; with no explanation, the guards reorganized their turns in a way that made it impossible for him to step a foot out and reach the Mafia informant.

*That’s bad*, the part of his mind that could never quite forget his duty made him notice. Then the *Weirdo* started leaving dog doodles on the toilets he somehow always knew Chuuya

would pick, and he got distracted again.

*Vanished shoes*, he lamented, in his letters to Kouyou. *Words scribbled on his face*, Araya swearing he hadn't seen a thing; *his complaints reaching the guards as nonsensical dissertations on the benefits of dog sitters*; *a strange perfume sprayed all over his clothes* — so that Violin Brat, who was allergic to most things, would endlessly sneeze in his direction.

“Well,” Taguchi concluded, when he woke up with his feet glued to his blanket, “You can’t say he didn’t earn his nickname.”

When it stopped, it did so with no warning — only a monotone, short announcement in the canteen, by that one guard who was particularly obsessed with curfew, sloppily rattling off details of the *Weirdo’s* successful hanging attempt.

“Oh,” one of the boys commented, with a nearly perplexed blink. “I didn’t know you could actually do that.”

The guard left the makeshift podium with no particular care, stealing an apple from one of the boys’ trays. On the ancient television over the buffet, over the murmurs, a News reporter waved his arms behind the colorful static lines, pointing to the familiar end of a bridge.

“ — *protests have been continuing steadily for the past few weeks*, ” he explained, with the tone of someone endlessly impatient for lunch time. The cameras switched from him to pre-registered compilations of a familiar overview; plastic roofs and trash-lined roads. Hiding behind a column, a Suribachi City child stared right at the camera, face dirty and wide eyes uncomprehending.

“*The authorities seem to be considering the most appropriate solution to the wave of demands by the local associations*, ” he continued. “*Foundings for the reconstruction of Suribachi City have long been a topic of contrasting opinions — though no optimal solutions have been offered by —* “

“Just change the channel,” Araya groaned, face inside his rice. “Something interesting, yeah?”

Staring forward, Chuuya cleaned the dirt from under his nails.

That night, the disguised Mafia guard only walked by his cell to direct him an unmistakably heavy glance. She turned the keys to their lock with undoubtable professionalism; Chuuya stared at the ajar, rusted metal until midnight struck.

Distant, muffled by the humidity-soaked walls, sneaking between snores and conversations between guards, he heard the creaks of the pipes, and the whining of the boys locked in solitary. It was all too far to visualize — if allowed to, though, he suspected Arahaki would have gladly let him hear the death of all stars.

He never forgot that it all came with blood. He never walked away far enough not to smell it.

Chuuya stood, and sneaked his way to the electrical equipment room in the basement.



The rows of metal lockers buzzed quietly in the utter darkness; he used the glow of *Tainted* to find the heart of those cables, absently playing with one of the tennis balls Taguchi had gotten his parents to send in with the mail. *I can hardly ever sit still*, he'd sighed. *And they're amenable. I think they sort of want me to stay good and quiet here — away from the chaos at home.*

*Chaos?*, Chuuya had questioned.

He'd shrugged. *They're among the mental cases convinced the Ballerinas are actually back. It's not like Yokohama isn't dangerous normally — but Ability supremacist terrorists are a bit much for my father's heart.*

He used the stolen kitchen knife to cut off a particular connection; then he extracted Violin's Kid's stolen violin from a secret hiding spot under one of the control desks, and made it heavier than it was — laying it on a particular inflammable knot of cables. *And what do you think?*, he'd asked.

*That the Ballerinas were arrested years ago*, Taguchi had replied. *And if anyone's gonna die in a big boom in Yokohama, it will be the Mafia's fault.*

There was a post-it on the back of the vest of the guard Chuuya had to knock out to make his way to the entrance.

“Jay-e—” Chuuya attempted to read, voice echoing off the empty hallway. They were never brought to that wing; only the kids dubbed safe enough to spend time outside could be dragged over the metal detectors. “*Shomà* — why can't you just write it in — *Kalh? Khälist?*”

The circle of a flashlight surrounded him. “Kid, what the hell are you —”

He didn't even look up; throwing the knife in the air with a hiss of *Tainted*, he waited until he heard a choked gasp and the *thump!* of a falling body, and pushed his way through the glass doors.

They closed behind him with a sharp *click!*, and Chuuya thought briefly about Araya landing on his bed by mistake, sleepily murmuring about the nature of societal bias. Cold, pungent November wind hit the portions of skin the inmate suit wasn't made to protect — his naked feet drowned in the dirty concrete of the Facility's parking lot, and Chuuya *felt* his presence before he raised his eyes.

“I can't believe I finally managed to land you in jail, and *still* came to get you out,” Dazai — *the Weirdo* — lamented, watching him march in his direction. “I've been poisoning the food, by the way. Should Chuuya *really* want the antidote, he'll find it with the yellow elf.”

The phrasing deserved some hesitation. It was clear the boy was expecting it — all coat and all blankly obnoxious face, like a curious bat against the firmament; studying him like it hadn't been months since they'd last talked, while Mori slept his way to death next to them.

Chuuya made sure to ram his shoulder with his own when he passed by him, silent. His mocking, patronizing grin stuck.

*You're the reason why the heating system smells of eggs, he considered snapping. You're the reason why Taguchi has been complaining nonstop about an ant infestation. You turned the water in the showers into fucking soy sauce.*

Instead, undeterred, he settled on: "You better have brought a car."

"Ah, yes," Dazai confirmed, not bothering with catching up, no matter the necessity to raise his tone. "That one! Ace gifted it to me while you were gone. Well, I threatened to tell Mori about his financial scam — and he offered one. How nice of him. Isn't it fancy, or something? It's a —"

Despite it all, Chuuya couldn't help but stop in his tracks, following the line of his pointing finger. "Jewel Bastard got *you* a fucking *Maserati*?"

He didn't seem to care. "Oh, that's what it's called?"

"You can't even *drive*."

"I drove here," Dazai replied, offended. At their backs, the entire Facility structure seemed to creak, vaguely — the hissed whisper of a hair tie about to snap. "And I only hit two people. And the paramedics said they'll be fine. Mostly."

Chuuya turned to look at him.

He'd grown taller — again. His coat was only *laid* on his shoulders; the bruises under his eyes seemed painful to the touch. Dazai never quite seemed older; just a tad more rotten.

The rush of his own heartbeat was too loud in his ears — he thought it awfully sick, that he might enjoy the feeling of his own anger enough not to kill the boy on sight. *Better than nothing*, he would argue, then. *Better than another grave*.

"Great," he said, tonelessly.

Wordlessly, Dazai slipped something from the back of his pants — handed him a pair of gloves.

Chuuya looked at them.

*His fault*, his mind liked to remind him, sometimes — Arahaki, who hated him, and the blood at his feet who hated him a bit more, and his fingers at night that only wanted to sleep. Koda's brother and the dead kids of the orphanage; the men wearing the Port Mafia tattoo. *His fault, his fault, all his fault*.

*His to keep safe*, his mind reminded him. Nothing but a hoarder — *not quite human*, he considered, that urge to set it all on fire for the sake of what Chuuya considered *his*.

*His to kill*.

He slipped the gloves on. Then, refusing to linger on the kind of face Taguchi would make as his skin burned to the bone — he tapped one foot on the ground, and *felt* the violin he'd abandoned grow a thousand pounds heavier.

The air turned golden.

His ears rang madly, brain sizzling between them, broken by familiar white noises. A column of fire shattered the sky — projectiles of concrete and stone flew to the stars in bright scarlet flares, as the *Juvenile Facility* blew up in a thousand pieces. The smoke arising took a distinctively white shade; the *Ballerinas'* trademark, glaringly obvious over the useless alarms ringing from what was left of the structure.

"Oh, well," Dazai said, raising a hand to cover his shield eyes. After some consideration, he raised the other to shield Chuuya's own. "I expect the upper class will experience a growing demand for adoption procedures."

His coat was painted like a sunrise by the reflection of the flames. Chuuya thought he could hear the distant shrill of screams, for a moment — and then nothing at all.

It was utterly quiet in the car.

"To be clear," the Executive questioned, over the irritatingly loud buzz of his console. He'd highly protested not being allowed to drive his own car; Chuuya had silenced him with a blankly recited list of his road-related crimes. "Are you mad at me, or are you entering a grieving period?"

"They were stuck up brats who would have hung me by the boxers if they'd known where I'm from," Chuuya replied, unconcerned. The inmate suit smelled of gasoline. "Grieving isn't going to be a concern."

"I don't think you would have let them."

Blood felt the same under velvet gloves — no matter the age; no matter the blame. Chuuya had come to the world with a crack in the earth, and he'd stolen every parent and siblings the Sheep didn't remember anymore.

"Boss," he asked. "How is he?"

Dazai glanced his way.

He refused to meet his gaze; refused to feel anything about the anatomically *deep* analysis he felt him graze across his entire self.

"You *are* mad," he concluded. Then, with the sort of superior, distantly suicidal nonchalance he wore when he'd won, he commented: "You're going to be even madder when you figure out the next part of the plan, then."

Despite himself — despite the widening cloud of flames and smoke he could still see in the rearview mirror — Chuuya threw a questioning look in his direction.

Dazai threw his head back; winked. “How would you like getting married?”

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“I can’t believe you didn’t tell Tanaki,” Chuuya muttered, hopping around the bathroom stall to slip into the tailored pants of a penguin suit. “What if my mission hadn’t been over? She would have just thought I was *casually* missing her wedding?”

“It’s not like she could move dates at the last moment,” Kouyou reminded him, perched on top of the marble counter of the faucets.

The Champagne glass in her hands was a probably unplanned match to the cream dress she was wearing; the shock of red of her hair against it reminded him of blood, for a moment. There was a shadow of tiredness over her shoulders; when she allowed *Golden Demon* to fluctuate over the tiles, she subtly leaned her leg against the katana the ghost had stuck to the floor.

“May the gods forgive you,” she added, “I would have entered from the *back*, had I known you planned to wear pajamas at her wedding.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” he mumbled, stealing her Champagne to down what was left of it. Her nasty glare didn’t register, even as he tightened his tie to the point of suffocation; the bathroom was just as shiny and sophisticated as the rest of the *Sea Jewel*, and Chuuya hadn’t worn silk in more than a month. “How pissed off is she?”

“That both you *and* Dazai missed the ceremony?” Her eyes twitched; at least, they did the closest thing her porcelain face would allow. “Nothing too severe. I could only hear the sound of her heart shattering *this*,” Her thumb and index flew away from each other. “Much, from my row.”

The Champagne tasted sour.

Kouyou pulled him close by the lapels; she removed his hat — which she’d brought with some foresight he had long since learned not to question — and fixed his hair, needing to look up at him. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

“One word,” she offered.

Chuuya studied his reflection. No scars and no skin-splitting grin; no decaying fingers. There was a strange disconnect, nonetheless — the urge of swearing a distorted mirror looked

nothing like yourself. *Dogs can't recognize their reflection*, Dazai had casually dropped, once, *don't you know?*

*His body*, he reminded himself. His to share — *his*, nonetheless.

“Change,” Chuuya offered.

Her jaw set. She offered a tight smile. “As inevitable as sunrise, little god.”

He shrugged, because it was true. Then he wrapped his jacket around her naked shoulders, and led her to the decorated garden of the *Sea Jewel*, where the celebration was blooming.

At the center of the enthusiastic circle of guests — hanging off the arm of that horse-faced *husband* of hers — Tanaki hadn't noticed him yet. She was a snowflake amongst the lights painting the gazebos in candid shades, her dress less like silk and more like a waterfall — surely, worth more than a woman who hadn't been in the Mafia longer than Chuuya had been *alive* could have afforded.

Silver hair and scars; happiness had always looked good on her, as stubborn as spring over pain-dug caves all over her face. She went with him to the cemetery every week.

“ — understand,” Kouyou was saying, through the parted lips of her most pleasant smile. Mafia events tended to demand a facade; when Chuuya was distracted, he found himself mimicking her in a slightly distorted way.

She patted his nose with her fan, and while *graceful*, it left his head ringing. “You and the little demon went through all that trouble to have a part in the wedding, what with your insistence to *walk her to the altar* — She was just telling me about Dazai stealing the invitation papers to remake them himself! And then you go and *miss it*, for —“

“I was on a mission, Ane-san,” he reminded her. “One that I would have *gladly* returned from sooner, had that stupid *fucking* son of a — Kajii, did you add lemonade to the wine stand? This stuff is turning my teeth into a granny's last shit.”

“You always have a way with words,” the scientist sighed, wrapping a sweaty arm over his shoulders.

He'd cut his hair again — an intricate ritual that involved a bowl, a lemon bomb, and the to-be exploded room Boss allowed him once every six months. “Nice pajamas, by the way. Grey brings out your eye color. *Uh*. Both of them. Weirdly cool, by the way. You made Madame Tanaki cry, though, so you suck.”

“She *cried?*”

“Over the good Champagne, too,” Kouyou offered.

“Where's your worse half?” Kajii insisted, head turning around wildly. “I thought I'd seen him asking one of the waiters to commit a double suicide with him, but — Oh, there he is. Oh, no. Tanaki is crying again.”

Horror filtered into his veins. He dropped the glass on the table so fast he almost broke it.

“No, no, *wait*, that bastard’s going to —” Chuuya took off faster than the snowy ground should have allowed for.

“ — tried to tell him!” Dazai was whining, by the time he managed to make his way through the crowd, reaching the newlyweds’ table. His hands were tight around Tanaki’s, clothes stained with wine the waiter had, *hopefully*, emptied on him.

“He kept insisting the mission was more important! I told him, listen here — *Chibi, Tanaki is the woman of my life! No mission will ever matter as much as she does!* I begged him to come back sooner, so that we could make it — but he barked and spat, the way he does, nasty dog he is — he had me add *three days!* And he told me he thinks your dress makes you look *fat!* Like a pregnant walrus deluded by love. It doesn’t. You look like rising sun itself, my —”

Tanaki’s husband scowled his features into something endlessly *polite* when Chuuya slammed the boy’s face into the tempura in front of him.

Some of the sauce reached his own chin; he felt it drool, slowly and securely, into a groaning Dazai’s hair, as he lowered himself to meet Tanaki’s puzzled expression and swore: “Do forgive *him* for making us late.”

“Boys,” the woman sighed — and the bone deep *tiredness* of her tone settled guilt between his ribs, heavier than the ocean. “It’s fine.”

“I picked my suit *three months ago*,” Chuuya snapped, pressing harder on Dazai’s nape, shaking the whole table. “No, it’s *not fine*. I was supposed to walk you to the altar —”

“Hirotzu was courteous enough to do it,” Tanaki cut him off, gently.

The flicker of disappointment in her eyes was as stable as the fairy lights hanging over the tables — still, much to his stubborn shame, they roamed them between their faces with something like exasperated fondness.

“I understand,” she added. “Alright? Work is work. I promise you, it’s alright — It’s good enough that you two are here now.”

“He’s drowning me in sauce!” Dazai whined, mostly muffled, “I won’t be here at all, soon!”

“Then *die*, you piece of shit —”

“This isn’t a good method of suicide at *all* —”

“I don’t fucking care!”

“*So*,” Tanaki intervened, raising her voice. She stood up, gathering lace-sleeved arms around both of them, pulling Dazai out of the bowl. Her heels were taller than ever; while she finally reached Chuuya, she still lost to the other boy. “It would be even *better* if you could be civil for the ceremony you managed to *show up to*, how about that?”

They exchanged a glance.

Sauce and tempura dripped from Dazai's face — Tanaki had to sink her nails on Chuuya's shoulder to keep him from attacking, when he slapped the hand he used to wipe it off on his face.

"Fine," Dazai muttered, eventually. "He's so small, so very *imperceptible* — I'm sure I can stand to ignore his presence for a few hours."

*"Revenge method 123."*

"You're too late. I already asked the taxi outside to walk over my foot."

"I don't see you limping."

"I'm taking your first dance, by the way!" A wide, too wide smile was offered to *The Husband*, still staring at that scene in defeated silence. Chuuya didn't think he had ever talked to them willingly — not after the first time they had spent twenty, *endless* minutes glaring daggers at him from under the woman's desk. "I'm sure your sweetheart won't mind. You should share it with the man of your life, anyway. If not a double suicide —"

Tanaki sighed, ruffling Dazai's hair. If she cared about the sauce ending up on her dress, she didn't show it. Biting down a smile — something a bit too resigned — she said: "I suppose it can't be helped."

Satisfied, Dazai stalked off — predictably, to reach that Intelligence friend of his, his arms open wide and his expression lighting up instantly.

A shiver crawled up Chuuya's spine — a whisper as soft as the staggeringly, intermittently falling snow; the kind of instinct that told him there was *something* to burn in his immediate field of vision. Someone had cleaned ash off Dazai's coat; it dragged on the ground as he walked, and the crowd — almost entirely consisting of mafiosi, given Tanaki's limited circle — parted to let him pass.

Their whispers were too far to be heard.

The shape of their lips was too familiar; the cruel, *empty* tilt it gave to Dazai's own was a sight tattooed under his eyelids.

"God," Tanaki shook her head, watching one of the closest guests *pale* when the boy stole his drink out of his hand. "He'll scare off even the snow, if it goes on like this."

Something complicatedly *sharp* settled at the base of his throat. "They can probably sense his clammy ass from afar."

"I believe it might have more to do with the lingering belief that he is going to sneak into Boss' Hospital room and stick a knife in his chest," she replied, a bit crudely.

Chuuya stared.

From the other side of the pavilion, Dazai laughed loudly at something out of Sakaguchi's unimpressed mouth — the sound startling some women *almost* out of their seats. He watched them clench their fingers around their cutlery. "Still?"

She gathered her gowns. "You've been away for a while," she offered. "Ever since the syndicate found out it wasn't actually Ace who got hurt, things became — a bit tense."

The urge to ask *more* almost suffocated him — to find Kouyou's eyes and demand why *political balance* hadn't come before the hour long tirade on just how horribly his pajama-wearing behavior reflected on her.

Madame Tanaki's shoulders were curved, though. He sunk his hands in his pockets, because it was easier than grasping her own. "Tanaki, I'm sorry."

"Chuuya —"

"No," he insisted, eyes on the floor. "I've gone against the bastard's plans for much less. I should have been more mindful of the time. This is your special day, and I —"

"And it was not made any less special by circumstances you could not avoid," Tanaki interrupted, laying her tattooed fingers on his shoulders. The swirling lines of colors were a *sight* under the flower-patterned lace; something painfully *her*. "This is all I wanted — A day of uninterrupted joy. You're here *now*. You can walk me down all the aisles you want for as long as we're alive."

"It's not the same, though," he mumbled.

"We'll make it convincing," Her smile was certainly brighter — the spark of hidden disappointment weaker, rubbed clean with her insistence to make the most out of everything. "Did you think I wouldn't notice more than half of the wedding was already paid for?"

Chuuya's ears caught fire. "That wasn't —"

"You want to make it up to me?" Tanaki leaned down, hiding the lights behind the silver crown of her hair — settling sweetly severe eyes on him. "Stop feeling like you owe me. You don't. You never will."

He searched her gaze, unconvinced, feeling his own face morph through the stages — instinctual insistence; the lingering embarrassment of being caught; fondness that settled all wrong in his chest, unwanted because *unsharp*.

He cleared his throat. "Tanaki, is there — A, *ah*, yellow elf, around this wedding?"

She stared. "A what?"

"A yellow elf."

"A yellow —" A confused glance was directed to the only other occupant of her table — sporting naturally pointed ears they had long insulted, and a golden tie. Right as he realized, her jaw dropped. "*Nakahara Chuuya*, are you calling my *husband* a —"



The ground under his feet, unfortunately, did not swallow him whole. The sauce from the tempura still dripped from the edge of the table — the newly weds could not do anything more than stare when Chuuya sunk his hand into the mess and licked it clean.

With his other hand, he grasped Tanaki's arm and led her to crowded dance floor, declaring: "Don't worry about it. Come on. Let's get this first dance over with."

"But Dazai said —"

"Six weeks after we met, after I smashed his first console against the wall, Dazai promised he would *never* talk to me again, *ever*," Chuuya cut her off, positioning his hand on her waist, dragging her to the true center of the garden. "'Wasn't even that mad about the fallen tooth. Point is — we all get disappointed, once in a while.'"

She laughed — freely and fondly.

The music was a vaguely sung hum that he couldn't place. Perhaps the Mafia had a pendrive for events and occasions — as Tanaki recounted unimportant tales from the days he had missed, he attempted his best not to step on her feet where Kouyou would see.

"Boss sent over countless bouquets and gifts," she told him, between swirls. "He wasn't in any condition to join, and I assured him it was alright — you should have seen how red he was!"

Chuuya munched on her words — roamed subtle eyes over the crowd of mafiosi — before daring: "Is he feeling better?"

"As if a wound to that iron heart of his could stop him," Tanaki tutted — pretending she had not hesitated. "I don't know much. Seniority is all that allows me information. But Executive Kouyou will bring you to him, if you ask."

*I don't know if I want to.*

He forced a smile. "As long as he comes back before I'm subjected to some more rumors."

The woman's gaze fled to some undefined part of the garden — he didn't need to turn to imagine a bandaged eye, and the mischievousness he would wink at Tanaki's clear concern with. "Hopefully."

She talked more, as if the moonlight could only wake her up further — light her eyes up with unbridled excitement, framed by the flirty waves she sent to her husband when she thought Chuuya wasn't looking, and the way she spun in her dress.

She told him about the matching tattoo she was doing her best to convince her husband to get, a sort of ring that could not be thrown away — *pray for us, my dear*, she said, *I'm getting too old to organize weddings*. Gin Akutagawa had developed a taste for masks and masculine clothing — she'd accepted Tanaki's help only after she had caught her in the middle of putting eyeliner with a knife.

“I invited the siblings,” she told him. “Apparently, they were too busy training. Dazai’s little hope sent a vase, though. Why a vase?”

*Dazai’s little hope.* A black silhouette; a pale face, and a tissue stained in blood. He tried to picture Akutagawa in the middle of that dancing crowd — he couldn’t.

“Those little paper bats you made them hang at the entrance are all the black you need,” he concluded, shaking his head.

“Is that *judgement* I hear, Chuuya?”

“Not at all. I just think you should have stuck to the Halloween theme a bit more.”

“Do tell,” Tanaki encouraged.

“*The Groom And His Corpse* style, maybe,” he offered. “But make it *The Bride and Her Corpse*. I’d have helped, had you asked —“

“Can you leave my dear alone for a second —“

“He said he thought I was *ten years old* —“

Fingers pulled ends of his hair.

“At last, we’ve found a positive quality in Tanaki’s beloved,” Dazai announced, dragging him off her grasp, wincing when he purposefully slammed his feet into his — and then tripping him, stepping over his fallen body. “Common sense.”

He fumed. “*You* —“

“Let us dance, Madame!” he announced, dipping Tanaki’s laughter-shaken body, “Your first dance had a right to be a peerless opportunity, but a slimy slug took it away. No fear. I am here now.”

“What a relief,” she breathed out, upside down, offering Chuuya her most apologetic grin.

“Play us something!” Dazai called, pulling her back on her feet, grinning like a child. If he cared about the glances thrown his way, he did not show it. “Something fancier than before. Maybe a song without words?”

Chuuya froze.

He was still climbing to his feet — to throw himself at the disruptor, perhaps; tug his hair until he *cried* and made a scene, fighting not to step on the edges of Tanaki’s dress, lest it muffled the smile he had managed to carve into her face.

Trapped inside his veins, where it was sticky and it was tight and it was quiet, the thing that smelled blood *before* it bled sang.

*[It was well past midnight, and they were sixteen, and someone should have been mad about that breach of curfew, but they had none of it — time limits or adults to get worried. Chuuya's only blanket was a veil on both their heads; when his kanjis were too precise on the paper, Dazai scribbled them off, as to remind him of the unstableness of progress. Or just to be mean.*

*“We’ve run out of Hirose Fumiko references,” the boy huffed, disappointed. “Let’s go with —”]*

Dazai and Tanaki danced; it took several twirls for the boy to feign him worthy of meeting his gaze. There, not a flare of amusement in his own — he tilted his head to the side.

*Everyone here is a traitor.*

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Chuuya moved.

He mingled. He hummed that tune he didn’t know, just to keep hysterical curses behind his teeth. Alcohol and food always got tongues loose — if only for the sake of filling the awkwardness. Most mafiosi recognized him at a single glance, and the battle of his reputations was a clear glint behind their eyes — one that got their shoulders to imperceptibly relax, and then tense all over again.

While there were mostly faces he had never even caught a glimpse of — no one from the *Guerrilla* squad, and no one from the ground floor security, which was unusual for Tanaki; and gently, Kouyou’s voice reminded him, *Dazai insisted to remake the guest lists* — it didn’t take long to realize a good half of them were simply *strangers*.

Names and pricey ties from the groom’s side, he assumed — tassels of the *Cleanse*.

“Chuuya,” Kouyou called, at some point, barely brushing his shoulders. She had always been wise; she had always seen through him too easily. “Are you alright?”

Tanaki danced with her husband. The moonlight was kind and cruel to the scars on her face. *Her hand on his at the cemetery*, he thought — always leaving a flower on his fake graves as well.

*Standard procedure —*

“If I was still fifteen, you’d ground me for this,” he offered, shaking the hand of some suited woman who had praised his operations in Beijing.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Her eyes had begun to study the crowd as well, if with less animosity; she had needed no code words. “I can still ground you whenever I want.”

*A song without words.*

*Standard procedure —*

“My feet hurt,” Dazai whined, high-pitched and loud, sitting down with a twirl. “There are too many ladies to dance with! Chuuya, be a good dog and give me a massage.”

He’d appropriated a table at the edge of the garden, moving abandoned purses and cigarettes away to lay his legs near the glasses. The cold wind whipped his skin, as he scrolled down his phone to check news of emergency helicopters reaching the *Juvenile Facility*.

The man sitting next to him was trapped in a fire-red jacket, a good way to black-out drunk — he had been *steadily* narrating about stolen sums from the defense-fee owned by the Government to the Mafia for the last half hour.

*Standard procedure —*

“Choke and die,” Chuuya argued, raising his eyes to the party. Tanaki was still at the center of the dance floor; the tables were all empty. He didn’t know the song — the words, though, were a slightly accented French that got Kajii to scream along. On his screen, the title of the article read: *The Ballerinas Strike Again?*

“That’s not very nice,” Dazai said.

“I wasn’t trying to be. Choke and die.”

“I’m telling Ane-san.”

“She doesn’t want to talk with your bitch ass —“

“You *youngsters*,” the man hiccuped, head swaying back and forth — along to the music, perhaps. “You should be having fun! This is a once in a life opportunity, you — *know?* Dancing with this godforsaken city’s mud.”

Chairs divided by the man’s slumped form, they exchanged a glance.

Dazai seemed to be basking in the rare joy of not being recognized — Chuuya studied the bright lipstick stain on his cheek. “Mackerel, this is Hirayama.”

“From *Hira&Sana Corporations?*” he guessed, offering his arm for a sloppy handshake. The man grunted, clearly satisfied — as enchanted with Dazai’s wide-eyed respect as every other high-name they ever met. “An enviable name, if only for those who wish the best for our city.” A polite, outrightly disgusted glance was directed at the dancing crowd. “Certainly, one deserving of something much better than mud.”

“What *I* said,” the man mumbled.

“Why would you be meddling with it, then, sir?”

“Look at it,” Hirayama scoffed, attempting to nod towards the guests. “The cause of every problem in this city, under the guise of our protectors — *Partying*. Half of our Cabinet has been emptied out — and *they* will refill it as they prefer. ‘You think it was those terrorists? *Ha!*’ Ge gulped down his glass. “No one will do anything about it. How would they? How *could* they?”

“If they weren’t cowards,” Chuuya offered.

“If the Port Mafia was less mighty, maybe,” Dazai agreed, not sparing him a glance. At the utter of that name, uncaring of his own stumbling tongue, the man flinched. “We should say things as they are, shouldn’t we? Take off the edge shadows grant them. Who knows, perhaps it would lower those cocky mafiosi from their high horses.”

Hirayama burped. Even sober, he wouldn’t have doubted the animosity in Dazai’s tone; even Chuuya had a hard time discerning his insincerity. “Wouldn’t that be a sight.”

The music changed into something sweeter — a braided mess of violins and cellos that always got Dazai’s fingers to spasm, whether he noticed it or not. Chuuya watched the crowd spin faster, and passed another glass to the CEO.

There was an unbearable calm on the sharp points of Dazai’s face — a relaxment that got him to tighten his grip around his own glass.

*Standard procedure* —

“So many faces I’ve only seen in police tapes,” he was whispering, in a haze — a spat locked between hatred and a fearful kind of awe. *The way Doc had talked about death*, Chuuya thought. *The way Noguchi had spoken of him*. “That’s *the Lady of the Port*, is she not? She’s as beautiful as they say.”

“Redheads aren’t my type,” Dazai shrugged.

“Is their Boss here?”

“No one would know,” Chuuya answered. “Few have seen his face.”

“How brutish.”

“Cautious, too.”

“I hear the Mafia’s deadliest ones are younger than one would assume,” Hirayama added, sliding down his seat, lower and lower. In the middle of the dance floor, Tanaki laughed some more, throwing her head back into the lights — scarlet, brighter than a wound. “Heard they can kill a man just by looking at him.”

“Fancy,” Chuuya commented, sipping his wine.

“Unrealistic,” Dazai replied, cleaning his nails.

“I know men in the City Hall who would murder their families in cold blood for a chance to get them,” he added. “To make them pay, maybe. If they were braver. No, it’s — *hic!* — *I know*. It’s only to make sure they can personally kill them in a way they won’t come back from.”

The man licked his lips. They were chapped — a dot of blood, or wine, was stuck at the edge of his mouth. He nodded towards Kajii, and the drunken twenty something years old he was sharing a toast with. “Is that *Double Black?*”

“No, no,” Dazai corrected him, very polite. He nodded his glass towards Chuuya, courteous. “We’re *Double Black*. ”

The fog in his eyes lingered, as he squinted, fast and tentative enough to seem nothing but a glitch. Violins sang — Hirayama turned to study his face, waiting for the echo of an announcement his brain had blinked too soon to catch.

Chuuya watched understanding settle on the caves of his face like a chasm in the ground; he only waited long enough to see the spark of terror in his gaze *crawl* out.

He settled his hand on the man’s nape, and *squeezed* the air around it.

It was a slow-motion of sorts. The crowd turned to their direction, casually and lightly, eyes passing — before their minds pushed them to do a double take. Brains and wet, *squelching* remnants of imploded eyeballs pooled down the headless body slipping down the seat, soundlessly landing on the moonlight-washed grass.

Over the honey-lined ballad, silence fell.

*Song without words. Standard procedure: eliminate all.*

Tanaki’s eyes landed on them.

*[“Do you think there’s a limit?” Virgil asked him, once. Sometimes he talked about faith the way someone who didn’t write would have about gold. “A point where we can’t really be forgiven?”*

*Chuuya didn’t mind the question much. The man’s life had been a growing vine between the claws of a man who talked about justice and a woman who had lived too long to believe in it — perhaps, he thought, Virgil couldn’t quite forget his own Limbo. Couldn’t quite pretend he had no fear anymore.*

*“Is there a point you’re not willing to go to?” he shrugged, not particularly concerned. “If you have to go to Hell for something, might as well be ‘cause you didn’t believe it to be worth it anymore.”*

*“Worthy of what?”*

*The weight his own body had been between his hands wasn't easily forgotten. The other him's skin had been all wrinkled up; the effects of a prolonged stay in the water — and he had been soft, and he had been dead, and Chuuya wasn't. Chuuya had taken his life, or maybe he hadn't at all. Chuuya had things, and he couldn't bear to lose them.*

*"Something," he replied. He had looked Rimbaud in the eye — had told him it was a good thing, giving it all up for a friend. Had lived to regret it. Rimbaud, though — he'd just died. "Anything. If you do it for nothing — then I wouldn't forgive you either." ]*

The remnants of his breakfast at juvie were still stuck under his nails. Chuuya stood up.

"You better have a good reason," he said, not turning.

Dazai's curled eyebrow was an audible thing — not unlike the *click!* of the safety of his gun. Chuuya felt hungry, all of the sudden — for something realer than the rapidly approaching conclusion fogging up the guests' eyes. Beasts barking at the sky — too obsessed by the blue to notice the bars.

"When do I not?"

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Chuuya only managed to catch a glimpse of his clone's face in the dossier, before Mori shut it between his IV-connected hands.

"*Mean!*" Elise shrieked, throwing herself at him with enough might to crush someone less adept to training to have cars thrown to his face. "You *boring*, stupid hat-wearing traitor! You said we could go shopping, and you *disappeared* —"

Despite the momentary shock — despite the startling, skin-tattooed vision of the drawing he couldn't imagine *who* would have managed to make of his clone — laughter was ripped out of his chest, muffled by her dragging weight. All four of her limbs wrapped around his middle, her mouth whining right in the shell of his ear.

She only *conceded* to lower her laments when he tightened his grip and spun her around.

"Elise, darling," Mori called, as he tilted her body back as far as it would go before falling, smirking as she scaredly held on tighter. "What did I tell you about waiting for people to come in?"

“But he’s been gone for *so long!*” she cried, taking his hat off to pull at his hair.

“You’ve been gone longer,” he reminded her, still holding her upside down.

“And you’ve been gone *uglier!*”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“*You* don’t mean anything!”

“Do I have to tell Hirotsu to get you in on the Akutagawa siblings’ lessons?”

She whined. He rotated her body around easily, not questioning whether she was lighter than air because of age or unreality. Stalling; until Kouyou’s invisible fingers tapped his chin. He put her on the ground — turned to the bed, falling to one knee with an ease that would have nauseated him, some autumns ago.

*What was that*, his mouth begged to ask. *Why were you looking at him. What was —*

“Boss,” he greeted.

Mori chuckled. “Chuuya.”

The sound got stuck in his own throat.

*There was ease in loyalty*, he thought; in being acknowledged, even in its most elementary form. Buried by debris, Chuuya had screamed for weeks before being found.

Mori was not an unknown piece of bread — good on his tired tongue, but a bit *too much*; so he had vomited it out, and then asked for more — but the urgency he sparked in Chuuya’s veins was the very same. Satiated and stupid. Eager to know more. To *repay*.

He climbed to his feet because the order was silent — looked at the man who he had almost taken a bullet for, because it felt cowardly not to.

“It’s good to see you awake,” he offered, at last. Wanted to say more, and didn’t.

The Boss of the Port Mafia was pale. Not in a sickly way — more like a caged bird. His scarf was folded on the nightstand, as precise as every inch of that non descriptive room he doubted was his own. Chuuya *knew* not to expect the shock of crimson around his neck — its absence left him confused all the same.

The man grinned. “If you had come any later, I fear you would haven’t had the misfortune. I have medically mandated naps these days, can you believe that?”

“He snores,” Elise attempted to whisper, through her quest to climb on his shoulders. “*So loud.*”

“Why are you always so mean to me?”



“Because you’re a perverted old man.”

“*Elise*,” he lamented.

She blew a raspberry.

Then, she settled on his back. Chuuya bit his cheek not to smile — or roll his eyes, or drown into the familiarity with the ease of a trust fall.

“I hear Tanaki’s wedding was — eventful,” Mori offered. His voice was nails on sandpaper; nonetheless, there was a hint of humor in his eyes — something weirdly unfit with the IVs connected to his arms, but that began to scratch at the weight Chuuya had carved in his own chest. “Typical of Dazai, to find the worst occasion possible to gather all traitors in one place.”

He attempted to step into remembrance — the blood down the fairy-lights decorated trees; the viscera next to Tanaki’s heels; the never-ending rumble of Dazai’s gun. He gulped it down; said, like it did not matter, “As long as the threat was neutralized.”

“You don’t have to hide your disapproval.”

“His plans always work,” Chuuya replied, measured. “That’s enough for me.”

“But you’re the one who deals with the aftermath,” Mori insisted. “Going door to door to apologize to families of men you had no choice but to sacrifice.”

He shrugged. It rattled his spine — he had never quite enjoyed participating in Mori’s mind games. He never did grasp *where* they were looking to land.

“Partnerships have roles,” he said. “If he has no soul to spare, I will do my best to clean up after his messes.”

“Certainly a vow.”

“He trapped me with a jam oath.”

He blinked. “What?”

A sigh. “Long story.”

“I hate jam,” Elise commented.

“I also hear that your mission was successful,” Mori added, with a lighter tone. “Not that I expected anything different. Did you have fun in juvie?”

He must have made a *face* of some kind; the former doctor laughed so hard it wrecked his chest with coughs — but he waved Chuuya away when he attempted to help him sit up, and did it on his own. He watched him drink from the glass of water next to his scarf. Elise whined. He scratched his feet on the pricey floor, and didn’t speak.

“That, too, was to be expected,” The man smiled. “I bet you had a fair share of people tell you that’s where you would end up one day, correct?”

Chuuya tilted his head. “Wonder why.”

“Including that policeman of yours, I’m assuming. What was his name? Matsuda?”

*I didn’t know you knew that*, he almost said, before good sense found his tongue again. “Old man tried to drag me to this or that facility more times than I care to count.”

Mori hummed. “He and his station have been giving us some trouble. As you must know — most are still unconvinced by the *Ballerinas*’ lead. The death of so many heirs of high society has certainly helped — the upper floors are filled with outrage towards a police that refuses to investigate the — *rightful assassins*,” He smiled. “You might want to look into that. And into your friend.”

He paused. “Trouble?”

“We’re never been as under scrutiny as we are now, Chuuya,” the man explained, after a pause. “The *Cleanse* was necessary. We’re losing support from assets we cannot afford to hand over. It will need to continue. The police investigating our affairs hardly makes the situation more ideal. Especially while I’m out of commission,” He sighed. “And, thanks to Dazai’s — *proactive* decision making, the entire syndicate and every possible spy inside it is *well* aware of it.”

“But you’re,” He tightened his grip around Elise’s legs, looking for something to grasp and not destroy. “But you’re cool now. You’ll recover, sir.”

He regretted his tone the moment it was out. He could almost see Kouyou cringe at his word choice — all Mori did was widen his grin, only a bit humorous.

“I will be more than *cool*, Chuuya,” he assured. It wasn’t physical; it wasn’t the reassuring hands Kouyou would have cupped his face with, or the shoulder-pats Hirotsu had begun to indulge with when he wasn’t threatened — a distant sort of appreciation, still, warmer than breath. “And as soon as I’m out of this hellhole, you and I will begin some lessons of our own.”

Chuuya frowned. Elise’s cheek was a cold weight on his own, pressing and mumbling, as she knotted her fingers through the *X* of his harness. “Lessons?”

“If Kouyou will allow it,” Mori winked. “I made you a promise, when you joined, didn’t I? That you would learn what it meant to be a good leader,” His eyes settled on some old stain on the wall; cracks in the stained glass windows. “Recent circumstances made me realize I might be slacking off on that oath.”

His mouth moved, soundlessly.

*Why were you looking at that*, he insisted. He wanted to defend himself — there was no one accusing him.

“I thought,” he spoke up, eventually, as careful as a walk on glass — because some things were meant to be known, and some replies were meant not to be wanted. *Why were you looking at that?* “Command was more of Dazai’s thing.”

Mori made a face. “Perhaps that’s what he wants you to believe.”

He snorted. Surprise widened the man’s eyes — Chuuya cleared his voice, hurrying to say: “The bastard is *not* that open in his manipulations. His whines and whims are hardly a relevant source of information.”

The man studied him. “I suppose you would know,” He tapped his fingers on the dossier on his lap; Chuuya felt his fingers curve into claws; and felt Elise tense up — and nothing. “But you *would* be amenable to some lessons, all the same?” he insisted. “Strategy, perhaps. Executions. Some... Possible future endeavors.”

It took him a moment to recognize the swirl in his chest — the distant *thud!* of it, like a fruit falling from a tree; rolling all the way to a street kid’s wrecked shoes. Chuuya hadn’t felt excitement in a while. “It would be an honor, sir.”

“It might turn out to be a frustrating trial,” Mori let him know, cautious. “Information you won’t be privy to. Some necessary secrecy. Long, boring matters with even more boring people. There are machinations we cannot escape, if we want the machine to keep moving.”

His lips quirked. “I know a man who would love that metaphor,” He bowed his head. “I understand that empires need secrets, sir. I’ll just climb my way to a place where I’m allowed to know.”

The former doctor sighed, not quite exasperated. “I should certainly learn to expect resiliency from the Mafia’s most stubborn. Do pray for my recovery, then. The sooner I’m up, the sooner we will start.”

“Prayers are all but efficient, in my experience,” Chuuya replied. “They tend to make people too hopeful. I could ask them to bring Elise some more toys, though.”

“*Yes!*” she rejoiced, strangling his neck in her best embrace. “Yes, yes, Rintarou, ask them to bring me —“

“I must admit, I’ve never been the religious type either,” Mori commented, studying the harsh motions of his Abilities tantrum. “I had some interesting conversations on the matter of faith — with the Secret Executive, actually.”

Chuuya perked up. Attempted to keep it subtle — to mold his face into that irritating mask of unreadable intransigence he hated to see on Dazai’s face.

“Yes,” the man answered, long before he could ask, “Hirotsu let me know about his request. Unusual, I will say. He has been — *insistent* about being left to his grief and his waiting. He only trains his students with their eyes covered, did you know?”

He ran his words back. “Waiting, sir?”

“*And* grief,” Mori nodded. “The same thing, under some very tormented circumstances. He swears so, at least. I have a hard time imagining what sort of conclusion an interim towards the dead might show him — but we all have our obsessions.”

“You said you two have talked of faith,” Chuuya echoed, after some stealthy moments of silence — as if it would appear as mere interest, and not the intrusion he had been planning since reading that request. “Are his values the reason why he refuses to face the Mafia?”

“Hardly. The only god he hates is himself.”

He paused.

It struck something deep, embedded inside bones that were not meant to be hollow — Elise pulled at his hair, and the jolt of it screeched like tires halting at the very last moment. For some reason, Chuuya thought of graves.

“Our last chat involved a pretty interesting idea,” the Boss continued — blind to his pause, or satisfied with it. “Kouyou must have taught you tons of creation myths, correct? The Executive finds the Christian one particularly perplexing. *If eating the apple would make the humans know all that God knew* — he asked me — *why, when they ate it, was shame the first thing they learned?*”

Rising from the white lace of Elise’s hems, Mori’s eyes landed on him — the irises sprinkled in crimson, like blood stains on a wall; like a crime he was not allowed to mourn. He wondered if this was a lesson, too. “What do you think?”

Chuuya shut his lips. He had never liked riddles; had lamented every, *imagine this*, Kouyou had put on his desk, swearing that training the mind was more than mere calligraphy strokes — that *understanding* the world was more than the ability to destroy it.

*But I’m good at it.*

A gentle pat, with her fan. *You can be good at more than one thing — or you can be easily replaceable. Pick your poison and die with it.*

Eventually, he shrugged. “I think it’s stupid to assume gods don’t have their secrets, too.”

A beat.

Mori smiled; it widened and it widened.

“I was looking at some data the Intelligence gathered from the Verlaine’s accident,” he offered, pulling the dossier open again. Chuuya tried his very best to stay put; planted his feet until he swore he could feel the wood cut naked skin. “We have no information from the laboratory itself — not anymore, of course. But the resemblance helped.”

He studied the drawing he had only caught a glimpse of; when the man raised the picture to compare it with his face, Chuuya tasted rust and tasted rage and tasted something that would have granted him a traitor’s death.

*Don't look at that,* he wanted to say. *Don't look at that. It isn't real. Aren't I real?*

“You know,” Mori mused, lowering it again — right before Chuuya could look at it, “Dazai told them to just draw you, *as if you'd never learned how to kill someone who did not deserve it.*”

He stared at the wall. His fingers twitched.

Elise jumped down from his back with a quiet, unspoken hiss; when he stared down at his gloves, they were thick with sweat.

*Ought to be angry,* Chuuya thought. *Ought to be angry. Ought to be human about it.*

“Of course he did,” he concluded.

“Still,” the former concluded, shutting the dossier again. He smiled at him as if he had no idea of the obsessive beating of his heart; he smiled at him as if he'd wanted it. *As long as he doesn't look at it,* Chuuya reminded himself, eyes on the dossier. “It's nothing to concern yourself with, is it? Give it a few years and some more scars, and you won't even look like him anymore.”

The stained glass windows painted squares of colors on the floor. When the afternoon sun was hidden behind passing clouds, they changed shapes — Chuuya studied the frame of shoulders in those curling kaleidoscopes, and knew it, and didn't.

*One day,* Mori had said.

Something settled between his ribs — as starved as he had been under debris and blood; as desperate as he'd screamed under the shocks of N's electricity. *It isn't hard,* Albatross had said, when he had taught him to stay afloat. He wondered what he would have thought of it all; he wondered if he deserved to long for wrinkles and grey hair, when his friend had died young and being lied to. *You just have to want to breathe tomorrow too.*

“Yes,” he said, a bit dazed. Perhaps it was selfish. All that was left of those kind eyes that had died in his arms was himself, and Chuuya, at his very root — had only ever been a thief.

“Yes, sir.”

Mori smiled. “How good it is to have you back, Chuuya,” he said. “Do me a favor. Don't tell Dazai about our future lessons. Not yet,” A wink; as secretive as they went. “We wouldn't want him to throw a tantrum, would we?”

Despite the unignorable hum of change, cracking Yokohama like roots breaking the concrete, the Port Mafia stayed the same.

Chuuya belonged to those halls as much as he did to the sky; sometimes he traced his fingers through the cold glass of the stained glass windows and recalled the voice of some unimportant cop reprimanding him on public property damage — recalled breathing in, feet deep into the chasm he had opened in the ground, and saying, *this city is mine*.

The *Guerrilla* squad greeted him with bows that were a dance between going deeper than necessary and a simple nod.

He asked after the families he hoped he would never have to meet, and still couldn't keep from memorizing — a courtesy Kouyou had tutted into his brain. The mental image of his own doorbell ringing at night, and some seventeen years old not even knowing his name before delivering a son, a husband's, a mother's corpse.

"Who are they bringing to you?" Kouyou asked, the one time he offered that possibility.

Chuuya wondered.

He had hardly ever not been the one who found the bodies — had dragged himself off any and all beds for the sake of fighting along to people that he *knew* — despite his efforts — would not last the fight.

"Tanaki," he answered. "She seems like she would die alone."

She hadn't talked to him since the wedding. Since he was always the one carrying the corpses — he let her.

He roamed, instead.

Nights were for the murders that required more blinding scenography than the work a bullet could do; for senators' villas that required to be left bloodied and haunted — when the whispers of a Port Mafia who had grown more *lenient* than it had been under an old man's craze needed to fill the silences. It filled the newspapers, too.

Mori grew less pale every day.

Days were for different kinds of tidying up. Kajii dragged him to some tailor of his knowledge right as the days grew icier, and sat on an armchair as he put on fancy suit after fancy suit, surrounded by tape and needles and clothes that fit better than his skin.

"I have Executive Kouyou's blessing," he made sure to let him know, between his requests for some Opera. "She promised to maim me if we go back with less than twenty pieces. *Twenty!* As if you don't wear the same thing every day!"

Emptying a seat meant needing to refill it; meant smiling and sharing cheap *Sake* with the most cunning — and easily influenceable, and rich enough to make his head spin, and stupid

enough to be played like a fiddle — men and women of Yokohama, promising power in exchange of shut lips and unwavering support.

The galas were the least entertaining.

“I preferred it when we were at war,” he grunted — the third week in a row he had to show up at Kouyou’s door, asking her to fix the tie he could never do straight. “These assholes had their asses wiped clean *long after* they learned what shit was.”

Kouyou smiled.

But not really; she wouldn’t have dared. He saw it all the same — because he had come to her snarling and dripping mud and *hating* the cage he had let himself be locked inside, and she had liked him from the first moment. “At war against whose army?”

He thought about it. “Who was your favorite?”

“Oh,” Her hands fell to his gloves; she fixed them, and brushed against scars Chuuya couldn’t recall if she had ever seen. “Beatrice was sort of fun, was she not?”

Replacements meant discussions — the top of Hirotsu’s head as he bowed, offering his *Lizards* for any and all services before leaving the room.

Executive meetings had been a boring novelty on their own. The excitement of granted responsibility disappeared faster than the scratches down his arms ever did. Soon, Chuuya learned to associate the crimson lights of the meeting room with the feeling of Dazai’s ankle hooked onto his, for the sake of sweating him to death — the brush of his fingertips under one of his gloves, tracing mindless chats and insulting Ace’s hairstyles as he bit his lips to raw skin.

“Always so cheerful, sir!” Hamamoto called, when he stopped by the training grounds with steps heavy enough to crack the floor. “*Big-names-san* meetings kicking your ass?”

“That pear shaped thing you call a head would *like* it, wouldn’t it?” Chuuya barked back — unexpected and *unbridled* in the way the Sheep used to roughhouse; because half of the *Guerrilla* squad had been picked off the streets.

Hamamoto had been twenty when Chuuya was eleven — but biting tourists’ wrists for food all the same.

They rolled around the dried blood on the floor, play-fighting, soon attracting a small circle of the squad — abandoning their targets to whistle and bet on that badly-rendered version of a duel. Some of their shoes landed on his knuckles, when they scurried too close — he sunk his fingers in own flesh until it all felt less violent than his veins were trying to convince him it was.

Once he got bored and pressed Hamamoto on the ground, Osaki, the sharpshooter, counted to three and whooped.

Demands for a rematch were fired.

“Give it up, *To-to*, ” one of the tallest women Chuuya had ever met — who only went by X — cooed, wrapping herself over his shoulders. “Your fault for taking that bet. As if anyone could put the local god in a chokehold.”

“*Uuh*, ” The twin girls pretended to pass out, “Fear the local god!”

“Before he eats you alive!”

“Before he blows your house down!”

“Will you two — “ Chuuya swatted at them.

“I was drunk when I took that bet,” Hamomoto was complaining, “And you *still* let me make a fool of myself, as if I didn’t ask you to —“

“Irrelevant,” X replied.

“Everyone,” Chuuya called, as he did every time he wandered down there — an *attempt*, perhaps, at learning from past mistakes. At making men who were meant to die for each other not *hate* each other. “Move your asses. Back to training.”

A chorus — something devastatingly *deferential*, and yet lined by a clear predilection that would have burned his fifteen years old self’s ears to the point of an ache. *He was getting better at that*, he thought. Better at watching kindness in the eyes, before it was swept from his hold and never recovered — before he forgot the exact shade of the irises.

Chuuya stopped by the training room everyday. If it was colder, behind the windows — he looked at the men, and wondered what smell their rotting corpses would carry.

*You cannot think of them as cattle to the slaughter*, Mori had explained, on what might have been the first of their lessons. *You cannot meet their eyes and let them see that you cannot shoulder any more graves on your shoulders.*

He had thought of the strange whispers he could not escape — had thought about asking Mori what he thought of the buzzing gossip, swearing the boy he had entrusted the *everything* of his organization to would put a knife to his throat.

It had seemed foolish; the delirium of a child not allowed at the adults’ table.

The whispers did not stop, still, no matter how unconcerned a healing Mori appeared about them. Chuuya looked out for the shaping faction no one was brave enough to admit was forming; Chuuya began to slip his finger in Dazai’s palm as well, during Executive meetings, to ask — *are you going to call them the Dazaists? Demonists? The Unite Mackerels Defense Front?*

*Why*, the boy would blink, wide and annoying — in that way that meant he found something Chuuya had said *extremely* funny, and would die before admitting it. *Want to join?*

On a day that was a bit warmer than the others, Kouyou let him pour tea in their cups, caressing Hikari’s aging fur with a distant sort of smile — and after checking every door, she



asked: “Should he kill him, would you support him?”

She asked as if she knew Chuuya wouldn’t answer. So he didn’t.

So he roamed.

“Sir,” Hamomoto called, on an utterly cold day, settling next to him on the bleachers. The skin under his eyes resembled a stormy sky; tired or not, Chuuya could still see smoke rise from his target. “I wanted to thank you.”

He’d been laying with his head tilted back, eyes on the lack of humidity stains on the ceiling. *Building One* was newer than the other — it had been wounded, like all of them. “Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not.”

“I executed your friend,” he insisted, a bit more brusque than he’d intended. “Despite the circumstances, offer yourself and him the respect not to say stupid shit.”

Chuuya enjoyed the *Guerrilla’s* loosened behavior — had fought for it.

It didn’t mean he was willing to let it go further. A night out drinking after a good mission; shared laughter and inside jokes as they fought on the floor — the basic courtesy of calling them by name when he assigned them to possibly death. Chuuya rejoiced in their presence and breathed out in the silence of his home and would have died for them. Chuuya had no more space for —

“You tried to vouch for him,” Hamamoto insisted. “It’s more than Katsuki deserved, after —“ A pause. A slight redness in the corner of his eyes. He wondered what Tanaki was doing; if it hurt her to leave the breakfast he kept bringing her *always* untouched, two weeks in a row. “No one else tried to help him. They all agreed he simply couldn’t — keep up. You *tried*.”

*Keep up.*

It had been an unstoppable melody out of Kouyou’s mouth, during his first weeks in the Mafia. Every calligraphy meeting, every training session, every cleaned drop of blood from Golden Demon’s sword, every smile — *keep up, Chuuya*.

The Port Mafia was an ecosystem of its own; it had its own laws and its own gravity. Calling it *natural selection* felt too cruel to the skull he had crushed under his shoe — the sight of teeth falling against the concrete, the resounding echo of bullets. Traitors and slackers-off and pebbles in the syndicate’s shoe and countless faces he had forgotten — it was all a matter of survival.

*And luck*, Iceman would have said, cynical. *It would all be easier if people were more willing to admit that.*

*And money*, Chuuya would have replied. *And blood.*

“When’s the funeral?” he asked. Because that man hadn’t been worthy of being Mafia — so he would, most certainly, get one.

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Apart from all the private funerals, a public service was held to commemorate the victims of the *Yokohama Juvenile Prison*.

It came with scandal, of course — Taguchi had explained it far and deep: no one had known a structure like that even existed. *How very lucky*, a particularly mean-spirited gossip channel had long discussed, *that such a discovery would come afloat on such a grievous time*. No gossipy aristocrat and no views-catching television channel had the nerve to count the crimes the children the open coffins had committed.

*Give it six weeks*, Hirotsu told him. Precise to the dot; probably correct, too.

He went to the public service all the same.

“Is this how you spend your paid leave?” Officer Matsuda questioned, appearing next to the Church entrance Chuuya was leaning against. “I think I almost preferred it when you used to break into state-owned Arcades.”

Chuuya scoffed. “Don’t lie. Breaking and entering are so much paperwork.”

“You know, in another life — you would have made for a great lawyer.”

*In this*, he didn’t add. *In this* —

The coffins had been set in endless rows. He had shared three meals for more than a month with the barely recomposed bodies inside them; he hadn’t realized there were so many of them. *It has to mean something*, he thought, nonsensically. *A rise in underage criminality. A fault in the system. A growing number of insufferable rich kids.*

A woman draped herself across one of the graves. She wailed.

“Yuan’s fine, by the way.”

He tilted his head, quiet.

“She did catch me, once,” Matsuda added. “She was — strangely happy to see me. Invited me to dinner with her and that woman she’s staying with. She seemed desperate for stories,” The glance he threw his way was heavier than the persisting autumn wind. “She asked if I’d seen you.”

“And what did you say?”

He shrugged. “That you knew better than to let me find you.”

Mildly mollified, Chuuya nodded.

“You know,” Matsuda added, with a distant look in his eyes that he knew exactly where — *when* — to place. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“If back then, you’d had the certainty that we *would* have been able to help,” he explained. He never really said Murase’s name in front of him, if he could help it. Chuuya thought he was getting that courtesy backwards. “Would you have let us?”

He was looking at him with strange, badly placed intensity. *It doesn’t matter anymore*, he had the temptation to tell him. *It doesn’t matter. Why do you act like it does?*

“I don’t know,” he offered. “I don’t care.”

The cameras took a few close pictures of the coffins. Matsuda nodded, frowning.

Rolling his hat between his hands, Chuuya then asked: ““You gonna help out with the *Ballerinas* now, or do we have to keep bumping into Police cars on the sidewalk of the Headquarters?”

A beat. A faraway reporter was narrating the scene inside the Church. Matsuda’s expression was complicated.

“We did figure out some of the late victims are from the *Special Division*, too,” the man said, at last. “An entire wing of it, actually.”

He kept his eyes on the coffins. “Really?”

“I believe the Mafia doesn’t exactly have the cards to risk a crusade like this,” he confirmed. “It certainly gives a basis to the *Ballerinas*’ theory. But the corpses of the only three names in our database from the *Ballerinas*’ days have already been found. We’d have to start from an empty page.”

“Then start it,” Chuuya replied. “What else was it for, otherwise?”

“What was it?”

All in one go, as per tradition, the coffins were sealed shut. The coordinated *thud!* echoed all across the room; some shoulders jumped, startled, and some shoulders stayed crying.

“What wasn’t?” he replied.

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Three weeks after the replacement process had begun, and unassumingly colorful billboards of candidates for the upcoming elections sprouted all over the skyscrapers — Chuuya wore the grey suit that was too tight around his neck. Then, he rang the doorbell of some private party that *officially* hadn’t been thrown, and the woman who let him in said: “Oh. You’re Lippman’s kid.”

It was a harder hit than he had thought it could be, seasons later.

Liquifying. Chuuya didn’t know what his face made of it — if the melted wax of a face he had sculpted, looking inside a mirror he didn’t recognize, took too long to drip onto the floor; if grief ever stopped hurting; if that woman was looking for a fight and if he would be blamed for it.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” She shook her head, amused.

Her hair was a cascade of dyed gold, just pale enough to seem white, pooling down her same colored dress until they meddled. Behind her was the attic of one of the highest skyscrapers in Yokohama — a fog of smoke and drugs blurring the sparkly dresses of the most well-known actors of the nation.

*The higher you are, Mori would have said, the easier it is to fall.*

“Understandable,” she continued. “The one time we met, you and those friends of yours were too busy graffitizing the fucker’s billboard.”

Chuuya stared. “Oh.”

Memories flooded into his skull, rattling it harder than bolts of lightning would have managed to. A night of eons; snow clinging to the hems of his pants as he cursed and *cursed* Albatross again for convincing him to tag along — Pianoman’s too polite giggles; Iceman’s apparent disinterest; the cold metal of Doc’s IV pole as Chuuya helped him climb to the roof.

Chuuya had been the one to bring spray paint with him. They had all agreed he seemed like the best option for who would know where to find some — *what is that supposed to mean, assholes?*

Lippman had laughed to the point of tears, watching the fake mustache on his face — some dramatic poster for some romcom, the lead actress' hair flying into his eyes.

A woman had dragged them back inside, at some point. *If you guys get a bit more drunk and fall off, I will be blamed for it*, she'd sighed.

"So," the actress had to scream, to be heard over the music, as she led him through couches of intertwined bodies and unappealing beverages. She had to be older than thirty, but something in the sway of her hips made her seem younger. "You're the one they sent to negotiate the Mafia's *fame facade*? You must have climbed up the ladder, since Lip died."

No one Chuuya knew had called Lippman *Lip*.

He felt the urge to dislike her; pushed it down, stole a glass of wine from a table and said: "There's nothing to discuss. You and your group have already accepted."

A snort. "With all that money on the table, we would have been stupid not to."

"I'm here for your opening nights' schedules."

"Got some urgent meetings to organize where no one will peek?" At his unimpressed gaze, she huffed. "Are you going to be a stable figure for these matters? I would like to request a change. Lip was *tons* funnier. No need to be all business in a room with la *crème de la crème* of this city, kid. You could stand to have some fun."

"We have different definitions of what an elite is," Chuuya replied, studying a wall of shelves — *littered* in prizes, their fake gold almost blinding when hit by the kaleidoscopic lights.

He had read that some acting association was thinking of opening a museum in Lippman's old mansion; a tribute to his movies.

*That's fine*, he liked to tell himself. He had taken to sleeping in the bathtub, sometimes. The porcelain was always cold on his arms — almost enough not to need to be scratched. Sometimes he woke up with eyes already open, no need to blink, chest heaving, and he didn't remember anything at all. *That's fine. You don't own the dead.*

"And *Lip* is dead, anyway," he added.

Something in her gaze shifted — a glint of undyed hair, perhaps; a face less untouched by the lights. She had a peculiar tattoo — a bruise-like line, shaping itself into a half moon, right at the juncture between her shoulder and neck.

She sighed — held his chin between two fingers and leaned down to plant her lips on his.

"Dear," The woman sighed, uncaring of his spluttering. "That's how you know the fucker was good, uh? Come on. I'll show you the wine cellar."

For reasons Chuuya wouldn't have known how to explain, he followed.

He stayed most of the night, too; swirled around those bodies he assumed most people his age would have freaked out to see from up close — thought about the poster he had seen in Yuan's room, the last time he had floated near her window. It had been hanging weakly, as if unsure such frivolity was allowed to *her*.

Something about him — the novelty of a newcomer, perhaps; a bit too young and bearing slightly unusual colors — called the crowd to him.

Chuuya tried to drink his wine one sip at the time, unwilling to deal with the mess he would leave behind if unrestrained — Chuuya sat by the daughter of some filmmaker and let her study his eyes with her hazed own.

“You know,” she told him, “My mother used to tell me stories about people with those eyes.”

*Mine didn't*, he thought he might have told her, with a hint of cruelty. Instead, he offered her his inner jacket when she began to shake, and let her disappear through the crowd.

He pocketed her stolen phone in his coat, and left the room.

*[“You're too beautiful to waste it away in passivity,” the women at the Pomegranate loved to tell him, whenever he and Kouyou were in too much of a hurry for her to complain about his presence there. “Learn to welcome their touches, and get what you want back.”*

*“I'm not the ideal choice for the Rose-blush Tactic,” he would reply, each time — because he wasn't. Older women and careful men at the most luscious Mafia events loved to fawn over him — still, they tended to pick a safer target as soon as he opened his mouth.*

*More often than not, that target tended to be Dazai — with his suicide offers and endlessly charming eyes, and the way he pretended not to feel Chuuya's gaze on himself, as he walked to some private corner with a pearls-bearing woman.*

*Sometimes it was just flirting. Sometimes it was a kiss or two — sometimes, the way Dazai would tilt his head back on his seat, exposing the crooked line of his throat. He had been a beautiful kid, if a bit somber, dark under the eyes — as far as the voices went. The more his lines sharpened, the more their fingers trembled.*

*Sometimes, more rarely, only enough to fit the fingers of a hand —*

*Did you fuck her?, Chuuya would ask him, sometimes, when they shared a cigarette on the sidewalk, waiting for a car to come pick them up.*

*Dazai was a pale, thin thing under the moon — not really attractive. Sickly looking; all Chuuya felt was the instinct to hold his hand when they crossed the street, and then slap his nape when he started to run.*

*No double suicide, unfortunately, Dazai would sigh, each time. Twirling until his coat was liquid air — having to look down to meet his gaze, and doing so with a childish glee that was the most captivating he could be, in Chuuya's eyes. Maybe next time.*

*It wasn't an answer.*

*The subject was better dropped. Dazai would get whiny if he didn't; would start asking awkward questions for the sake of watching rage paint him red.*

Miri from Intelligence said you'd look great between her thighs, *he would chant, pulling on his choker; and*, I heard that guy from the *Black Lizards* say he would want us both at the same time, *while he abandoned his head on his shoulder in the back of the car, the bumpy ride knocking them closer; and*, the first time I fucked someone I was —

I lied, *he would say, days later. He always lied, but not quite.* You didn't believe me, silly Hatrack, did you?]

The actors' schedule was given to him, at one point — wrapped with a bow and a formal letter Mori would find meaning into. *Blondie* told him she would wait for him at her premiere, to discuss protection; Chuuya thought about asking *from what*, and didn't.

"You'd do *very* good on the big screen," she told him, holding his chin still — studying his eyes. "Lippman must have told you at least once. They like freaks like us."

Chuuya's mouth opened to snarl — the sight of her unmatched eyes, watching him with a twinkle that spoke of nothing but trouble, made him pause.

"Learn to enjoy what you're given," Blondie said, as she ruffled his hair, and kissed him again — a wet smack on both his cheeks and then his lips, emptily affectionate. *How French of you*, Kajii would have said. "Do it *mercilessly*. A smack in the face, to all of them. Lippman came from the streets too, you know? Mommy took him in," Her voice turned into a sly whisper. "And he killed her for it."

He watched her. "I didn't know."

A wink. "Come around more, and I'll give you some stories my little brother might have failed to mention."

She shut the door in his face without a care. Chuuya hadn't even asked her name.

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"Oi, don't run off," Chuuya called, climbing up the snowy grounds of the cemetery. Q's silhouette was a dot in the slightly dirtier white of their school uniform, disappearing up and down the tombstones. "If you fall in one of the open graves, I'm not saving you!"

The season was starkly familiar against wind-swept eyes — if less plastic, compared to the *Ballerinas*’ mess; more authentic under his shoes, as the fallen leaves crunched and the bright stain of the child’s yellow scarf whipped the air. Kouyou had given it to them.

*We punish them for smearing blood all over the floor*, she had shaken her head about, once, in the privacy of her room. *We praise them for the exact same thing. Seems unwise.*

Perhaps it wasn’t compassion, Chuuya considered. Perhaps it was just carefulness; stained mindfulness of consequences. Perhaps most of them had stopped visiting Q’s cell — the clearer it became *they* had been the one to choose to put blades in their own arms.

*How long until they forget which one is their duty?*

“I know her,” Q let him know, when he managed to catch up, pointing to a nameless grave. It bore some graffiti of a monster. “She stole kids from the Institute.”

Chuuya crouched down. “How would you know?”

“She stepped on my foot, once.”

He sighed.

He offered them his hand to hold because, doll or not doll — there were only so many times Mori would accept not to execute them all for losing the local ill omen. He settled his eyes on the curling strands of candid and ashy hair, and he thought of the slight pause Koda always inhaled right from the space next to him, before launching in a speech.

They walked by the small bundle of graves dedicated to the *Wild Geese Orphanage*. Koda’s brother, he knew, was somewhere there.

Q nudged his side.

They had grown taller, at some point — had made sure to point it out the moment Chuuya had showed up at the metal doors of the army base, pushed by Kouyou’s cleared-throat; as if it was a less heartbreaking, more childish way of saying, *I haven’t seen you in almost a year*.

“Are those your friends?” they asked, nodding to the graves in front of them.

Abandoned graves came in pairs; Chuuya had mentally situated his squad’s own only a few steps from where the Flags’ own resided. “Yeah. Looking fancy and all, aren’t they?”

The kid squinted, pulling on the hems of their shirt. They stared at what they couldn’t know was Koda’s own, and Chuuya tried not to feel particularly touched by it.

Very quietly, Q kicked a pebble. It bounced off Rin’s grave; landed on the wet grass.

“Don’t worry,” they said, then. “God likes *them*.”

He slipped his hands in his pockets. “I don’t see the use in that, but it’s nice to know.”



“It means they don’t need to hurt anyone anymore,” the kid insisted. They looked up at him with strangely shaped pupils, scarlet veins at the edges of their eyes. Their bandages peeked from the shirt — Chuuya thought of Dazai’s most distracted glances, and he thought of the way he laughed when under *Corruption*; and then he didn’t think at all. “It’s good.”

The cemetery quickly got on Q’s nerves — either that, or they decided to test his *fishing out of graves* threat. They began playing Hopscotch between the tombstones, climbing over the angelic statues — unbothered by the offended stares of the little crowd.

“Maybe I should get them a console, too,” Chuuya mused, through munches of food he had bought more out of obligation than anything else. “Is that a thing psycho brats dig? I sure would have,” A huff; a kick to Albatross’ grave. “Don’t look at me like that, assholes. ‘S not my fault I keep getting roped into babysitting.”

Chuuya was hardly looking for hobbies; for silence, perhaps. “I know I messed up,” he mumbled, once he was done with his half-assed rendition of the events of Tanaki’s wedding.

Summarizing stories to the Flags always felt a bit silly, but efficiently soothing to the swells in his throats one or two missions wouldn’t sink — he wouldn’t have indulged, had he felt a fully developed presence in the near vicinity.

“It’s not like she doesn’t understand. We’re in a bad situation, yeah? It’s that bastard’s fault, anyway — and her husband didn’t even divorce her or anything,” His tone seemed plastic to his own ears. “I made sure to pay for her laundry too, for the wedding dress — I know blood is hard to clean off from the whites. Ane-san’s been gifting me detergents, lately. Fuck knows why.”

He gulped down his bite; threw some fries to Albatross’ grave. “Of course she’s mad. It was her big day. *A chance at something normal, once in a while* — I suppose that’s why she’s had so many weddings. Who needs that many weddings, anyway? She’s a beautiful woman. She should escape commitment.”

The wedding was a confused bundle of flares he had refused to linger on — table cloths stained in blood and viscera; the repeating ricochet of bullets where his steps were not fast enough to reach.

“This whole *Cleanse* situation, you would have loved it,” he added, some undefined eternity later, nodding towards Pianoman’s grave. “Bet you’d have found a way to get yourself a comfy seat in the City Hall. And Doc would have forced you to make monthly blood draws mandatory.”

He vaguely longed for a cigarette, but he suspected it had more to do with the *motion*, than the action itself. Thinking of Iceman always came with the smell of smoke; thinking of graves always came with a strange urge to set something on fire.

Seated on the shoulders of some general’s statue, Q waved their arms to the sky.

*Not a cigarette*, he let himself consider. He yearned for something more physical; for the way Albatross would always pick the priciest option of *anything* if Pianoman was paying, maybe.

One of Noguchi's insults. For the City Hall not to burn the skeleton of the *Wild Geese* to the ground — to build a supermarket or a clothing shop over it.

"I'm gonna get that *Permit*," he let them know. "And I'm gonna wave that fucking thing it in your stupid faces until you *feel* it. And you *will*."

"Chuuya *nii-san!*" Q roared, laughing so loud it startled some crowd off a nearby statue. Chuuya ought to clean leaves off Albatross' grave; take his motorcycle for a ride and remind himself of what being left behind felt like. *No need to hurt anyone anymore*. "Chuuya, look! It's snowing!"

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He recognized his shoes well before his guest bent in a half and stuck his nose under the desk. Dazai did always pick the least ideal leather.

"That's my spot," he noted, annoyed.

"Then you should have been faster," Chuuya spat, eyes on the commercials popping up in the laptop carefully balanced on his knees, as he attempted to set an episode. He huddled closer to one side of the secretary corner at *Building One* — not quite an invitation, given he followed it with some well-aimed kicks to the boy's shins. "This was *my* idea."

Dazai settled next to him. "How was this *your* idea, if we didn't even plan to meet?"

"Well," he hissed, "Well — you should have known I would do something like this."

Dazai's elbow landed somewhere between his ribs and his ankles, smacking one corner of the laptop against the desk so hard it *cracked*. "Maybe *you* should have known *I'd* do something like this."

"You've never apologized to anyone in this world. Not *once*."

"Who says I'm here to apologize?" He sniffed. A small group from the *Guerrilla* squad had been muttering about Dazai all day, during their visit to some Senator's warehouse — talking about factions and possibilities and history. *About time someone put a bullet in his head*, Hamamoto had said. *Perhaps threatening the Boss will give us just that*. "I need to catch up on *Spider Eyes*, and this place has the best Internet reception."

Chuuya frowned, pulling the laptop closer to his chest. “Could you pretend not to be living and breathing shit for, like, thirty seconds?”

Dazai blinked. “Can you pretend to reach the national height average for thirty seconds, or is floating too tedious?”

“Shut the *fuck up*. And Floor Seven has free Wi-Fi.”

“We’re *banned* from Floor Seven, Slug,” A sigh. “Not that I care, but Mori is already galling enough these days without adding on it.”

He opened his mouth — closed it again, because he had been about to suggest Floor Thirty-Three instead. Keeping count was tedious and necessary, unless Chuuya wanted to be faced with the shrieking security system — and *Double Black* were banned from a good quarter of floors, for reasons that ranged from property damage to hours-long debates in the ears of *innocent workers, boys, truly* —

*Sonoko-chan says I can go wherever I want*, Dazai would then say, usually. But *Sonoko-chan* had tried to kneel and propose marriage to the Demon Prodigy, months ago, so she didn’t count.

*Find someone better*, Chuuya had told her, once — because almost all the girls Dazai’s shifting moods left behind tended to inevitably fall next to the closest shadow tailing his crooked frame. *That includes almost anyone in this God forsaken earth.*

She had sniffed. *No one’s like him.*

*On that*, he had shivered, *we can certainly agree.*

Chuuya paused, gasping. “Wait, was *Sonoko* the one who sent a bomb to your office?”

The desk chair was moved away, swift and gentle on the marble floors.

Heels and flower-patterned stockings filled their vision — a sight as familiar as every free afternoon he had ever been granted, softening the edges of his shoulders.

“Boys,” Tanaki called, very quiet. “Get up.”

Dazai’s expression did something complicated. It dragged goosebumps from under Chuuya’s skin, pulsing strangely against his shirt — instinctive horror, perhaps. Chuuya was too distracted to wonder about his own features; the ache of his fingers, clenched too tightly around the laptop, startled him.

With a shared glance that meant nothing at all, they climbed out of the under-desk refuge.

*Honeymoons are outdated*, Tanaki had said, when Boss had presented his congratulations and offered a few days off service as a gift. *Not while the season is so busy, sir. Perhaps one day, if you will still allow me.*

Mori's nod had been unsurprised. *Always proving yourself sooner than one can test, aren't you, dear Tanaki?*

Honeymoon or not, a glow of sorts was still stuck all around her frame — something as elegant as her dress had been. She made sure to place her chair at a certain distance from them, and said: “You're too old to crank up under there. No need to get all stiff before a mission.”

To call her tone *ungentle* would have been a disservice. She took the laptop from his hands with incredible kindness, not touching a inch of him — made sure to shut the *Spider Eyes* page, before closing it.

“Hey,” he protested. “Do you know how long it took me to get past the viruses?”

“Perhaps we should pick a less obscure soap opera for our next watch,” Dazai suggested. “Something easier to find. We don't want Chuuya to accidentally land us under the Government's eyes, do we?” A pause. “Not *again*.”

“What the *fuck* is that supposed —“

“Boys,” Tanaki echoed, eyes on some place of her twinned hands. The engagement ring, maybe — the wedding band. The scar one of the guests had left on her wrists, trying to hold onto her as Chuuya sunk his shoe in his skull. “I have work to do. Maybe later?”

They stared. She sat on her chair — typed away on her laptop, offering gentle nods to the entering mafiosi.

A bit lost, only realizing their own dejected steps by the final stairs of the *Building*, they left.

The next day, unprompted, they were back.

Unsuccessful results followed.

“She's never going to forgive us,” Chuuya had no choice but to observe, one week into that parade. His spine was permanently rearranged; the sight of Tanaki's unimpressed, disappointed gaze was burned under his eyelids, itching in a way that made him madder than some more maturity would have justified. “She even refused the Italian takeout. She *never* refuses Italian takeout.”

“I'm not here to apologize for doing my duty,” Dazai insisted, every day. “Tanaki's been in the Mafia for longer than we have. She should know things don't always go as planned.”

Nonetheless, he failed to keep the whiny edge out of his tone.

Favorite pastries were left on her counter; the little commissions her job demanded were taken care of before she could; they spent a whole morning, still rubbing Senator blood from under their shoes, running around the city in search of the agency that owned her wedding location — and Dazai stole his wallet to pay for all damages.

“You have my same salary, *jackass*, ” Chuuya could only snap, raining kicks on his back, as they walked out, “It’s probably higher! You’re a fucking Executive!”

“I *keep* telling Mori I don’t need money,” Dazai replied, confused. “I’ve got yours.”

Favors seemed the best solution to their perplexion. Kouyou had been mad at the two of them more often than Chuuya could comfortably recall — Mori’s exasperation was hardly cause for intervention, as long as it didn’t grow sharp. Hirotsu’s frustration was a daily sigh behind their running feet.

Tanaki had never truly *avoided them*.

Chuuya had pulled away, during the *Nine Rings’ Conflict* — had made sure to step into rooms she would not find, to be quiet and polite and a good fighter, as if it could fill a void he had helped tear into her.

*Stop feeling like you owe me*, she’d said.

“Odasaku says women like flowers,” Dazai came to the point of murmuring — breaching even his oath not to mention his best friend in Chuuya’s vicinity. “The florist near the park has a daughter that goes to the local University. I could threaten her — do you think a whole flower shop would make her less prissy?”

“I get that you wanted to make the traitors an example, or whatever turns your torturer mastermind ass on,” he snapped, watching the woman laugh along to some faceless subordinate through the vents’ slots. “Good job, or whatever. The whole Mafia hasn’t talked about anything but Tanaki’s slaughterhouse wedding in a *month*. You want me to believe you *couldn’t* have organized a public execution in the training grounds?”

Stubbornly, he kept quiet. Tanaki laughed some more. Chuuya watched him frown about it.

Gifts turned out to be the worst method; they all turned her expression more sour than it already was, and she was quicker to hush them out from under the desk. She was more *likely* to hear out whatever starting point they were attempting to build up — if they didn’t immediately start fighting in front of her.

The one time Chuuya had gone alone — asking if she wanted to join him to the cemetery — she had only shaken her head.

“I’m not here to apologize,” Dazai swore.

On a cloudy afternoon, Chuuya watched him climb out of the desk, drape himself over Tanaki’s chair and moan: “Tanaki, the Hatrack is *so* very *sorry*, why can’t you just forgive him and let us move on?”

Chuuya kicked him right in the face. Tanaki threw them out. When her husband came by to bring her a packed dinner — he met Dazai’s eyes through the ice pack Chuuya had annoyedly pressed on it, and didn’t say anything.

Slowly, like all corpses tended to do around there, the smell grew intolerable. And the worms came to eat.

Managing to get her to sit on the floor, laptop on her stockings, and Chuuya and Dazai on either side of her — should have felt more like a victory. But she spent that whole afternoon silent — watching *Spider Eyes* pass in front of her and under their commentary with a hint of tiredness.

“Give her three days,” Dazai swore, confidently, as if dealing with a body in the dungeons. “She’ll start talking.”

She did.

Clipped sentences and quivering smiles in the face of their wittiest remarks to the characters; she ate the breakfast Chuuya brought her, and she didn’t join him in his visits to the Cemetery — but he found flowers on his graves all the same.

“Sorry,” Chuuya offered, one evening, like a second thought, while Dazai pretended to sleep on the floor — hoping he would piggyback ride him to that container of his, probably. Or to Albatross’ place, given he kept breaking in at weird hours — and Chuuya kept waking up on the floor.

“It’s alright,” she replied, eyes on the screen. “It will not matter anymore, soon.”

One week later, she let her head drop on his shoulder as she watched; some days after, she fixed Dazai’s tie before a meeting. Her husband came by to bring her lunch.

On the last night that tension between them lingered so openly — the last night before it turned into a deaf hum of sorts, ever present but less cruel; easy to ignore, if Chuuya closed his eyes and thought of the fear most eyes in the Mafia reserved for their roaming through the halls — she set up the laptop herself, and asked: “What is it that your boys feel so apologetic for?”

They exchanged a glance, perplexed.

“Well,” Dazai dared, eventually. “Blood is hard to get off wedding dresses.”

“For ruining your special day,” Chuuya replied, as he reached behind her to slap his nape — *hard*. “Not letting you know.”

Tanaki studied them.

Imperscrutable, in some way — the way some weathers were; the shape some bodies left on the ground when burned. Dazai was playing with the hems of her skirt, ripping loose threads off. Chuuya wasn’t sure of why he felt like they had failed some sort of test.

*[Once, he recalled, when they were younger, she had asked them what the missions that involved Chuuya’s body destroying itself — as she lacked a name; as they all did, and no one was brave enough to ask — felt like.]*

*“Uh,” Dazai had blinked, realizing the expression on Chuuya’s face probably meant no answers for a while. “Like any other, I’d say.”]*

“I suppose,” Tanaki concluded, only barely louder than the voices coming from the screen — somewhat quizzical; a hint of empty wonder.

And that was the last of it.

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The presenter wore a somber expression during the first commercial break they bumped on.

*“ — only mere weeks from the anniversary of the beloved actor’s passing,” she was saying, eyes on the notes, “ Despite requests for privacy, sources seem to agree the death of the actress is unable to be ruled off as a mere suicide, with numerous evidence pointing towards a violent altercation that might have instigated the —“*

Chuuya met the woman’s eyes in an old picture right as Tanaki’s lips parted — her make up and grin lighting up the entire screen.

Breaking through some old videotape clip — a last dedication put together in too little time, from movies he hadn’t seen — Lippman’s sister offered them a wink, and did not move until her screen turned black and white, buzzing.

## Chapter End Notes

skk: my emotional support secretary is mad at me. hope i die

from the note in the juvie's control room: 'jay-e shomà khālist' which means "your place is empty" (a persian way of saying "i miss you")

hey there! nice to see you again. life update for those who remember that one "almost got run over note"... apparently i broke one of my toes. but! it doesn't hurt at all so that's very surprising to me. anyway. i'm fine and alive and thinking about skk, and that alone will certainly heal me.

thank you so much for reading, and for leaving comments and kudos. i hope you liked this just as much. stay warm and have a beautiful day week and everything!!

see you soon! ;)



# THAT'S

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xvii.*

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*Case number: 37837888*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were tasked with [...]*

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Ten days before Christmas, the first of the assassins broke into the Boss' room.

Roughly five hours later, as a somber group of mafiosi reunited in the interior garden of *Building Three* — *the blood parking lot*, Chuuya had heard them call it, when he was still

young and in need of directions — waiting for the execution of seven guards.

“*Please*,” the one still breathing choked out, attempting to crawl away from the rising foot of some faceless executioner — one of Dazai’s men; because they always were. “Please, please, I — I will be more careful, I *promise*, my loyalty is —“

“Your loyalty to the Boss is pointless,” Hirotsu cut through, vacantly, “If you can’t even guard his *rooms*. ”

A cry. His jaw was forced open on the curb. With a sick crunch, the shoe was smashed against his skull.

“What a bother,” Dazai sighed, sitting in front of him. A few seats had been brought to the circle, as they always were — Executives tended not to stand; not when the cockroaches who couldn’t do their job got exterminated. Chuuya thought it sort of disrespectful, in a distant way; he usually stood, arms on the closest chair. “They only waste so much time because they want to hear them cry. A bunch of sadists.”

“Says the only fucker to graduate from the school of torture,” Chuuya muttered, pinching his nape. His arm was straining a bit; mostly, to pull on his hair whenever his gaze grew too distracted — the look of upcoming jumps in the river.

“It’s not a school if I’m the only one.”

“You wrote entire *papers* on it,” he hissed. “I saw you bring them to the Intelligence.”

A woman choked on her spat tooth. Before the coughing fits could be over, her jaw had been cracked open by the sidewalk.

Three bullets followed.

As the corpses got dragged away with little delicacy, ignoring the heavy gazes slithering all over them, Chuuya let him know: “They think you sent the assassin.”

Dazai hummed, just as still. “Do they think I turned Mori’s personal guards into incompetent fools, too?” They had to be making for a sight, he supposed; lazily, Chuuya *tried* to remind his angling body that proximity with the Port Mafia’s latest conundrum was anything but wise.

*Let them call you by name as much as you want*, the boy had told him, once. *Haven’t you heard our title? You’re as Mafia black as I am.*

*Not like you*, Chuuya had to have said. He couldn’t recall.

When the last assassin was made to kneel, she escaped. An unreasonable suicide; she only did so to fall to her knees on her stubborn, desperate own — kissing the blood-dirty tip of Dazai’s shoe.

Chuuya crushed her head before any of the mafiosi could get a grip on their gun.

*They had to be making for a sight*, he thought, distracted — there were brains on their pants and utter silence over their skin. Hamamoto was standing on the other side of the room, face a void. Mori had almost been killed, and Chuuya was standing too close to a man who people would die swearing loyalty to.

“Clean that up,” Dazai ordered, bored.

The men turned to Chuuya.

Not much to do. He nodded.

It was the first execution of the season. Without any fussle, under a bandaged gaze, more followed.

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The *Old World* tasted like more like copper the further one sat down the counter.

*No scientific explanation to it*, Doc had shrugged, when one of them had mentioned it. Chuuya had no idea of how the smell had even survived the reconstruction; being cocooned in it was easy, though, and it slipped down his throat like wine. *Perhaps our brains are permanently altered. Could be a toxins issue. Oh, that could make for an interesting —*

The brush of fabric on the floor tickled his ears. He didn't look up; only nodded once towards the sole bartender already working that early in the afternoon, watching her leave a glass in front of the seat Kouyou hovered upon.

“Am I meant to take offense?” the woman asked, with a small smile. She pointed to her glass. “You know I'm not a *red* woman, do you not?”

“You'll like this one,” Chuuya replied.

“You don't say,” Her amusement made sure not to knock too loudly on his tensed shoulders; still, he breathed it in. “Good to know all those wine tasteries I dragged you to were of some use.”

They sipped in silence. The bar was empty; the low hum of music pressed against the walls like a caress, framing the passersby behind the windows in a strangely rose-tinge. It had stopped raining, at some point between the funeral he had followed behind a tree and his

stubborn walk to the bar — the smell of rain lingered, mixing with the *Old World's* more traditional scent.

Eventually, Kouyou said: "I'm sorry."

"Didn't know her," Chuuya shrugged.

"Ace's police squadron was assigned the investigation. They're convinced an Ability User is involved in her death," She glanced his way. "She and Lippman had been estranged for — a long time. They saw each other rarely; they first met when she was already out of their mother's house. Her death worsened the drift —"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, *eventually*," she insisted, "Once you've crawled your way out of those silly, guilty ideas in your head, I *know* you would have looked for her. She would have given you these stories — I'm merely fixing an issue of timing."

"Timing," Chuuya echoed, tracing the rim of his glass. He thought about asking the woman's name — thought better of it. "Why kill her?"

Kouyou's next glance was dirtier — made it clear she had seen through his attempt at a change of topic. "The most popular theory is a message."

"What kind of message?"

"*Keep your Cleanse to the political side*," she mimicked. "They don't want us to control public opinion too, and our — the *fame front* is a road straight into that kind of power. I have a different theory."

He curled an eyebrow. "Then, what's our theory?"

Lipstick-red lips curled up; she tapped her nails on the wood, blind eyes roaming through the bottles lined up on the wall behind the counter. She extracted a thin file from the back of her sash — offered it to him with as much nonchalance as she had displayed the last time she had gifted him a collector revolver.

"The *Cleanse* demands a rebranding from our inner rows as well," she explained, as Chuuya squinted at the papers in his hands — pages after pages of identification forms, all of them belonging to somewhat-known rogue Ability Users. "Boss wishes for us to recruit — particularly in the Users department. The *Special Division* must have caught a whiff of our intentions. It already angers them enough, not having enough evidence to frame us for illegal hire of Users — *Adding* to our numbers?" Kouyou scoffed. "Question is — how did they even find out?"

"*For every ten men you get, two spies fly in*," Chuuya said.

"Awfully rude of you to quote me."

“Or awfully right,” He downed the last of his wine. “So what — the *Special Division* killed a well-known name just to ward us off building an Users’ network? It’s useless. If the Intelligence has already gathered this much on these people, they’re basically ours.”

“Except — killing civilians isn’t their style,” Kouyou commented. “Plus, we have detailed lists on almost every User who works at the *Division* — no one whose Ability matches what was found on the woman.”

Chuuya frowned. “*What* was found?”

She nodded towards the file, again. Making sure the bartender was too far to sneak a look, he moved all forms to the side — landing on the pile of pictures at the very end of the dossier.

“My subordinates stole those from that officer friend of yours,” Kouyou explained, with no more than a distracted gaze to the crime scene printed on the photos — Lippman’s sister body sprawled on the floor in a eerily cinematic pose, whole *chunks* of her skin and hair missing; as if ripped off by her own blood-struck fingers. “The police are scratching their heads — given the woman’s fame, they will go as far as possible not to give up the case to the *Division*.”

Scarlet blood stained every inch of surface the camera had captured — pooled on the floor, splattered on the walls, dripping from the pricey furniture. *A crazed rat in a cage*, he thought, but couldn’t quite pinpoint why.

He traced the half-moon tattoo on her neck — the trace of nails over it was barbaric, and clearly self inflicted. “Matsuda deals with children.”

“Apparently, he requested to be involved in this case personally,” Kouyou made a face. “Any theories on that?”

Chuuya munched on his lip. “If he knew about the connection between her, Lippman, and the Mafia — perhaps. But he doesn’t. You think the *Special Division* might have hired some rogue Ability User to take care of this mess?”

“Might even have offered them an *Ability Permit* deal,” she confirmed. “It goes against their morals, but after Dazai forced their hand to get our hands on the Government, and their own traitorous faction — I’m assuming they’re not willing to play any longer. The upcoming year will decide this *tug o’war*. No side will relent.”

He stared at his refilled glass, uncertain at when it had happened. Distantly, he recalled Agent Minami’s voice — the disbelieving expression she had worn, through the slot of the door, when Mori had refused the best deal the Mafia had received in decades.

*The Mafia comes first*, Mori had told him — lesson or warning, he wasn’t sure.

Chuuya straightened; then, he pushed the glass away. “So it’s all the bastard’s fault. Good to know. I’m unsurprised.”

A snort was quickly hidden behind her sleeve. Kouyou failed at looking truly reproachful. “Not exactly what I meant, little god.”

“Why not?” he mumbled. “His fake delusions of grandeur are what landed us in this mess. Do you know how many people I’ve caught furtively offering him *Boss-deep* bows? They think he’s gonna start a revolution.”

Very casually — attempting to sound so, at the very least — she questioned: “Do you not?”

“Dazai?” Chuuya gulped down the urge to laugh hysterically. “All he’s good for is sleeping in my office.”

“How trusting of you.”

“Ane-san,” he insisted. “It’s *Dazai*.”

“Mori’s *successor*, Dazai,” she pointed out.

“You don’t believe this shit either. Why are you even trying to make me rethink it?”

Kouyou pulled on her cheek, distracted. One of those *less-than-statuary* tics she couldn’t always avoid — a blooming garden of youth all over her crystal frame. “You know,” she continued, eventually — with a twinkle in her tone that said she was not willing to be honest again, for the rest of that conversation. “The two of you used to be *much* cuter a few years ago.”

He stared. “*Cute?*”

“Yes, sort of. Now you’re all — *Executive that and Vice-Executive* this, and *reverently feared Double Black* that, and dealing with the Mafia’s upper machinations this —“

“Didn’t you try to have Dazai permanently banned from my near vicinity?”

“Hardly relevant,” Kouyou waved the matter away. “Caution is never immoderate. I briefly made the mistake of doubting your ability to — well. All the same, you two are so — *intense*, these days. I miss seeing you run through the halls with those strange games of yours —“

“You’re like, *twenty*,” he reminded. “You know what a console is.“

“ — holding hands and whispering in the corners, like schoolboys —“

“I do *not*,” Chuuya snapped, “*Hold hands* with Dazai Osamu —“

“This alleged rogue Ability User is going to hit the Mafia next. They’re from the *Ballerinas* — whether the *Division* knows it or not.”

He paused.

Kouyou’s smile was still in place; to any eye peeking from behind the windows — to the perhaps not distracted *enough* bartender — she might have as well been talking about the

weather. “Are they?”

“They buried her at the very edge of our territory,” she clarified. Chuuya recalled the sniffs of the crowd, drowned by the winter rain — the Christmas lights over the street, welcoming a new grief the gossip radio stations would not keep quiet about. “We need to understand what this Ability does.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he assured her.

“After the New Year,” she offered. “If you want. That’s when the official recruitment will start,” A tinge of sourness painted her white teeth; she knocked the sides of their abandoned glasses together, very softly. “I know this time of the year is — complicated, for you.”

The *Old Bar* tasted of copper — on his tongue; on his teeth; under the edge of nails that he had sunk into Albatross’ skin not to scream at his face. If he stared at the pool table in the deepest corner — rebuilt in the exact same place; either one of Mori’s miracles or some bad joke from fate — he thought he could hear breathing lungs.

*Why grieve when you can rage?*, something had said, the first time Verlaine had touched him.

But Arahabaki did not talk.

“No time like the present,” Chuuya said, getting off his stool. “It’s just Christmas, anyway.”

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There was a locked door, on the way to the dungeons.

Shrieking to-be tortured souls were too busy to pay any mind to it, as blank-faced men in suits led them down the dried-blood-and-stone stairs. The men had higher concerns — or too low of a status to assume the information would be given. Death was too busy to pass by.

Chuuya didn’t care about doors.

*[“What does it feel like?” Albatross asked, one day.*

*The Old World was almost empty — only the buzz of the heating system and a half-heartedly turned on TV laid next to their sprawled out bodies. Chuuya tilted his head until he could kick a pool ball into a hole, and curled an eyebrow. “What does what feel like?”*

*Arriving first to the bar — given Chuuya and Albatross shared an apartment complex, and the man refused to let him cross the front doors without him in tow — was nothing short of a miracle. He had a tendency to get distracted by anything the streets could offer — to decide a detour by some rival gang would be a great way to pass the time.*

*It's not, Pianoman usually ended up saying, patting Albatross' shoulder helpfully. Not quite his to-be Executive voice, but almost. Please stop trying to cause a conflict.*

*Chuuya would then raise his hand. Iceman tried to kill me when I was thirteen.*

*Can't we move past that?, Iceman would reply.*

*"Tainted," Albatross nodded towards his hands. "Is it like when you have a cold?"*

*"The hell you mean, a cold?"*

*"You know," he insisted. Chuuya didn't, but that consideration would hardly stop him. He had once broken into his apartment at three A.M., only to discuss the mythology surrounding Ōmu's race of birds. "I hate having colds. Wait — you said you don't get those."*

*"I don't, no."*

*"Can you feel people?" Albatross questioned, through the cartwheel he was attempting on top of the longest table. Chuuya bet ten minutes before the owner reprimanded him — seven until Lippman appeared and threw a knife at his kneecaps. "We are all subjected to gravity, right? Can you feel any of it? Are you like — constantly aware of the existence of everything?"*

*Chuuya stared at him. "No," he replied. His tone sounded unconvincing.*

*A shrug. "You should try it out. No point in having such a cool Ability if all you can do with it is stomp around."*

*"Stomp —" he spluttered. "I don't stomp around —"*

*"My apartment floors had to be renovated because of your stomping around. On the ceiling."*

*"You —"*

*The door opened, startling the bell. Lippman threw a knife towards Albatross' rolling body; he stopped it, but only barely. Doc dragged his IV pole all the way to Chuuya's seat — Iceman sat in the furthest corner, where he knew Chuuya would join him when things got too messy. Pianoman winked at him, twirling a still-bloodied piano chord between his fingers.*

*On his way home, later that night, as he and Albatross slobbered insults on each other's stumbling frames, he planted his feet on the ground, and he breathed. Breathed, and tried — ]*

*"Chuuya."*



His hand fell from the door.

“Boss,” he exclaimed. “You’re up.”

“Somewhat,” Mori sighed, leaning onto the wall in a rather *pointed* way — a show of unfinished recovery Chuuya was sure he wouldn’t have offered to a crowd. A concession; a gift shiny enough for his eyes to be captured. “I should begin showing myself around, should I not? We don’t want the men to grow too complacent.”

The stairs, too, were weird — they made a strangely ruvid sound when shoes touched them; they were irregular to the eye. The relevant names in the syndicate looked at them as if truly haunted; he always got the feeling to be missing something.

“The men are loyal,” Chuuya replied.

A smile. “They are.”

*You don’t know how it was before*, Hamamoto had said, low, some time ago. His eyes had been set on Dazai. He had sounded angrier than Chuuya had ever assumed he could be.

“I believe a new analysis on our deals with the CSS has been delivered to my desk,” Mori said, once the note of quiet had been nurtured in the steps between them. Chuuya’s fingertips tingled; the door seemed to radiate a sick sort of warmth, on his back. “Are you up for a boring lesson with an old man?”

He bowed his head. “Hirotsu might take offense to that comment.”

*You should try it out*, Albatross had said. He pressed his shoulder against the door, subtle and bored — and frowned.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” A wink. A lingering look to the door. *A concession*, he thought. Either that, or Chuuya was growing too observant for safe survival. “And some secrets are better kept.”

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They were two alleys from the traitor Mori had almost lost his head to, when Dazai got shot.

“News flash, Coat,” Chuuya snapped, as he landed on his knees next to the fallen body — on the opposite side of Akutagawa and his blood soaked hands, hovering over the disgusting

mess of liquids from the breathing crater in Dazai's chest. "He *is* made of flesh. You can touch him just fine."

"Don't spread insidious lies," the Executive murmured, halfway to hysterical.

His whining head lolled back and forth on the concrete, painted red and blue by distant police cars uselessly attempting to surround the street block the Port Mafia had locked in. He was pale — but Dazai was always pale. *Bleeding, too*, Chuuya had the vague thought of.

With wide eyes barely hidden behind a veil of unfitting mafia-suaveness, Akutagawa replied: "He ordered not to touch him. He said this could be a *potentially satisfying end* —"

"And you *listened to him*?"

"I change my mind," Dazai moaned, as he childishly fought off Chuuya's hands removing his jacket. "This is too painful. I changed —"

"Shut up," Chuuya snapped, ripping his tie open brutally enough to make him moan higher. "This isn't the worst you've gotten by a *mile*. And this is your fault. Maybe one hole or two will teach you not to sit on your ass playing on that console during a criminal chase —"

Drool and blood bubbled up between his lips. Akutagawa turned horridly pale. "We *are* the criminals —"

He looked up at the subordinate. Behind the black shoulders of his coat, blurry silhouettes of running mafiosi roamed the locked down streets. Traitors weren't allowed to leave — the assassin would not be allowed either.

He snapped his fingers to call Akutagawa's eyes off Dazai's blood. "'You ever extracted a bullet from someone?'"

Hesitatingly, he shook his head.

"Good," Chuuya tore Dazai's dress shirt open, removing one of his gloves with his mouth. Through the haze of pain, the boy's eyes widened with realization. "Eyes on me, then."

The kid stared. "Wait, you —"

Right as distant police sirens began blaring, and some faraway building got partly blown up to pieces — Chuuya stuck his gloved hand between Dazai's teeth, buried his naked fingers in the scarlet cleft between his ribs, and mercilessly dug for the bullet.

The screech out of Dazai's mouth, muffled by the unrestrained bite he tore into his skin, was decidedly more of a reaction than someone with his pain tolerance should have offered — it got a wide eyed Akutagawa to jump back, though; and Chuuya mentally *knew*.

"Oh, you're fine. Don't be a baby, now. You — hold him still," Chuuya ordered, dragging his gaze away from Dazai's pained face. When no movement immediately appeared in the corner of his gaze, he snapped: "*Hold him still!*"

Akutagawa flew forward again, clenching a death grip around Dazai's bandaged limbs. Moments passed in a blurred mixture of sickly wet noises; by the time Chuuya managed to clean the extracted bullet with the side of his jacket and pocket it, the wounded boy was muttering nonsensical laments on the nature of firearms.

Breathless, temples pulsing with irritation, Chuuya dropped forward on the boy's frantically beating heart, groaning.

"You're — *sick*," Dazai whined, delirious; filled with accusations. "You're — *why* are you keeping that —"

"No bullets wasted," Chuuya painfully sat up again, slapping his cheek to keep him awake. Akutagawa's already pale hands had turned white at the knuckles from his grip on Dazai's wrists — right as he was about to speak, his eyes found a new silhouette as it landed by the car they were hiding behind. "Gin. 'They take the jerk yet?'"

Her late style change had been startling, considering the only memories Chuuya had of her included candid dresses and waist-long hair — but it fit her, in a strange way Tanaki had clearly been very proud of. She was all sharp angles; the glint of the cross of her choker threatened the air itself.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

Bloodied hands twitching, Akutagawa stood and walked up to her — to hiss something, he assumed; to reach for her and stop a few inches off her skin. All she did was look back at him — a painfully *familiar* light in her gaze; a quiet that rattled Akutagawa's shoulders — and step away.

The kid's hand fell. His eyes hardened.

"Do you gain any sort of freakish pleasure out of demolishing their relationship," Chuuya asked, a tad lower, knotting the bandages. "Or are your sadistic urges *mostly* unwilling?"

Dazai's eyes were still somewhat glazed; as Chuuya slapped his hand away from picking at the wound, he kept them on the siblings, nonetheless. "Stop blaming me for others' unsuccessful familiar counseling. I don't have a license."

"You could just stay out of it."

His eye squinted; obnoxious, he insisted: "What's so bad about a healthy sibling rivalry?" he insisted, fixing up his own tie, flat on the ground. "I'd assume you'd find some perverted enjoyment in simply watching, this time around."

Chuuya clenched his jaw.

Another explosion shook the ground. With a sharp grunt, Dazai raised one arm — just enough to call Akutagawa's eyes to him.

"What a nice coincidence," the Executive commented, eyes closed, as if he couldn't quite be bothered to do more. "We should not waste it. You two can start."

Silence echoed across the concrete.

“Start,” Chuuya echoed. “Start what?”

He looked at him with unbound pity. “The duel,” he spelled out, pointedly slow. “Obviously. Whoever kills the traitor first wins.”

A beat.

Akutagawa let out a *sound*; next to him, a twitch of her fingers was Gin’s only sign of pure, unfiltered — anger. Chuuya got the feeling he was missing something.

“Seriously?” he questioned. Bubbling in the blue of his veins was a tickling urge to punch him in the face — he tried to remind himself that Mori wouldn’t enjoy having to stitch someone up in his conditions. “Is this a game to you?”

“More than so. Children?”

Another beat. Shockingly enough, with one last bow in their direction — Gin was the first to fled the scene, jumping over cars with a kind of athleticism only growing up in the slums gave a fragile child. With starvation dripping from ink eyes, *Rashomon* surrounded Akutagawa like spider legs, and the boy vanished after her.

The moment he was gone, Chuuya threw his least impressed look to Dazai’s closed-eyes. Then, he punched his shoulder.

“Ouch,” he went, noncommittal.

“Kid’s dying inside,” he noted. “Can you stop being an asshole for three seconds?”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Did you even tell him a word before you decided to make this into *thee* competition?”

“No,” Dazai said. “I was busy thinking of ways not to have Mori witness it.”

He frowned. “But why —” The words died in his throat, winding down as his mind tried to make sense of the neon green stains around the boy’s wrists. “Are those rubber bands?”

The way his face lit up made him want to take a step back. “They are!” he preened — only to fall back with a cough when blood began to stain his bandages. “You see, Ango has been dealing with this suicide case — This woman slept with rubber bands around her wrists and calves for *two days straight*, and the third day — *ah*. She didn’t wake up, obviously. Autopsy results are still pending, but it’s been confirmed that her dying expression was more than joyous!”

Chuuya stared.

Pointedly, he reached for one of his wrists. Dazai batted his hand away.

He tried again — similar results. “*Don’t* — Are you delirious?” Chuuya hissed. “You’re trying to kill yourself with rubber bands?”

“Results may vary,” he conceded. There was a drunken haze in his eyes that told him the bullet *had* hurt. “That beautiful, poor lady and I might be the only souls on this earth to brave this quest. Does that sound like a double suicide, to you? I agree. But I suppose we’ll know it for sure in — *oh*, about two hours,” Dazai blinked; then, he threw a look at his chest. He groaned. “Ah, *great*. I got myself shot and incapacitated during the chase for Mori’s assassins.”

“Sure you did.”

“Surely that will help *tons* with the general belief that *I* want to assassinate him.”

Vacantly, Chuuya asked: “Don’t you?”

Easily, Dazai offered: “Of course. Oh, *hello* there. You must be one of my dogs’ dogs.”

He turned just in time to catch the light of the ricochet from Hamamoto’s rifle; the man’s old shoes slipped down the concrete, as he hid behind their same car and he fired in quick succession — taking down a good number of police officers who had missed the memo about the locked street.

“Nice aim,” Chuuya complimented.

The man threw a look at the blood pooling under both their soles. A complicated expression crossed his face. “Thank you, sir.”

“Such a fascinating phenomenon,” Dazai insisted, stubbornly fighting Chuuya’s attempts at keeping him from bleeding out. It didn’t seem like there was any rationality to his train of thought — Hamamoto’s jaw, next to the boy’s upside down head, was tight. “Don’t you agree? I think so. Like a pet taking itself out for a walk.”

“Shithead,” he warned. “Give it up.”

“I’m just saying *hi*,” Dazai replied, too loud for a stakeout. “You know the *Secret Unit* so well. It’s only fair that I get to know my partner’s squad. What if one day I require their aid to look for you down whatever straw you got lost in?”

“*Oi* — “

“We’ve met,” Hamamoto reminded him.

“Did we,” he replied, uninterested.

His face hardened. “Yes, we — “

“Never mind,” Dazai replied. He wiggled his arms. “Chuuya, help me stand up. I want to see how high of a property damage our youngest ones can inflict,” Snapping a rubber band against his wrist, he added, gleefully: “I’m going to die *very* soon, anyway.”

The echo of falling debris came all in one go — it was utterly silent for a blink, right after. It was the sole reason why Chuuya managed to hear the scoff out of Hamamoto's mouth.

Then: "Can't come quick enough."

Chuuya's tongue grew heavy.

Not a sound came out of his lips; his mind got stuck on a vivid juxtaposition of Dazai's blood on the floor of his bathroom — his own knuckles wrapped around his neck, incapable of a gentleness his mind swore was the least he could give. The *whistle-y* note of his breathing pattern when he was pretending his wounds didn't burn.

Dazai's laughter was a child's. The upside down look he threw at Hamamoto — less so.

"Ah," he sighed. "You're right about that."

The man didn't answer. He shot another officer right in the chest — a strangely close spot to the one marked red on Dazai's own ribs.

Abruptly, Chuuya wanted to leave.

"Finally. How slow can slugs even — what are you doing?" From teasingly casual, Dazai's tone turned stone cold — swiftly interrupted by a *less than* untouched yelp, as Chuuya snuck his arms under his back and knees, picking him up the way firefighters did with damsels in Tanaki's dramas. "I — Chuuya, this is undignified — with your stupid noodle arms? You'll drop me. You heard that? You will *drop me*, and then I'll bleed out, and it will be *so painful* — Are you listening? Mori will lock you in the dog house —"

The boy's approximate weight was that of a particularly well-carved table chair. The moment he picked him up fully — only vaguely nodding to Hamamoto, before beginning to make his way to more better hidden alleys — the boy fell so utterly silent he seemed to shake with it.

"Don't make this weirder than it needs to be," Chuuya ordered, staring forward.

A beat. "Ah," Dazai said, only.

Somewhere around the point when the partially destroyed office building where the traitor had hid appeared into view, he lowered his cheek in the crook of his shoulder — letting out an exhale that was *imperceptible* in its sincerity. Vaguely, Chuuya came to the conclusion that it might have been the one, honest demonstration of pain from that entire mess of an evening.

The lightning-quick arrow of a black body flying right past them — landing into a building wall so *heavily* it cracked with it — cut that careful balance right in the middle.

"Oh, well," Dazai blinked.

Crawling from the debris with red tentacles of empty space around him, Akutagawa's eyes glared like an angry bull's. Chuuya abandoned the weight in his arms somewhere behind a flipped car in the middle of the building's parking lot — right as he stepped past another flying car, the deafening screech of fire being opened painted the air golden.

Standing protectively with her legs over what could only be the corpse of the assassin — Gin threw her knives in the air, directing merciless eyes to the shooters until they backed off. Then — she set them on her brother.

“Hamamoto Hitashi,” Dazai spoke up. “Is he competent?”

“Not *now!*” Chuuya screamed, as another small truck was thrown directly to his face — he trapped it mere inches from his nose, feet digging backwards lines into the concrete from the effort of holding it back, before *Tainted* managed to turn it into a metallic feather he could toss somewhere over his shoulder.

A swirl of black and white and blood red was all he caught — over the slowly rising sun, the Akutagawa siblings’ embraced. Flashes of poisoned Ability and the silver of blades — limbs moving with the familiarity of known bones.

It wasn’t *graceful* — not enough to steal the breath out of the mafiosi hiding behind the dust stained maceries. But it lit a fire in the siblings’ eyes — a deadly, unwanted focus over Gin’s mask, and nauseating determination between Akutagawa’s burned eyebrows. *Rashomon* sunk its claws on the ground with no hesitation, attempting to slip past Gin’s guard and grab the assassin’s corpse; knives swirled, blood blooming on the floor and the white crests of the boy’s neck handkerchief.

“Dazai,” Chuuya called.

“Yes, that is my name.”

“Your brat is fighting.”

“Yes, I can hear those coughy groans of his just fine,” He waved the matter away. “He refuses to use the full potential of *Rashomon* against his sister — given, he refuses to *use Rashomon* where it’s actually needed *at all* — so the game’s already decided. Boring. To think he’s bound to be one of the greatest forces in our rows. About Hamamoto —”

Gin jumped — her blades left a scarlet line on her brother’s cheekbone. The strength of her kick sent Akutagawa flying — and he should have *beaten* her already; Chuuya *knew* — as *Rashomon*’s teeth used the ground as a hook to land him to his feet.

Avidly, he searched for Dazai’s gaze.

“He used to be in Noguchi Tooru’s faction, right? During the *Nine Rings Conflict*,” Dazai insisted, uninterested in Chuuya’s skipping effort to kick *Rashomon*-destroyed debris away from their men and themselves. “One of those fools who kept voicing their disapproval when Boss gave us two temporary sovereignty.”

As *Rashomon* slashed Gin’s jacket in two, Chuuya stilled.

A distant memory crowded behind his eyelashes — a circle of distrustful men, patting Noguchi’s back after an attempt at landing the two of them between the flames of an

explosion. They had taken care of every assassination attempt — they hadn't had the time to care about mere hefty, venomous glances.

"Your loyalties sure have changed, yes?" Dazai hummed, a tad too loud.

Feet stuck to the wall of a nearby shop, he barely had to lower his eyes to find Hamamoto's silhouette — rifle frantically following the sloppily fast movements of the Akutagawa siblings; as if not entirely certain he could let them drag this out.

Clearly, he'd heard every word. Eventually, eyes stuck on his weapon, he said: "Vice-Executive Nakahara has proved his worth more times than any of us could count. He saved my life, during the *Dragon Head Conflict*. He saved many lives."

His eyes flickered to him.

They seemed unshaken. Chuuya frowned.

Dazai crawled forward — just enough to lay his elbows on a partly destroyed car, enjoying the duel from a better perspective. "And I haven't."

"Is that a question, sir?"

"What an insincere, *sir*," A yawn. "No, it was more of an affirmation. A *point*, if you would. Observation with a cause. If I had, you and your friends wouldn't be plotting to slit my throat."

"*Hey*," Chuuya snapped, brusque. "Don't go making accusations you can't —"

"Don't go and be blind."

His tone made him pause. The edge of the sky was turning the color of fallen leaves; its light painted the sweat on the siblings' faces into pieces of diamonds, and emptied Hamamoto's eyes.

"Chuuya always picks mirror shards, does he not?" Dazai said. If he cared about discussing his own death with a bleeding hole in his chest — one that would give him a fever, Chuuya knew — it didn't show. "Loyal to the bone. Boss appreciates your fire greatly. We don't grant medals here, but I'm sure the Hatrack will pamper you in praise and free drinks the more you scratch behind his ears."

"Some respect wouldn't be unfit, *sir*," Hamamoto reminded him, before Chuuya could say anything. "*Double Black* occupy the same place in the hierarchy."

"*Mmh*," the boy nodded, interested. "And when *I* kill the Boss, where will that leave him?"

The man's gun shook from his grasp.

Chuuya landed on his feet so ungracefully — that some dozen streets away, Kouyou flinched. He stalked towards Dazai's vacantly cheerful face, and pulled his tie to snarl: "Shut the *fuck* —"



The hiss of knives pinning Akutagawa's coat to a fallen column rattled the whole area.

His eyes refused to part from the pale rage spreading through the boy's face, as he struggled to extract himself. It was utterly humiliating; the low murmurs of the unwanted audience said so with clarity. Chuuya saw bloodied flesh, over the red face of a child who had been made to cry in front of a crowd of well meaning cruelty — realized that the knife had gone deeper than cloth.

Gin realized it too.

Her grip faltered; her knees weakened over the assassin's corpse. Akutagawa slipped off.

His gaze searched Dazai.

"Akutagawa," Chuuya heard himself say — too quiet. *It would have been easy*, he thought, to mistake the *thing* stuck in the broken veins of his eyes. All at once, he realized he *knew*. Urgently, he called: "*Akutaga—*"

The uncertain touch of his sister's feet on the ground, hesitating to reach out, was the only reason why she did not see one of *Rashomon's* tails emerge from the ground at her back — and *clench*, unthought and burning, around her shoulders.

Horridly loud against dawn, she screamed.

A blur passed by Chuuya's peripheral; too fast to follow, too hurried for his wound to not stain his bandages red, Dazai dashed by — the grip of his fingers around the boy's shaking nape was a distracted thing, seemingly.

He saw his nails sink in.

*Rashomon* disappeared without a murmur — Chuuya ran, grasping the girl in his arms before she could tumble to the ground.

"That's enough," he warned, dragging a shockingly still vigorous Gin away before she could jump her brother. There was a distant sort of ire in the sweat lines over her squinting eyes; something distant and heartbreaking. "That's *enough*, I said!"

"Come at me," the girl whispered, right as Dazai dragged Akutagawa even further. The two had yet to stop staring at each other. It was too low — but he saw it haunt her brother's eyes. "This is what you *wanted*, right, come *at me* —"

He clenched his arms tighter around her. She was shaking like a leaf. The assassin's body was still on the ground — limbs spread; martoriated by the way they had fought over him like a doll.

*It ought to be revolting*, Chuuya thought — with the same distance he'd felt for the dried blood under his nails, the first time someone had opened fire at him. He hadn't known he wasn't about to die until *Tainted* hadn't let him. He had asked the Sheep to each grab a gun from the corpses Chuuya hadn't quite meant to make, and told those nine years old to point them at him. He had wanted to train it.

All at once, Gin deflated.

Three burning cars away, Akutagawa kept his eyes right on her — and began coughing.

Dazai let go of him at the first wet squelch. With an endlessly lethargic expression, he watched him kneel and press his handkerchief to his mouth until blood wetted it. Then, he sighed.

“How disappointing,” he concluded. With a squinting look to the dozens of hidden mafiosi in the area, he clapped his hands, calling: “*Well?* Did you, or did you not notice the police cars doing their best to trap us in? *Hop-hop!* Someone take the body — the sun’s about to rise. Time to go home.”

With a wave of uneasy murmurs, and a good amount of unmistakable glances, the men did as told.

“You’re not staying?”

The words — the first out of Akutagawa’s blood-smeared lips; cracked and ruined, as if his throat had been nothing but a rusty engine — were only barely enough to stop Dazai from just turning and leaving. Gin’s head turned to him so fast it almost creaked; but her brother’s eyes, mercilessly and echoing and *empty*, were all on Dazai.

Chuuya got the unsettling feeling of never truly having looked at him.

“Ah, no,” Dazai said, hardly bothered. His smile was strangely wobbly; as his lips stretched, he stared right into Chuuya’s eyes — and that was the only reason why his feet *moved*. “I’m about to be a bit busy.”

With one last nod, and a clever wave of his purple fingers — asphyxiating all the way to the rubber bands on his wrists, and bleeding from the gap in his chest — Dazai’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he dropped.

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Yokohama took Christmas rather seriously.

“You’re supposed to fight me,” Akutagawa snarled, right in his ear, at the last traffic light they encountered. “You *told* Executive Dazai you would take care of me — are you underestimating me? Gin didn’t *win* the duel —“

“Neither did you,” Chuuya informed him.

The roads were a sickeningly bright white as far as his eyes could reach; lights and decorations jumped from one corner to the other, bouncing off in a deadly challenge of ostentatiousness and celebration. An early morning choir was singing familiar hymns, amongst the crowd of hurrying workers; he’d left them all the coins in his pockets, just because they sounded terrible.

The billboards were the least festive parts, what with the faces of men and women the Mafia had put there — along to the building-tall screens framing the square, looping the newest head of the City Hall’s election speech in a monotonous hum.

Occasionally, a mourning montage for a recently deceased actress appeared.

*We look forward to a peaceful new year*, the man on the screen had yet to stop promising. Chuuya had found him neck deep in one of Ace’s casinos two weeks ago. *This city is in good hands*.

“I’ll win against *you*,” he insisted — which was a clear testament that the frozen peas held on his still bleeding forehead *weren’t* working. The passersby kept ogling his fresh bruises — Chuuya hadn’t really been thinking when he had dragged him away. “Was Executive Dazai alright? Shouldn’t we have carried him to the Headquarters ourselves? *Why* are we at a High School —“

Chuuya, hands in his pockets, leaned on the column of the bus stop — not *hiding*; but carefully staying where the school entrance would not frame him.

A crowd was beginning to gather near the gates — last-day students huddling close to find warmth.

“The bastard will be fine,” he replied. “Despite his hopes, that chick didn’t actually die because of rubber bands. He did wear a fuck ton of them on his ankles, though, and the wound didn’t help,” He glanced his way. “It would do you good to remember this: Dazai would *never* die in front of so many eyes.”

Akutagawa made a face. He was several shades paler than all the kids his age exiting the building. Choking in that black coat Chuuya could *swear* had belonged to Dazai, once, he looked like a crack in an ice lake.

“He has no care for reputation.”

“That’s not what I said,” he replied.

“But then —“

“I know you think his word is the next best thing to gospel, but I can assure you: it’s not. Most of it is bullshit,” A spark of dyed red appeared near the gates; Chuuya leaned a bit forward, squinting. “Let’s start from the obvious — even if you had beaten your sister, he wouldn’t have patted you on the back and given you a position.”

“That’s —“ Akutagawa snapped. He had yet to say Gin’s name. “That’s not why — how dare you presume I —“

“Shut your mouth. I *know*. I was teasing. The last thing those lungs of yours need is cold air,” He nodded towards the silhouette crossing the street, backpack bumping against her thigh at every step. She had always favored her right leg; the result of a fall, when she was eleven. “See that girl?”

Akutagawa frowned, confused. “Do I have to kill her?”

“No. Relax,” Chuuya scoffed. “God. Not even *my* instincts are that bad. Her name’s Yuan, and she’s cooler than you’ll ever be — what with that brooding muzzle.”

“That’s great. About training —“

“You know, I may *not* exactly be Dazai, but some respect would still be appreciated .”

He glanced away. “Respect is to be earned.”

“Yeah?” he challenged. “What’s Dazai done to earn it?”

His spine straightened so abruptly Chuuya heard it creak. “Watch your mouth.”

“Oh, *trust* me —“

“He saved my life. If it wasn’t for him, I —“ He threw the peas bag to the ground. “I’m not *stupid*. It’s clearly what Gin and everybody else is convinced of but —“

A cough — softer than the claws that had wrecked his chest in the training grounds, but just as violent as the winters Chuuya had watched drag the weaker Sheep away. *Some of us are made to die young*, one of the older kids had shrugged, when he’d started asking too many questions. She had ruffled his hair with something like pity. *You won’t be like that*.

“If the *best* of me is what’s needed to earn this life,” Akutagawa spelled out, eventually, “I just have to give it. I can’t — I won’t go back to before. The slums — not knowing what I was living for —” he spat, eyes on the disappearing rows of students; their unbroken skins. “I owe him my ability to survive this, and I *will* give it to him.”

Chuuya crouched down, making sure Yuan would not catch sight of him.

Still leaning on the car she had dropped her off on, Minami said something. The girl laughed.

*I have lost countless people*, Kouyou had told him, once — near the grave she would walk right past, but breathe in the direction of. *If we weren’t allowed to mourn the living, we would sit on the ground and grow roots*.

He stood up. “Pick up the peas.”

A pause. Akutagawa looked at him as if he had lost it. “What?”

“The peas,” Chuuya repeated. “Pick them up. No need to pollute the city with your distress.”

The boy stared.

Unimpressed, he stared back.

He picked up the peas.

Chuuya turned on his heel, skipping over the bus stop with an unnatural jump; he made his way down the road without checking if Akutagawa was following.

“You know, Yuan,” he started, sure he would be, “She used to be *convinced* I was nothing short of invincible. Not exactly a matter of faith in me, either — it was just something she had grown up believing. *Sky’s blue, say hi before you rob someone, Chuuya will win.*”

The boy grunted. “And you aren’t?”

“No, I am,” Chuuya scoffed. The crowd was tight and cheerful around them; the higher the sun rose, the brighter the streets shone — lights and Christmas trees warming them up. “It’s part of why we aren’t fighting. I would have crushed you, your ego would have taken a hit, Dazai would have found out — a whole mess. Better not.”

“You don’t know if — my Ability —“

“The day you stop using your Ability like you hate the sight of it, let me know,” he cut him off. “I’ll duel you, then. You’ve got great potential — it would be fun. Pinky promise.”

Speechless, Akutagawa’s steps faltered. The golden and crimson lights gave his sickly skin a curiously festive appearance; a plastic skeleton in the middle of a fireworks show. *We come from the same place, you and I*, he could have told him. He doubted he would have appreciated the notion.

“I’ve seen your mission reports, you know? You *are* good. You’re exactly the kind of brutality this syndicate needs. Dazai knows it too. Want to know your problem?”

A stare. *Not by you*, he could almost hear.

“Casualties,” Chuuya offered, nonetheless. “On *both* sides. Too many of them. You wave that Ability of yours around like a bat. You don’t care who gets in its way, as long as it sinks its teeth in at least one enemy.”

Akutagawa made a face. Studying the ground, he looked younger than his age — pettily quiet; childish in a way that did not feel the blood still staining the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not going to tell you the Mafia *won’t* burn you alive, if you can’t give back more than what they spend on you,” he said. Hamamoto’s friend had been the latest of weekly occasions — while drowning in funds, the Port Mafia was all but fond of wastes. While even *fonder* of Ability users, it had no need for dead weights.

*If it’s not real*, Pianoman had said. *It might as well be useful.*

“What I’m trying to say, is: as honorable as your loyalty is — Dazai is *not* the Mafia.”

Unconvinced, the boy studied the concrete.

“I don’t think that’s true,” he muttered.

A memory pressed against his eyelids — the last of the Executive meetings Mori had not taken part to, before he’d left for juvie. The uncanny sight of an empty seat next to Chuuya’s own, no shoe pressed against his calf.

Dazai, blank-faced and shattered, lunging on Mori’s seat.

*[Chuuya had been eight years old the first time someone had uttered the words Port Mafia where he could hear them. It had left an impression — and so an unburnable spark had been set ablaze in his spine, pushing and pulling and dragging, making him into the child who had decided to turn the Sheep into a group that would be feared — not just ignored.*

*Three weeks later, he had stolen a whole cargo of weapons belonging to the Mafia. When they came for revenge, he left only skeletons — to tell the tale of a new Ability User in Suribachi City.*

Don’t attack unless they attack first, *he’d spent his childhood ordering, smaller and shorter than the older kids — more necessary than they would ever manage to be.* And they will attack first. That’s just who the Mafia is.]

“The idiot is Port Mafia black from blood to bones,” Chuuya told him, eyes on a particularly *crooked* old woman turning on the lights of her shop. “At one point, he’ll need to get kicked in the head hard enough to realize he *isn’t* the syndicate — it’s the opposite,” A running bunch of kids gasped, clapping. “It will always be.”

Akutagawa seemed unimpressed. “Does being his partner spare you from respecting him?”

“Sure. Find yourself a partner, and you’ll see.”

“No,” he spat, too quick. “Dazai said — I work alone.”

“How edgy.”

“Executive Kouyou said —“

“So you still aren’t calling her *Ane-san*?”

“ — that’s what you used to say, too,” Akutagawa insisted. “That you work better alone.”

“Sure thing,” Chuuya kicked an abandoned decoration off the sidewalk, watching a family flinch when it made a *noise*. On the screens, a collage of the new heads of the city built itself in quick motions. He imagined telling a younger self that he would be dabbling in politics. “I’m the very soul of solitude.”

A distasteful glare brushed him.

Unsure of where it came from, Chuuya ruffled the boy's hair. His whole body seemed to short circuit — lips parting and shoulders growing stiffer than unmolded stone.

Very slowly — keeping every part of him where Akutagawa could easily see it — he lowered his hand, adding a step of space between them.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What?”

“You know, you’ll have to talk to your sister,” Chuuya swiped an apple off the nearest stand, biting into it as he abandoned an outrageous amount of bills on the paper bags at its edge.

“She wants to tear you apart. I’m assuming it’s lovingly. I don’t have any siblings.”

His lips curled. He tasted poison; felt like Dazai would have laughed. “Well,” he conceded.

Akutagawa blinked. That conversation had been more useless than he had hoped; nonetheless, he was sure to have settled the belief of Chuuya being downright *bizarre* between his burned off eyebrows. “It’s *he*.”

It was his turn to blink. “What?”

“When Gin wears those clothes,” he said, voice carefully devoid. “With the *Lizards*. It’s *he*.”

“Cool,” Chuuya bit again. “Good to know. Hey.”

He put his foot in front of Akutagawa’s legs at the very last moment — when he tripped, spluttering, he grasped a part of his coat that did not touch his skin and pushed him into the closest alley, away from the crowd.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he started, endlessly calm, the moment the two of them were pressed against one of the snow-ridden walls — close enough for the rattled edge of the boy’s lungs to be *felt*. Akutagawa was shorter than him, if only barely — Chuuya could not escape the trembling spasm of his body, as his eyes stuck to his own.

“Don’t you *ever*,” he spelled out, “Let me catch you attempting to bleed your sibling out in Dazai’s name again. To hell with his orders and to hell with his tutelage — *I* will make sure you’re thrown out of this organization faster than you can whisper the shithead’s name. Whatever he’s told you — debts come *first* in the Mafia. And you owe the only family you have left more than you’ll ever be able to give them.”

Akutagawa’s eyes dimmed out, all at once — a severed branch.

Rage imploded through the shards of it, sudden enough to startle him; an unfiltered, savage kind of starvation, as deafening as the hum in the back of his skull grew at night.

*I’ve heard them refer to him as the Mafia Hound in training*, Hirotsu had said, fleetingly. *One wonders what is it with Dazai and dogs.*

“Gin doesn’t get it,” he spat out, through the ire.

“Gin doesn’t want to see you kill yourself for the sake of orders,” Chuuya replied. “Dazai saw something in you. I doubt it has anything to do with lashing out during training — all in hope shit will get vicious enough he’ll turn around and grant you a look.”

“What do *you* know of —“

“You want him to acknowledge you?” Chuuya pushed. “*Impress him*. Train even when he isn’t around to see it; learn how to treat *Rashomon* as a part of you — and not a shiny toy to wave around until the bastard gasps. Survive for yourself, and not for him — or he will not *care*.”

A breath passed, panting and obstinate.

He saw it in the passing glint in his irises, blinding in a way the sun had yet to accomplish. Chuuya’s feet landed on the opposite wall, ten feet taller than clenched fists disappearing under Akutagawa’s coat — as *Rashomon* shattered the crackling air and attempted to decapitate him.

“Not exactly what I meant,” he said, “But at least that Coat-demon’s as pissed off as you are. Unfortunately —“

Chuuya landed on the ground with enough strength to crack it, muffling the surprised gasps of the crowd outside. Akutagawa shook on his feet, surprised — faster than he could recover, Chuuya touched the belt of his coat, and sent him flying into the wall; the graffitied surface behind him falling under his weight.

He was still laying there, coughing and climbing to his feet, when Chuuya walked to him — eyes wet with bare frustration, as he attempted to slow the coughs down.

Hostility lit up the outline of his body in a poisoned, dark crimson — before it could worsen, he nudged his knee with his shoe, gently.

“Come on,” Chuuya offered him his hand. “Our Abilities don’t match very well, see? Your devours through space. Mine erases the need for it. *That’s* why training with me would be pointless.”

“Then *fight me for real!*” he snarled.

“I’m no one’s punching bag,” he replied. He pushed his hand, again. “Come *on*. Gramps said Gin is all fixed up. Who knows, maybe you two can come up with a training schedule.”

He crouched down; took notice of his bony frame, under the coat, and the asymmetric strands of his hair. He thought of Yuan’s laughter; of the low hum of the slums, ever present.

“Be angry, if it helps,” Chuuya concluded. “But don’t be angry because you have nothing else to be. If anything — be angry at *him*.”

*It’s what he wants*, he didn’t add. *Can’t you see?*



Akutagawa's chest rose and fell — did a rather job at it, too; damaged goods wheeling along, adamant. He stared at his hand; stared at the chasms he had left on the ground.

Predictably enough that Chuuya barely had the will to sigh and drop his head — he stood, kicking his hand away, and stuck *Rashomon's* claws in the wall to plunge himself out of the alley.

Tried to.

A wet kind of squelch echoed off the space — a tear through the Christmas hymns and the noises of the crowd, just outside their bubble. Not the sound of an Ability touching concrete; it was unmistakably *flesh-like*.

Akutagawa landed on the ground, barely balancing on his heels. When he called *Rashomon's* back, he was dripping blood on the ground. “What —“

Chuuya surrounded himself in the blanket of his Ability, running towards the end of the alley. Amongst old boxes and rusty pipes, the first thing he saw was the puddle of dried blood, stained by the fresh one *Rashomon* had accidentally torn out.

Then he saw the body.

“That's not —“ Akutagawa stuttered, taking a step back. His eyes were wide; he stared at the fallen man, frowning a bit more at every nail scratch and mark he found. “*Rashomon* can't — That wasn't *me*.”

“I know,” Chuuya said. He thought back to the actress' photographs in Kouyou's folder; stepped into the blood to lean down, searching through the battered skin. There was no obvious lethal last hit to find; the rust-stains on the side of the man's head matched the wrecked pipes on the wall — as if he had crashed into it willingly.

A bruise caught his attention. He held up the corpse's left hand, skidding over the teeth marks — to land on a line at the center of his palm.

A half moon.

“Call the disposal team,” he ordered. “Tell them to bring Executive Kouyou.”

“But —“

“Akutagawa.”

Chuuya turned to look at him. He didn't know what the boy saw — only that it rubbed any desire to be stubborn out of his face. He nodded; moved to grab his phone from his pocket.

The police sirens stopped them both.

Chuuya barely had time to remove his gloves and stick them inside the boy's coat, startling *Rashomon* into awareness with a clear hit of gravity to the knees — flinging him out of that rottin space — before Matsuda's disbelieving face appeared at the end of the alley.

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Given he hadn't committed any crimes, this time around — after giving unwilling testimony, Matsuda locked him in his office with a cup of noodles, and told him to wait.

It left Chuuya with endless, boring minutes to let Kouyou know her squad would have to intervene with the city obituary, if they wanted to analyze the body — then, to snoop around, until he found a pair of rifle-handling gloves to cover his naked hands with.

Then, he got to searching.

The room was as bare as usual, with only pictures of his children on the desk — the few from his Academy years, with a wide-eyed Murase, that were the liveliest part of the gritty papers and bloodied photographs. And then piles and piles of research on the underground's most well-kept sins.

*P.M. — Case 255*, was the incipit on most of the thicker files.

They hid blurry photographs of familiar crime scenes and people Chuuya knew by name; while nothing new — he was surprised by the amount of details gathered in one place. As far as he knew, Dazai was tasked with spreading clues in a variety of hands — never close enough to pile up.

*Give them something to search*, Mori would say, *if what they want is a hunt*. Still — the amount of information Matsuda had managed to gather was slightly worrying.

“Clever mutt,” Chuuya murmured, with a frown. “Too clever for your own good.”

A yellowish file on the bottom of the lowest drawer, edges frail with time and insistence, caught his attention. Fiddling with the twine thread that held it in one piece, he read the word scribbled on the dark green cover: *Sheep*.

Shirase's face was the first thing he saw.

He shut the file and threw it in the paper shredder underneath the desk.

Before he could kick the drawer to focus on the absurd amount of Mafia-related investigations, the shiny texture of a photograph peeked from the darkened depths of that Sheep bundle. The sound of his ribs creaking came in tandem to that of the doorknob bruising the wall, as Matsuda opened the door to the office.

Ire flashed in his eyes. “Are you *trying* to get —“

He stared. “What do you know about Paul Verlaine?”

The distant buzz of ancient computers and drowsy voices scrambled up the officer’s shoulders, drooling down the crinkles of his dress shirt. Chuuya could only hear the rush of white noises in his ears — the view from a tombstone he had not dared to visit, once he’d learned what its insistence had not been able to save.

Chuuya breathed. His brother’s eyes stared back at him from the photograph.

“I don’t care if the Mafia encouraged your sense of overindulgence,” Matsuda said, eventually, very slowly — his arm *almost* raised, as if Chuuya had been growling. “You keep your nose out of our efforts, Chuuya. Including the attempt at taking the corpse out of our jurisdiction I just witnessed at the obitorium —“

“I’m not *asking*,” he snapped, waving the picture from the other side of the desk. “You’re not supposed to know about *him*. All the information here —“ His eyes widened. “That’s why you asked to handle the actress’ case, isn’t it? You know of the connection to — you do realize *you can’t* just hold this much over the syndicate with no consequences —“ He paused. “You’re — investigating Murase’s death.”

The man’s face emptied itself. “Chuuya.”

“Are you *insane*?”

“He had *friends*, you know? People who might want to understand what —“

“The investigation was already closed,” he snarled, lost in his own frantic train of thought. “There’s no way you would have found any kind information on it, unless you —“ He could see the end of the tunnel — a blinding light framed by ivy; the blurred photographs in the Mafia files and the too-similar eyes of his brother in the one stuck in his hands; beckoning him forward, whispering —

“The clues are — minimal,” Matsuda admitted, with a resigned sigh. “They always have been. You don’t expect me to believe he truly died in some random street shootout, do you?”

Chuuya’s fingers twitched, relentless. “But *why* would you associate him with the Port Mafia’s investigations?” He squinted at the tape marks left on the corners — a clear match to the ripped-off pictures from the Mafia files. “How did you even find a picture of his face?”

Guilt pulled the corners of his face down.

He stiffened. “What?”

“Listen, I —“

“Matsuda.”

He exhaled, all in one go. It seemed to steal the air from his limbs, too — he fell into one of the guest chairs, elbows on spread knees, rubbing his temples like an overworked sinner.

Chuuya felt the urge to move — circle that desk and escape; like he was nothing more than a twelve years old who had promised the Sheep to be back home before dark.

“What did you do?” Chuuya heard himself whisper.

“I’m still the detective assigned to you and the Sheep’s case,” the man explained, staring at the floor. “It’s technically closed, but — I do have the Court’s permission to access all documents that may contain relevant information on you. Ever since you got involved with the Port Mafia —“

“I’m not involved with the —“

“Chuuya,” Matsuda interrupted. “You *know* you’re unofficially filed as an *Unregistered* to the *Special Division*. Children who have Abilities have a different sort of legislation —“ His hands intertwined; the pen he always changed hung from his shirt pocket like it was about to fall. “And so it was me they called. They thought I could help, get you to talk with them —“

Chuuya’s mouth dried up. “*What did you do?*”

He dragged his hands down his dreary face. “I know about Verlaine, kid. All that the *Division* gathered about him, at least — I know about his connection to the accident, back in December. I know he targeted Murase, for some reason. And I —“ He pressed his lips together. “I’ve been helping the *Division* out. Letting them know what — what you’re up to.”

It all seemed eons away — the buzz of loud voices behind the door; the computers and the old Christmas hymns; the mumbling laughter. Even the texture of his stolen gloves against his palms — Chuuya felt incorporeal; distinct from that body that knew how to be controlled by something that wasn’t him.

*How much could he claim of it, then?, he had wondered. If he could give it up so easily, how could he call that breathing bundle his?*

His jaw ached. “How long?”

“Chuuya —“

“How *long?*”

The officer looked at him.

“Since he died,” he admitted.

Chuuya nodded once, mechanically, fixing his hat in place. Nodded again and again, until he was biting the inside of his lip to raw skin, muffling laughter — eyes on the dangling chain he had taken from Albatross.

He threw the picture on the desk, invisible filaments creaking — uncertain of what the dead silence in his skull meant. It was never quiet. “So much for keeping an eye out for me.”

It rammed against Matsuda like a storm.

“That’s not —” he attempted. He had been rendered speechless. “It wasn’t one or the other.”

“Save it.”

“Listen to — Hey. *Hey* — Chuuya, listen to me,” He leaped off his chair right as Chuuya made his way to the door; his hands clenched around the upper sides of his arms — an easily escapable grip, because all of it *was*. He stayed, though, because he was as much of a fool as ever. “Chuuya. That’s not it. Are you listening to me? That’s not it.”

He fixed his eyes elsewhere; Matsuda’s head followed frantically, jerking him. “That’s enough.”

“Why do you think I’ve been working with them?” Murase and I, we — we promised you kids we’d get you out. Didn’t we? I’ve had to resort to different methods, since your emancipation and — the *Special Division* is *legal*, at the very least —“

Chuuya met his gaze.

It was *untouching* — remote and strangled. He recalled the pressure of cold water on his face; the soft tune of Agent Minami’s voice, right in his ears. Questions he wouldn’t answer; files and files and *files* on him, never an end to them, never a period to the lines of information one could gather from a body that had been injected with infinity.

*Legality never gave me a bed*, he thought about saying. *Legality never called me one of their own. Legality only ever sold me out for —*

“I’m only going to say this once,” Chuuya offered.

“Chuuya.”

“I don’t care about what you were trying to accomplish,” he continued, unflagging. “I don’t care about your ghosts, and I don’t care if you think I could rid you of them. I don’t care about your atonement,” He shrugged the man’s grip off; spelled out: “You keep your nose out of the Mafia’s business, and I don’t punch your face in for all the troubles you’ve caused.”

“This *isn’t* about the *Mafia* —” Matsuda hissed. “This is about *you* — why don’t you get it?”

Chuuya thought of a knife in his side — of Murase’s fingers growing still in his grasp. A numb cognition — *known* — pooled down his throat.

“It’s the same thing,” he offered, blankly. “And neither of us is going to go down, no matter how much you prod.”

Matsuda’s flinch rattled his entire spine. *Stupid*, he thought. Stupid — to still linger. Believe that cutting Chuuya open wouldn’t have stained the floor black. “Chuuya —“

“I called Madame Tanaki to come pick me up,” he insisted, making his way to the door. “We don’t want to make her wait.”

“She isn’t here.”

He paused. “Not yet?”

“Not at all,” The Officer stood up, unsure of where to put his hands. “The Station called her — she couldn’t come. She told us to apologize to you on her behalf.”

Something uncomfortable scratched at the back of his skull. Chuuya cleared his throat. “All the same — have I done something that warrants my *legal* stay here? I already gave my recollection of the events to one of your Agents. I was alone there. The witnesses confirmed I had just arrived.”

Matsuda’s hand flexed, helpless. “Listen.”

“Have I?”

He deflated. “No.”

“Great,” Chuuya opened the door, fingers spasming with repressed energy and *something* that always sketched Professor N’s face underneath his eyelids. At times, he realized — he couldn’t quite recall his face either. “Want some friendly advice? Give up on the actress’ case. It’s nothing your band of gossip fools will solve.”

With the nauseated tone of something he hadn’t quite meant to say, Matsuda asked: “Is there any possibility Verlaine is involved?”

He only saw him in his peripheral.

It was merely a pump of his blood through his veins — drops nobody would care to spill and too many would kill to study. Leaning against the wall, his side torn and his skull showing, bleeding onto the dirty tiles of the station — his brother curled an eyebrow.

A spear wrecked his chest — the pole that had been stuck between Chuuya’s fifth and sixth rib, freezing cold and wet like mud between nails and never, never, *never ending*. It had been the closest thing at reach. He had driven it in Verlaine’s chest — because they had shared no blood before he’d forced it into him. Because he had killed his family, and he kept calling him his *brother*.

*I would find comfort in the familiar, perhaps*, he’d written, in those diaries Chuuya had read out of some sort of petty, useless revenge. *But how do I lay my head in the empty air?*

“No,” Chuuya said. He blinked, and he was alone. The gloves still itched. “None at all.”

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Murasaki Shikibu had had an entire page of a *Human Studies & Social Perception* magazine dedicated to her, when the *Ballerinas*' had been frantic news in Yokohama.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about her," Tanaki explained, rather tonelessly, as she kneeled next to the chalk and little red flags left from the corpse. It was the fourth one they had found in *those* conditions, since Lippman's sister — people had yet to grow weary; despite the police tape their contacts had set up in the area for them, no one had shut down the Christmas theme park one caramelized-apples' stand away.

"Murasaki was the eldest member of the *Ballerinas*," she added, holding her scarf against the evening wind. "She was more speculation than reality — most thought someone that frail and ancient *had* to be a distracting technique of sorts."

"And was she?" Chuuya asked, around his cigarette.

"The old Boss asked her to join us," Tanaki replied. "I doubt so."

He conceded, eyes stuck to his phone. The bundle of phone charms never grew any heavier anymore; but the threads were slowly beginning to unfold. Over the bright lights of the Ferris Wheel, the laughter of unaware children, and the blood stained mud under his soles — Chuuya studied the half-moon mark on the pictures, and frowned.

"And this Murasaki's Ability left no visible marks," he questioned.

"No," Tanaki confirmed, standing. "I don't know why they would leave a trail for her —" Her fingers brushed one of the files the officers had left for them on the ground; on the arm of one of the park workers, the name *MURASAKI SHIKUBU* had been carved with an abandoned knife. "— but it isn't her. She was a clean kill — apart from that goodbye mark. The half moon, the wounds; this is someone else."

Chuuya squinted at the tattoo-like stain on the body's cheek, batting his smoke away from the woman. "And you never heard of someone who did something like this, back then?"

She stuck her hands in her pockets; shook her head.

Tanaki was one of the few who'd been in the Mafia long enough to have dealt with the oldest generations of *Ballerinas* — not the most famous, from the attack that had given them their name; but the ones that had begun planning for it.

"Most people who were mafiosi when the *Ballerinas* were starting out have long left," he mused, selecting a hated contact information. "In a casket, or by refusing to join Mori's reign," He made a face. "So — a casket, again."

“The Mafia is much different than it was when I first joined,” the woman said, after a pause — perhaps perceiving he wouldn’t formulate a real question.

The Ferris Wheel had lit up in greens and reds, for the festivities; the game stands and the rides were equally blinding, painting the pensive caves of her face in eerie shades. To an outsider, Tanaki was as she had always been.

She wasn’t.

*It’s not like her ugly husband died*, Dazai had huffed, some days before, as she politely — but distantly — indulged their antics. It had been a bad day; Dazai had been quiet enough for even Akutagawa to glance strangely at him; and when he’d talked, it had been to cut. *I made sure of it. It’s nothing like when the Nine —*

*Don’t*, Chuuya had warned.

”Is it ever lonely?”

It took Tanaki’s eyes a moment to focus on him. For some reason, she made him think of her sister — the one from her grief-stricken stories. Virgil’s relentless curiosity. The children she never saw anymore.

“No,” she offered. “Just — it itches.”

It struck *something*. Chuuya tapped his cigarette, raining some ash over the scars he had given himself by scratching his arms. “I get it.”

Nearing his phone to his ear, he missed the expression she laid on him. Her words sounded corroded when she said them, though.

“Yeah,” she decided. “I think so.”

“*You’re calling Dazai Osamu, dog owner extraordinaire,*” the mechanical voice in his ear let him know.

*“We refuse to deal in temporary adoptions — so if that’s why you called, I’m afraid you’ll have no luck. If you’re looking for me, don’t. Thanks. If you’re looking for Chuuya — why? His unideal dimensions certainly make the job harder, but why would you want to succeed? Oh — we do, however, endorse the employment of goons for the permanent erasure of all our four legged friends. I will not call you back. Unless you’re Odasaku. Are you Odasaku? Hi, Odasaku. Bye!”*

“Where the fuck are you,” he grunted, after withstanding the parade. “They enhanced the corpse. No trace of the *Werewolf Killer*.”

”*Werewolf?*” Tanaki mouthed.

“You know,” he explained. “Because of the half moon?”



Her expression turned pained. “I’m not sure the Intelligence would appreciate such a title in the reports —“

Chuuya wasn’t listening anymore. In the midst of their irritated roaming, and the unlistened requests to his phone, his eyes had found an unmistakable dot of black and bandages — much, much higher than it should have been.

*Far*, he considered, fuming, *far too high for his phone to have no reception.*

“That shitty bastard,” he snapped, hastily throwing the files the woman had passed him on the ground. “Be right back, Tanaki —“

Before he could run, her hand clenched in a gentle grip around his wrist. “Chuuya.”

He paused, allowing his shoulders to fall — just enough to observe the way her scarf whipped the wind; bright yellow lines against a polluted sky. He had missed the anniversary of her accident, the year before — had been somewhere in Greece, eyes open the entire night, remembering the dripping blood of a scripture on a wall, damning him. He wondered if she would let him walk her to the cemetery, the upcoming. If she would ever look any of them in the eyes again.

“It’s mortifying,” Tanaki said, at last. Her grip was twitching; it seemed her fingers couldn’t bear not to have his naked skin *understand*. “Being the only one left. The only one who remembers.”

The wind curled on his bitten lips, pulling at the falling skin. It burned.

He tried to speak. The words weren’t even barely enough — they wouldn’t have fit in the grass between the Flags’ fake graves, and the knife Shirase had struck him with wouldn’t have been able to trace them entirely in seven lifetimes.

“I know,” he concluded.

“You can cover it up,” she insisted, eyes too intense to be lingering on bloodied weddings or on bloodied scriptures. “You can wear a title. You can fill the space. But a corpse is a corpse, and they will smell it from miles away.”

The Ferris Wheel spun, languidly. Over the caramelized-apple stand, some kid who knew nothing of files filled with corpse pictures laughed so hard Chuuya’s own stomach began to hurt.

*[The graves were all covered in snow.*

*“Bet you’re coughing,” Chuuya said, kicking the lingering flakes off Doc’s. He hadn’t bothered tidying up his squad’s ones; they were too in the open, and slightly newer — just enough to make him suspect someone might actually use them for the people they were meant for. Pieces of rocks with no worth; all their ashes had mingled with the waves, lining the salted air with copper. “You know, I was looking for the picture you guys gave me. Couldn’t find it anywhere.”*

*“Not that I’d want N’s face around,” he added, a beat later. “I’m just over the, are you thirteen? jokes. Having proof of what I looked like as a kid might ward them off. Should I just carry it around? Hand it over like those agents’ IDs in that one show of Lippman’s?”*

*No answer. An habitual flavor.*

*Come around more, the actress had said. He thought of the weight of fragile, tortured bones in his arms; his own face, kind in a way he had never dared. Of a floating possibility, drowning in liquid Singularities and the sea-calm gaze of a man whose name he carried, still. And I might tell you —*

*He imagined growing all the way to a weakness that came with age — still remembering the sound his borrowed lungs had made as he watched him die.*

*It always tasted icier when December came.*

*“Anyway,” Hands in his pockets; blood under his nails. It would be warmer, eventually. “You guys won’t believe the stunt Hamamoto pulled —”]*

“I know,” Chuuya concluded. There was flesh on his knuckles and it wasn’t his. There were scars on his chest — *never on his spine*, he’d vowed; *never a runaway; only haunted away* — and they would only ever belong to him. “I know, Tanaki.”

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“Why that fancy, asshole?” Chuuya called, barely louder than the rush of wind from the small platform on top of the Ferris Wheel. “You want to jump to your death in prom clothes?”

Laying on his back, head dangling over the edge of the makeshift podium, Dazai — one hand scratching the spot where a bullet had hit him in front of Akutagawa — wasn’t even wincing against the repetitive Christmas jingle shrieking from the ride.

He had scared one or two families on his way up — had landed his feet on one of the cabins’ glass that a couple had been making out against. Eventually, fingers reaching for a good shake he knew he wouldn’t be granted — *a Dazai that climbed Ferris Wheels*, he mused, *was not a Dazai that could be touched* — he laid down on the thin space next to him, dangling his own head off the platform.

“Those weeks at Baltimore High damaged you severely,” Dazai said, barely sparing him a glance, in his three-piece suit. His eye was studying the midnight-deep ocean upside down;

the festive lights had turned his bandages into a ruvid kaleidoscope. “I have to go to a gala.”

He carried a bizarrely familiar scent — the rust and malodour of the shipping container.

Chuuya hated the shipping container.

*It smells*, he’d told Kouyou, the one time she had asked him. All the Demon Prodigy touched was bound to grow poisonous — no one dared to walk even the perimeter of the dumping site. As grace-lined as she always was, even the *Lady of the Port’s* ears rose when myths were told. *And it’s disgusting. Like its owner.*

Hedonism was a character defect Chuuya had been steadily nurturing into a quality — it wasn’t quite enough to make him judge a place purely because it reeked of struggle.

But — it *reeked*.

“What kind of gala?” He extracted what little was left of his own cigarette from his pocket, stuffing it between Dazai’s lips.

“*Special Division’s* pre-Christmas Eve gala.”

His eyebrows flew to the sky.

“Ane-san’s theory appealed to Mori,” the boy explained, sounding as if nothing could have been more disappointing. “Now he needs me to figure out what kind of fool they’ve employed for this moon-symbolism quest. The *Ballerinas* are so boring these days — haven’t you heard?”

“Their name keeps the general public away from ours,” Chuuya said. “I’m fine with *boring*.”

“You are?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No,” Dazai concluded, nonsensically. “I’m gonna jump.”

“I know,” The wind was a gentle thing, for once. All the blood was torturously making its way to his head, twirling with the tilted skyscrapers and the sweaty press of Dazai’s arm against his. “It’ll be very pathetic, by the way. You’ll splatter on the water like a saltless pancake, and sink like the dead fish you are. Orcas will eat you.”

A hum.

Consideration, maybe. Most probably, he wasn’t even listening.

“Pancakes are good,” he specified.

“You would taste like shit.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve bitten you before,” he reminded him.

A nod. “Dog.”

“Bastard.”

Dazai moved one arm until it was dangling over the circling cabins under them. A remote sort of longing dropped from his eyelashes like tears; he saw him gulp. The Ferris Wheel rose higher. He thought of scars under his hands — the constant pounding of things he hadn’t been quick enough to grab before they shattered.

*Caring will get you killed*, Kouyou had told him, some Christmases ago. He hadn’t spoken for a week after Adam had left for England. *Caring will get them killed*, he hadn’t replied.

*Caring is very selfish*, Iceman had said, once. Chuuya didn’t want blood in his bathroom.

He kept his eyes on the barely visible stars — the trace of smoke curling from the cigarette. “I’m gonna knock you out.”

It wasn’t a threat; he had no time for those. Dazai’s lips parted. “Sing instead,” he proposed.

“I don’t sing.”

“No,” he accepted. “Just hum. You’re stage shy, maybe. Should,” He licked his lips. “Should get you in a compressor and turn you into a jukebox. Or a carillon. Can you even be compressed more than this?”

Chuuya smacked him.

Air left in cold puffs, embracing the smoke; it painted Dazai’s cheeks a sickly red, one he was cursed with no matter the season. Sunburn or wind-scratched skin; he never looked anything but distracted.

There existed a brief moment — between the ivy in Dazai’s mind knotting and braiding to think *something*, and his lips parting to deliver *something else*. When the pain medications were the good kind, and his scarred skin remembered how unattainable and detested it felt to know silence, Chuuya wanted to nest there.

Eventually, he threw the cigarette away.

“Come on,” Dazai declared, sitting up. “You’re coming with me.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “Am I?”

“It’s a *Special Division* gala,” Dazai insisted. “If I’m lucky enough, one of them will ask for your identification papers and arrest you again.”

“Hilarious,” he grunted, using *Tainted* to somersault over the Ferris Wheel, chasing warmth. “I’m not fancy enough for a governmental gala.”

Glinting mercilessly, the Executive’s eye fell on a passing cabin under their feet. Inside it, the couple Chuuya had interrupted was still having a hard time enjoying their love ride — the woman’s traditional clothing was all mussed; their faces pale.

Leisurely, Dazai looked at him again.

His brain disconnected. “No,” he hissed, floating a good stone throw away. “No. *No*. No, this is *your* shit, *no* and *no again* —“

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“Tsushima,” Dazai said, politely nodding to the valet at the entrance of the *Horizon Line* — one of the showiest, gaudiest ballroom locations in the whole of Yokohama; *tasteless cave*, Kouyou would have shivered, horrified. Just as posed, Dazai tapped the hand clenched in a claw-grip around his elbow. “And his fiancée. Naka — *uh*. Kashimura.”

“Please,” the valet bowed, motioning to the golden chandelier-lit ballroom.

His eyes stuck to Chuuya as he entered; he met his gaze right as he blew a strand of hair Dazai had done his best to style off his jaw — showing off a too-sharp line. The man stuttered.

Clearly, the other boy was feeling slightly more solid. “Do you need me to tap your chin?” he questioned, voice obnoxiously low.

Stepping on his shoe with the poor girl’s wooden sandals — *horribly* small for his own foot — Chuuya raised his head until his neck burned, like Kouyou would have liked, stalking through the crowd of good society.

*See, Ane-san?*, he felt the urge to scoff, *just as fucking cute*.

A crimson carpet divided the infinite room in two, separating dancing couples from mingling men with nauseatingly serious looks and women with worse ones. High society looked the same in every place, from the perspective of slums’ roofs; it was probably mere bias, but Chuuya thought the shining pearls and live instruments of that place tasted bloodier than the Mafia’s own.

“Who’s *Tsushima*, anyway?” he asked. “You always use that.”

“I like how it sounds,” Dazai replied, easily, zooming to the refreshments table immediately. “Could you at least *pretend* to possess some sort of feminine grace, you elephant?”

“I *am* graceful, you two-faced asshole. *You* try to walk with this sash —” Chuuya tried to take a deep breath; failed. “And who’s Kashimura?”

His smile turned gently mocking — some far away joke he wasn’t meant to catch. “*You’d* like it.”

“What?”

A passing waiter waved a tray full of glasses in their faces; Chuuya grabbed one glass for each hand, subtly raising a middle finger over the neck of the left one when Dazai made a face.

The dancing bodies seemed to be having the least fun out of anyone in the room; high heels and distracted gazes twirled along to some classical piece Kajii would have recognized, *kimonos* and the secret conversations only violins could muffle. He swayed along to a mind game Dazai had started playing with a guest who knew *tons* about the last hires at the *Division*, and subtly searched for Agent Minami’s familiar traits between his own swerving blue sleeves.

Eventually, indignantly hooking his hand in the crook of Dazai’s elbow — *do mind appearances, Slug* — Chuuya unimpressedly watched him spin a married couple of *Division’s* investors, doing his very best to appear *fiancée-y*.

“ — what I tell her,” Dazai was saying, through fake fits of laughter. His suits were always tailored — all the same, he couldn’t shake off the impression that they never fit him. “We have great hopes for future endeavors. Despite its... slightly suspicious nature, change was definitely needed — wouldn’t you agree?”

“If it lowers the taxes,” the man sighed.

“Oh,” Chuuya sighed, too, trying to mimic Kouyou’s most mocking cadence, “Don’t they love to raise those.”

His wife’s smile sharpened. “The *Division* had great plans for the upcoming year. If all goes as it should, some of the annual payments will easily be moved elsewhere,” She tilted her head, studying her yawning husband with a grim smile. “It would be nice not to obsessively fund a police that can’t even catch two measly criminals from the port.”

“More than nice,” the man agreed. “More than nice.”

Head thrown back, Dazai laughed. She did, too. It was all very pleasant.

Chuuya smushed his cheek against the side of Dazai’s arm, muttering, behind a bright smile: “Isn’t this obligatory two-people invite thing outdated, by the way? Are we really to assume every rich fuck is getting snatched up?”

“Money is a good thing to snatch up,”

He looked around, sizing up lonely men in desperate want of conversation. Christmas party or not — men who spent their days behind a desk and their nights interrogating, or not — match-up flares could be found near every pearl-wearing lady. “Then why are *Bachelors Lists* a thing?”

“Precisely to get snatched up,” Dazai said, turning just enough that the imperceptible shadow of a teenage beard brushed against Chuuya’s nose. He pulled on the back of his *kimono*. “My dear.”

He retched.

“Not on board with the engagement?” the boy guessed, subtly leading him towards the stairs, half hidden behind a chocolate fountain. “You dislike the silverware picked for the celebration?”

Chuuya shuddered, cheek rubbing against the good fabric of his jacket like a whim. *If one of you had been a girl, and old traditions had still been intact*, Kouyou had warned, *you two would have probably* — “An hypothetical wedding of ours would wind up worse than Tanaki’s,” he judged, with a distinctively unfeminine snort. “And that’s saying something, considering we gave her seasonal depression.”

Laughter escaped Dazai like a surprise — he seemed taken aback himself; a bit annoyed.

“Blood fountain,” he theorized.

He glared at him. “You do not get a *blood fountain* at our wedding. Which isn’t happening,” he added, in a jarred hurry. “Because *ugh*.”

“More than so.”

“Ane-san would have an aneurysm.”

“*Oh*, but I’m sure you get a — dog to carry the rings or something,” Dazai muttered.

He felt his back tremble. The boy threw a look at his blurred, excited eyes and stepped on his foot. “*No beasts at our wedding*.”

“Listen.”

“No. You’re enough dogs for a lifetime. You can carry the rings.”

“It’s *my* wedding.”

“Embrace new traditions. In fact, let’s both say *no* when they ask,” he suggested.

“I wouldn’t say *yes* if they paid me.”

“Objectively,” Dazai observed, “We do have rather high standards of what a tempting bribe is. Or *I* do, at least. You might sell out for a dog that carries rings, apparently.”

“Well, it won’t be a problem when I drown the other groom in his blood fountain.”

“So we *do* get a blood fountain —“

“Congratulations!” A passing trio called, as they bowed their heads respectfully.

Chuuya stared, horrified. “*No*, no — you’ve got it all — “

With habitual pettiness, Dazai pulled his sash again. He smiled charmingly at the trio, with a much deeper bow than they’d offered. “Thank you to bits, my beautiful companions!”

The girls giggled. He retched again.

The wide ribbon holding the sash was *far* too suffocating; Chuuya was still convinced the makeshift bun Dazai had savagely pulled his hair in wouldn’t sell his face as feminine. But the crowd’s gazes passed them like water — and no one paused on him, eyes lighting up with the memory of files and waterboarding sessions.

“How did you even get an invitation here?” he questioned, when Dazai dragged him to the first floor — a wooden, ghostly set of hallways whose doors had golden plaques and secret offices.

“Ango had one in his bag.”

Chuuya stared. “Glasses just *had* one?”

“Ango always has everything,” he insisted, clicking a hairpin stolen from his hair into a lock — opening the doors to a certain *A.K.*’s office. “He collects charms from Odasaku’s jobs.”

There was an obscene amount of receipts from mercenary acquisitions, locked behind the metal door of a makeshift cabinet; yellowish papers filled with pictures of faces Chuuya recognized — from their own Intelligences’ researches on all the worst of the worst of possible aces. The Port Mafia had a tendency to call Ability Users — tempting them with the promise of support on endeavors they were already forced to commit — but some of them preferred to go rogue.

“Anything on half moons?” he asked.

Dazai’s nose was hidden between dossiers. “No. But here’s something interesting.”

The open file that landed on the desk was particularly new; on it, amidst blurred pictures of an wrinkly old woman in a peach-colored *kimono*, was a red stamped word: *DECEASED*.

“Suicide,” Dazai added, with some envy. “A clean jump from the bay. It happened more than four years ago, though — the body was carried to the *Special Division*, and never seen again.”



A shrill went up and down his spine. “But why would someone try to frame her?”

“Maybe the killer doesn’t know she’s dead,” he shrugged. “Or maybe the *Special Division* is now on board with our plan to move the attention from the Mafia to the *Ballerinas*.”

Chuuya frowned. “Why would they be?”

He tilted his head to the side — picked up a good amount of the thinner files, and stuffed them behind his jacket. Possibly for the Intelligence; the recruitment process, bound to start next year. “To make sure no one else gets to us before them.”

A key turned in the door; behind it, the low murmur of all but festive voices.

They didn’t even exchange a glance — they flew to opposite sides of the suite, Dazai vanishing behind one of the locked doors, Chuuya dragging his body on the wall outside the window. It was mere seconds before the door was opened; the lines of stiff shoulders and motioning hands were all he caught, before he disappeared.

He was halfway to the window that would lead him to the ballroom again, when the moving silhouette from another first floor window caught his attention.

“—there,” the man was mumbling, madly. The slot carried his fragile tone along with the cold wind, fragmenting it like a spasm; his hands flew to his hair, pulling — holding on. “Not there, you’re not there, you’re *not there*, I know you aren’t —“

Frowning, Chuuya plastered himself by the window, making sure not to reflect the red glow of *Tainted* on the glass. It didn’t seem like the man would notice — he was too busy pacing, his spine curving a bit more with each hit to the desk in his way he didn’t seem to notice. His voice grew lower and lower, stretching into a hysterical sort of cry; he hauled his hair until some tufts were left in his palms, shoulders shaking with laughter.

“*You’re not there*,” he insisted. His fists were on his chest, suddenly — punching and pinching and *sinking* the nails in the skin; the man hugged himself until his fingertips were tattooed on the skin. “*You’re not there! You’re not!*” He screeched, contorting wildly against a straitjacket that wasn’t there, breathing in desperately.

Blood began pooling from the holes his nails had dug effortlessly on his arms; his laughter grew strained.

“You’re not there,” the man swore, *begged*, hiding his head between his arms, and Chuuya moved — “*You’re not, you’re not, you’re not, you’re not, you’re not, you’re not, you’re not* —“

Abruptly — far too fast for him to break the glass — the man spun on unstable feet, his mouth open on a shriek, and slammed his forehead on the sharpest corner of the desk.

He heard the *thud!* of his body on the moquette like a gunshot.

“Chuuya should know better than to drink on a job,” Dazai commented, a bunch of minutes later — seemingly untouched by the fast escape — appearing next to him at the refreshments table. His fingers skimmed over his waist, imperceptible through the thick fabric. He had

studied enough high-names couples to know stickiness was a sign of *something*; he wasn't kind enough to assume the touches weren't just Dazai's whims. "What if he throws up on the gentlemen he's meant to spy?"

The wine was steadily getting to his head — uncomfortable warmth drizzled down his arms. The natural tattoo of a half moon on the back of the man's hand was stuck under his eyelids.

Dazai's frame hid the brighter lights; the dancing silhouettes of men who wanted Chuuya dead or in a tube filled with water — *and which one was worse*, he wondered, and wondered, and *knew* — and men who had no idea of the blood on their ceiling. The boy peered down at him, wearing a pout that made him look younger than the age on their invitation.

"You should be scamming the bourgeoisie, right now," he informed him, gulping down wine. "I'm not pulling an all-nighter in enemy territory."

"These are just underpaid interns," Dazai let him know. "The adult table doesn't party."

The man's nails. The half moon. His brain squeezed itself for a conclusion. "If I have to hang around here with no bones to break any longer, I might just decide to snap your neck."

"Of course the dog wants a bone," Dazai smiled at some women walking by, face morphing so easily it made his head spin. "I'm unsurprised."

"Of course mackerels catch the stupidest baits," he replied. "I'm unsurprised."

He hummed. The orchestra bowed their heads in gratitude to the raised glass to the end of a song; the violinists straightened again — chins low on their instrument, as a new melody deftly started blooming between their fingers. Dazai's head tilted in a way that was pure instinct — Chuuya saw him listen to that starting, high-pitched note with an interest that was bizarrely academic.

"*Mmh*," he concluded.

His hand ended somewhere on the side of his neck, cold fingers curling where his choker was missing; hidden in the back of Dazai's shoe. He leaned down — right as one of the men who had suspiciously commented on, *how young they were, to be so high-placed in society already*, glanced their way — thumb on an old scar by Chuuya's jaw; then, he set his lips at the very corner where Chuuya's own ended.

The pressure was a tickling, nonexistent tap of raindrops. He made a face; pinched the space between his eyebrows as soon as he moved.

"Madame Momo *insists* I show her the muscles I hide under my bandages," Dazai sighed, still bent in his breathing space. "Do me a favor?"

"Not quite on my to-do list. Did she say *alleged* muscles, or is she stupid?"

He wiggled his eyebrows. *He should have cleaned up more often*, he considered, distantly. It was only proper for him to look good next to Chuuya. *Double Black* and all. "Come on. We're dancing."

*We can't, Chuuya thought about saying, a bit lost — agonizingly so. He didn't want to dance with him in a woman kimono, with names that weren't even their own; he didn't want to dance at all. He grasped the barely-peeking edge of Dazai's wrist bandage, and pulled. There's a corpse upstairs.*

*[The day after he got shot and Akutagawa's face was sprayed with the blood, Chuuya found Dazai face down on the futon by Albatross' bed.*

*It wasn't anything new — they came back home at different hours, when their missions weren't Double Black- assigned; he didn't always catch him washing half the dishes or resetting his results on the gaming console, but he always saw the signs of it. The unmade futon; the used DOG OWNER #1 mud; occasionally, the smell of blood.*

*Whenever Chuuya did catch him coming in, he did what he'd always done: attacked him — for the sake of training, he would have explained Mori; only he never would, because he didn't want to know what Mori thought of the shipping container — and then let him in, anyway.*

*“Oi,” he snapped, still. “The fuck you think you're doing?”*

*Having dived face first into the futon, the boy's voice came out somewhat muffled: “Drowning your insufferable voice out through forced slumber.”*

*“The hell you are. Go home.”*

*“Can't hear you,” Dazai replied. He stole a pillow, strangling it close as he shut his eyes. There was no blooming blood at the center of his chest; Chuuya's fingers spasmed a bit at the memory, all the same. “Can't see you either. Too small. Buy a megaphone and try again. Hey — You didn't tell me you'd kept the microscope from the Dragon Head Conflict. I saw it in your bathroom.”*

*“That's — you're not sleeping in my bed — Dazai. Dazai.”*

*A rather fake snore.*

*Chuuya stole the other pillow; smashed it on his back with little restraint, watching him bounce. “You've got your own bed!”*

*“The container is too far,” he groaned, under the unstoppable hits. “Even average-length legs get tired, you know? Buy a dog house. Ouch!”*

*The container is too — He tightened his grip around the pillow; hammered it on his head again, mercilessly. “Oi! Sleep on the couch if you've got to stay! There's three of them!”*

*Dazai curled his legs close. He was all legs and all bony spine, peeking even from his shirt — he was wretchedly good at making himself smaller. Through sleepless glances thrown over their months out of Yokohama, he'd learned the machinations of his face disappearing in his arms, and his pulled-up legs getting hidden inside his shirt.*

*He was hardly the kind of person to wish to occupy as little space as possible, Chuuya knew. Loud and boisterous in his every violation; purposeful in all his noticeability. And yet —*

*An open palm landed on his face.*

*“You fucker —”*

*“Make yourself useful and take them off,” he whined, through the pillow, on the verge of kicking his feet. “I want to sleep. Do you always talk so much before sleeping? Your neighbors must hate you even more than I’d already guessed.”*

*Chuuya kicked him. “Take what off, asshole, your big ass head — ?”*

*The arm Dazai had disembled from the embrace of the pillow was waved, half heartedly, again. The sleeve of the shirt he had stolen from his own wardrobe — and how unlikely it was, still, to see him in blues and reds and normality — barely reached his wrist. Under the faded azure fabric, his bandages peeked.*

*He stilled.*

*Despite the closed eyes, he knew Dazai felt it. Didn’t care as much as he should have, Chuuya considered. Cared more than he would have liked.*

*He wondered if the reluctance was human — if it was one of the sourly-lined tricks of the thing inside him that was not a god, but wished to be treated as such. Do not touch him, it would say. Sometimes — do not let him go. As crazy as the former Boss, the whispers among the Guerrilla said. A hundred times smarter. Inhuman.*

*The truth, Chuuya could have told them, was much simpler — Dazai Osamu was always too far away to reach.*

*Chuuya sighed. “Whatever.”*

*He crawled on the futon, feeling the gaze of a fakely sleeping lump on him. He climbed over his abandoned body, caging him in — and then flopped down, stomach pressed into his wind-cold dress shirt and the sweaty skin underneath.*

*A groan; only sincere by the end, where the futon grazed the bullet wound. An attempt to act whiny about nakedness. Chuuya sunk his cheek on his shoulder blade, keeping thoughts of growth at bay — the difference in size of their settling bones; the puzzling familiarity of a skeleton that he’d watched change, always too connected to his own for it to matter.*

*“Promise 189,” he recited.*

*“I didn’t mention the Standard Island Accident,” Dazai complained, into the pillow. His bandaged arm was still in his periphery; Chuuya’s fingers itched. “No one was saying a thing about it until you did.”*

*You sent me a thousand miles away the day after I saw underneath the bandages, he could have told him. A blessing gone too soon, he would have then added — because it was true,*

*the way most things out of his mouth tended to be. Crooked, but honest.*

*Chuuya could hear his heartbeat. His body was rattled by occasional shivers — warm enough to make his own eyelids feel drowsy. Knowing Dazai, he would sneeze in his face to pointlessly try to pass it to him. Knowing Dazai, he hadn't wanted to be sick and locked in a container.*

*Or maybe not. Some kind of greediness, he thought. Ugly and mean and unwanted. The rules of the playground; of the streets. Gluttony; only, sour under his tongue. Only I will bleed you out.*

*He pressed closer.*

*Hoarder, Arahabaki spat.*

*"I'm no one's punching bag," he echoed.*

*Dazai sighed until his cheek sank in the pillow — offered him the distant gaze of his eye. "I'll tell you a story if you do it."*

*Chuuya ran his hand up a particular point of his side — not tickling yet, but threatening. There, he traced: don't use me as transactional gain either.*

*"You're not a gain," he insisted, as if obvious. "You're a given."*

*"And you're not vain," he challenged. "Being seen does nothing to you."*

*A pause. "It's a very good story, though."*

*He dragged his hand up — hauled the hair on the boy's nape, gently enough. "Is it?"*

*A note of pleasurable distraction muffled his words. "Mm-mh. Q told me some of it. About people exchanging bodies."*

*"Yeah?" he encouraged, with a sigh. "And then what happens?"*

*"One of the guys was about to start a war," Dazai choked on a yawn, all of him a whisper — a mere suggestion. "A personal revenge against those who killed his family."*

*"Does the guy who steals his body start the war?"*

*"Can't decide. It depends," His finger traced a half moon on the sheets, absorbed. "Is your anger yours or your body's?"*

*Chuuya watched the wrinkles of the futon come into shape. In a distant corner of his mind, his arms itched. He turned his head; pressed his mouth to Dazai's shoulder blade, hard enough for his teeth to ache — waited, patiently, for the taste of blood.*

*All he felt was the shiver underneath him.*

*“Come on, then,” Chuuya sighed. He sat up — let his fingers land on the abandoned bandaged arm, and linger. “It better be a good story.”]*

“Fine,” he concluded, eyes to the ceiling and its invisible blood stains. He’d have to mention the man’s crazed state, eventually. He’d have to mention Matsuda. “But I’m leading.”

For that, Dazai made sure to step on his feet through the entire waltzer.

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Chuuya only managed to escape the board games by *accidentally* spilling juice on Elise — and because of the corpses.

“She’ll get over it,” he assured Kouyou, the moment he joined her in the hall of *Building Five*, where two dozen grey body bags were lined on the floor. “Don’t act as if you didn’t immediately lose the first round just to escape.”

Her festive *kimono* was a firework show; she curled untied hair between pale fingers. “Maybe board games aren’t amongst my strengths.”

“Sure,” He removed his hat. “And you *didn’t* make Hirotsu swim in your artificial river after you beat him seventy rounds on seventy one, last Christmas.”

*New Year* celebrations echoed from the far away windows of the other buildings; *Building Five* was still utterly silent, though.

“Who?” Chuuya asked.

Outside, it thundered. The uncomfortably wet weather was predicted to last all the way to the first week of the new year; the sky had been stuck in a perpetual layer of ash, uncaring of sun or stars. He’d found himself missing the red raincoat he used to be forced into — at the very least, though, his *kimono* was a male model. Corpses looked the same under sunlight or storms.

He wiped some raindrops off the nearest body bag. The next stroke of lighting painted Kouyou’s face a crepuscular sort of golden. “That eccentric bomb maker of yours.”

He flinched. “This is *Kajii’s* squad?”

“The second one he was ever assigned,” she confirmed. “I can’t imagine he will be particularly thrilled about this failure.”

Distantly, he thought he could hear music — all the way from the ballroom at *Building One*, where he’d watched the scientist scream at Elise’s rampant cheating. “I thought the job was just to handle the lack of payments from the Port side.”

“It was,” Kouyou confirmed. “He said they bumped against an Ability User of sorts — stayed in the shadows,” Her gaze grew pointed. “His men acted out because of it. He was already throwing his bombs out to hit the invisible threat. He wasn’t fast enough to stop.”

Starkly bright against the body bags, New Year’s choirs filtered in from the outside. Adam had gone out of his way to send both an eerily grammatically correct email of good wishes and a new *Jack-in-a-Box* — only this time, he’d added a little toy in a black suit and a red mop of hair next to his own doll.

*I painted it myself!*, his letter assured him. *I hope you will appreciate it. I used every stored memory of your face in my database. It is, of course, incredibly small.*

Chuuya winced.

“Actually,” The woman glanced around — they were the only ones in the Hall. She crouched down, her sandals beating the marble of the floor. “I wanted you to take a look at this.”

Burned on the left shoulder of the nearest corpse was a mark, red and angry near the center — fading off into a bluish sort of dead skin at the edges. The shape could have been vague enough, partially ruined by bruises and familiarly torn apart skin; Chuuya recognized it immediately.

“A half moon,” he echoed. He settled his fingers on the stain, biting his tongue against the familiar taste of dead flesh. “Again.”

“More than seven corpses, now.”

“Any new voices about an Ability User with that side effect?”

“None at all,” she answered. “I searched. I’ve been dealing with that married couple I told you about — the woman’s Ability is quite similar to my own. A few years ago, they started building a system of research on rogue Abilities — something sharper than even our Intelligence.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“So they’re a *golden league* rogue,” Chuuya concluded.

“Don’t use video game metaphors with me, dear. I’m not that silly demon of yours.”

“They’re someone powerful enough the *Division* might have accepted to leave free reign,” he insisted. “And — I told you about Matsuda’s suspicions. If they’re taking Verlaine as a model of sorts — the half moons could be like the crosses he left on his victims.”

A complicated expression bloomed on Kouyou’s face. “They’re to be reeled in before they cause more issues,” she ordered. The corners of her lips climbed up cold-rose cheeks — she nudged his side with her foot. “What do you say? Do you feel up for a more — *official*, let’s say, bounty hunt?”

“Ane-san,” he tutted, not unlike she had a penchant for. “When do I not?”

She parted her grinning mouth, on the verge of adding something — then set her eyes on the glass doors, and paled so quickly he might have mistaken her for one of the bodies on the floor.

“*Oi*,” He blinked at the emptiness in front of him; set a hand on her shoulder. “Hey. Ane-san. What’s wrong?”

“I thought —“ Kouyou trailed off.

The silence had a strange tinge to it — the absent steps of mourning subordinates around the corpses; the murmurs of holidays they couldn’t afford to enjoy fully. Her lips were still parted; for a single, disconcerting moment, Chuuya thought he knew what word was about to leave her mouth.

She cleared her throat; leaned down to zip up the marked body’s bag.

“It’s alright,” she concluded. “It’s alright, I — momentary distraction. I thought I saw —“

Nothing concluded the sentence. Slowly, still looking somewhat lost, the woman led him back to the ballroom.

Decorations were impeccable down to the last notch; despite the stubborn rain attempting to crack the floor-to-ceiling windows behind heavy curtains, the room was drowned in a warm golden wave, swarmed by bodies in overpriced kimonos. *Classy*, of course, all of it — the Port Mafia had fought too hard for its spot not to show off when it could. A different sort of snottiness than the one dripping from the *Division’s* ballroom walls — but still snottiness.

“*You lose!*” Elise screeched, jumping on top of the table she had forced countless mafiosi to sit around.

The games hadn’t stopped in hours. Mori seemed on the verge of using sharp cutlery against anyone who offered the girl one compliment too many. A group from the *Guerrilla* squad blinked pleading gazes at him, one eye abandoned to their precious cards. Elise laughed, again.

*Snotty*, he considered, fond. *But warm*.

Kouyou sipped on her glass. “And what do you want in exchange for not letting Elise know about my...” She scrambled for a better term than, *losing in the first round to run from her*.



“Fortified humbleness?”

Chuuya hummed, leaning back against the column they had claimed. “I read this one pamphlet in Hirotsu’s office,” he offered. “There’s this *Bugatti* — only five or six were produced in the entire world. Costs an eye.”

“Imported cars as a favor,” she summed up. She ruffled his hair; he dangled his hat from two fingers as it fell. “I’m almost proud. Deal.”

From the chair next to Elise’s own, Hirotsu laid empty eyes on the ribbon the girl was offering him. In a hushed wave of terror, framed by the widening eyes of his *Black Lizards* — he hooked it to the top of his head. At his right, Tanaki laughed so hard her face grew redder than the wine.

“Voices say she’s forgiven the two of you,” the Executive dared, as the chuckles faded through the music and the unwilling competitiveness of the mafiosi.

He glared. “Calling your spies *voices* doesn’t make them more bodacious.”

She shrugged. “Pretending that she won’t bear resentment as long as you make her normalcy repetitive is foolish.”

“Or maybe not everyone is as attached to their resentment as you are,” Chuuya replied, as carefully as possible. His doubts were his and his alone. “Respectfully. I see no —” He glanced her way. “Just what are you looking at?”

Kouyou didn’t answer. Her grasp on her glass was paling her knuckles; nothing but the rain was pooling on the window she’d set her uncannily vicious attention to.

He straightened. “Ane-san.”

“Do you —” She frowned. “Excuse me.”

“Ane-san —”

He watched her stalk to the other side of the room, hastily leaving her glass in his free hand. No time was given for him to follow — thin, pale fingers stole her drink from his confused fingers. Still masked and surprisingly close — compared to diffident habit — Gin Akutagawa’s face appeared in front of him.

“Kid,” Chuuya offered, forcing himself to look away. “Happy New Year. Looking slick.”

He had opted out of a kimono, not unlike most *Black Lizards* — the suit he wore fit him too well not to be tailored, and it had Hirotsu’s posh touch all over it. The spiky ponytail was still there, if a bit higher — experimenting, Chuuya assumed.

He nodded. His fingers curled in the air, indecisive. He eyed the stolen alcohol in his other hand.

“Don’t you dare,” Chuuya was quick to take it back, abandoning both of the glasses on the nearest table. “Think about it again in six years or something.”

His eyebrow curled, speechless.

“Age limitations are there for a reason.”

Hesitantly, his fingers shaped out a syllable — then two; uncertain of being understood or glanced blankly at. *I’ve killed people.*

*Did you kill them with alcohol poisoning?*, Chuuya replied. Gin’s eyes widened, stuck on his hands. He grinned, leaning into the space between their bodies. *The Mackerel and I had to learn the standard, to make our own. So make sure not to tell him to fuck off like this.*

*I don’t think he would care.*

*Ah.* A shrug. *If you don’t want your brother to get overprotective, then.*

Quickly, he muffled his snort. Chuuya waited for him to be done with his unsubtle search, and asked: “Did your brother talk to you?”

He made a face.

*Somewhat*, he signed.

Chuuya couldn’t say he was sure of why Gin had decided to initiate a conversation with him; they had never done more than coexist in the same space. He was clearly a silent kid; he only ever willingly interacted with Hirotsu, it seemed — allowing occasional fawning from Madame Tanaki, and the brawls he had no hesitation to *win* against *Black Lizards* too keen on underestimating him.

*He said you’re the one told him to apologize*, Gin accused.

“I didn’t,” Chuuya replied. Akutagawa had left his gloves on the floor, in front of the door of his office, after the alley escape — it had sparked some kind of *stubbornness* to look for him, but he had failed. “I told him to look up from his own ass and realize there are things that matter more than what smelly fish think of him.”

*It won’t work*, he considered.

“Then don’t give up,” he tilted his head to the side. In the corner of his gaze, a black void with his eyes set on them caught his attention — Dazai’s coat over his *kimono*; face judging the festivities around him with glee. “Not if you care. Right?”

Gin crossed his arms.

He had a tendency to crawl into himself; hug his shoulders until the shadows swallowed the few glimpses of skin. *Street-sticky*, Shirase would have said. He liked to make up words.

“*Black Lizards* stand tall,” Chuuya let him know, voice low, tapping his under chin. As if electrocuted, he straightened his spine all in one blink. “And they don’t let brothers be assholes,” he added. “Try to talk some sense into him, but don’t *ever* let yourself get hurt for the sake of waking him up — not again.”

He stared at the floor.

“Clear?” he insisted.

A small nod. *Yes, Vice-Executive.*

“I go by Chuuya. None of that,” Chuuya warned. “Not when Akutagawa is two words from calling me a son of a bitch.”

His eyes crinkled — he thought his smile might be less than a curved line under the mask; but a good enough price. Studying his face, Gin traced, very slowly: *You sound a lot like him.*

Chuuya frowned. “Him?”

He shook his head, eyes low.

Eventually, he shrugged. “Wanna dance?”

Surprise widened his eyes. He glanced at the few couples rubbing their feet near the center of the room, heads thrown back in laughter — a tad less solemn than the high society the *Division* ballroom had waved around. With an avid glint in his eyes, mostly subdued, he signed: *I’m not...*

He trailed off — fiddled with his tie, like it might have signaled some sort of statement.

“...an adequate dance partner?” Chuuya concluded. He hooked the chain of his hat on his sash; reached forward and gently took Gin’s wrist, leading him to the swaying crowd. “You should have seen the waltzers the bandaged fool’s forced on me. Come on. I’ll even let you lead.”

The boy lit up. Failing at non-eagerness, he dragged Chuuya to the floor.

As the music changed into something both classical and upbeat, Gin’s alleged grin was hidden behind his mask — but he accepted to hold onto his tentative steps, occasionally being glared at by Kouyou for bad posture, and danced along.

Elise screamed a bit more — mafiosi and seats were exchanged; money was taken and given up on. Ace’s mouse eyes shone in that dangerously hyper aware way of his, whenever a card game was in the works. Some of the younger *Lizards* — a small group of subordinates who hadn’t burned in jealousy at his rapid climb to fame — ended up stealing Gin from his embrace, poking at him.

Hamamoto, X and some of the *Guerrilla* squad waved their entire bodies at him, begging for him to join the death match. Chuuya shook his own head *very* pointedly, dragging one thumb over his neck.

At some indefinite point, he ended up over the back of Mori's chair, studying the dots the IV had left on the edge of his wrists.

"Not too fond of table games, Chuuya?" the man questioned, tilting his head back to offer him a placid smile.

"I get a bit too competitive," he replied, as Elise waved the bingo blower over her head. "And I have a thing for game rules."

The man winced. "I've been trying to figure out the right sequence of these passages for a bit — I do hope Elise hasn't noticed."

"*Too slow!*" the girl barked. Subordinates all around jumped three feet in the air. "Hurry up!"

The glances directed to the man were few and far in between — the festive crowd preferred to murmur; as if they could have escaped his eyes by pretending they weren't there. No one had quite dared to wonder after his health; they had only welcomed him back with bowed heads and a questioning line in their eyes. *Of course he's here*, one of the snipers had mumbled. *Where else?*

"So," the Boss started, graciously pulling at the bow on top of the child's hair to keep her near. "Have you been enjoying our lessons, Chuuya?"

*Lessons.* An unfit terminology. He lived with the lingering possibility that every word out of Mori's mouth might be one of those *lessons*.

"Certainly, sir," he offered. He knew more about daedal, deeply convoluted mechanitions of the Mafia's nervous system than he had thought he would ever need. It sat weirdly on his shoulders. "It has been very — surprising."

"One tends to take greatness for granted, until they see what is built behind it," the doctor confirmed. "To keep it afloat. To keep everyone standing inside it safe."

And it was true. Connections and threats and deals and stolen secrets — all of it creased on the base of the syndicate to create walls so high, even Chuuya had to fly up a bit to see over them. And with the elections — "The executions are a bit repetitive, though."

A chuckle. "We live in times of change."

Eyes to the liquid in his glass, he insisted, low: "Those time of change are forming a wing of supporters to the one suicidal maniac in town."

"Chuuya," Mori's hands, which had been rolling dice from the table road, came to a halt. All around them, music and drinks flooded; no one paid them any mind, and everybody watched. "Do you believe I will be dethroned?"

It was surreal to hear that question in any place but a locked room. He thought it belonged to secret meetings in rooms of the *Five Towers* that *might* escape Mori's spies for a minute or two — maybe to the distant gaze in Dazai's eyes. It was disturbing to have the man look at

him with genuine curiosity, as if his input on what would be the eleventh — the *last* — assassination attempt was indispensable.

Chuuya shrugged. “I believe they think you *can* be.”

“Who is *they*?”

Elise had plastered her nose to Tanaki’s chest; her begging, *whining*, grew and grew in the background of his thoughts. “The whispers.”

Mori intertwined his hands, pressing them against the table. The man hardly ever fit into that storm of people; but suddenly, it was his eyes that did not *fit* on the celebratory smile on his face.

“A cleanse goes two ways, Chuuya,” he said. A lesson, probably; because he straightened, and his hands spasmed — the thievery of a street kid, who knew when gold was being dangled. Stealing words from Pianoman’s speeches — stealing moves from Ability Users set on tearing the Sheep into pieces. “If cockroaches smell revolution, they *will* crawl out. It’ll make it easier to step on them. I only need people I can trust, as of now.”

He frowned at the chandeliers. “Why now, specifically?”

“The *Ability Permit*,” Quicker than he could muffle, Chuuya’s shoulders stiffened. “I believe I might have found a clear road to it.”

*Neither side can afford to waste more time*, Kouyou had said. “That’s good, right?”

“It’ll be arduous, undoubtedly. Might take a year or two to plan.”

He set his jaw. “That’s why we’re fortifying our defenses, then.”

“Exactly.”

“So — Dazai’s the flame to the moths?”

Mori smiled. He drank his Champagne; evaded Tanaki’s warning look — she’d berated his drinking during healing times. “You were always smarter than most first assumed.”

His ears burned. “Good to know, Boss.”

“Or maybe — people should begin to see a threat in the trust you put in your partner.”

“It’s not about trust,” he scoffed, because it was easier than meeting the man’s eyes about the curse he had placed on both of them. “It’s about observance. This whole parade, the people falling to their knees, the assassination attempts — that’s not how the bastard kills.”

He could feel his gaze on him. His skin prickled — a careful, ingrained instinct; something that almost lit up his hands in liquid crimson.

“And *how* does he kill?” Mori asked.

Blood on the ground — on the walls of bathtubs in every motel the world had to offer; on the side of a stolen car; on his shoes; on his face; under his bandages. Always on his blind side; and Dazai, always bloodied in his periphery. “Fast.”

“Fast?”

Hands in his pockets, he shrugged.

“And you?”

“Me?”

“How fast would he kill *you*?”

Chuuya snorted.

The man’s smile widened; he ruffled Elise’s hair as she sat next to him again. “I suppose you’re right. You *are* faster than most,” A pause; with some petulance, he whispered: “Or perhaps, you two have decided to send Kouyou to an early grave. Time and closeness do tend to develop fondness, in my experience.”

“He’d leave my corpse to be eaten by the dogs,” he replied, nonplussed.

Elise crashed her fist against the game board, calling for attention. She was perfectly *real*, Chuuya knew; she sometimes felt ignorable, like a stain on a rear view mirror. A solid, bored piece of wind. Mori wondered: “But?”

Chuuya tilted his head. “But he will not let me die. So there’ll be no dogs.”

Imperceptibly, *something* passed through the doctor’s gaze. It itched where his hungry skin had crawled to stick to his bones, *Corruption* after *Corruption* — told him he had made a mistake, at some point, between one breath and the other.

“No,” he echoed. “I suppose he won’t.”

“*Rintarou!*” Elise called, eyes shimmering along to the lights. “Rintarou, look *here* — “

Some wine glasses away, after Kouyou had deadly-smilingly dragged him to dance, rain-soaked arms leaned on his shoulders. Tickling wet hair stuck on his temple, as whine-lined lips brushed the shell of his ear. “Looking for entertainment?”

“If you jumped in the river again, I will gut you,” Chuuya let him know, unbothered, keeping his gaze on the festivities. Secretive and hidden as it was, he had always thought the Mafia was made to be watched — a captivating dance of normalcy and blood; the echoing hum of laughter, as suffocating anxiety lingered in the air.

“It’s pouring outside.”

“Does that mean you *didn’t* jump in the river?”

“No, I did,” he huffed. “Odasaku and Ango won’t be free until *so late*. I was trying to pass the time in a way that would give Mori an aneurysm.”

Contempt curled on his scratched lips. “By not showing up to the most awaited event of the syndicate?”

“And telling Elise nothing would bother him more than seeing all these subordinates fawn over her blindsiding talent in board games.”

“You suck so bad.”

“That’s what he said.”

“Why don’t you go bother those two fools you’ve brainwashed into appreciating you?”

“Hey,” Dazai insisted. Shrugging him off was a pointless attempt — he stuck close enough they must have been one, to the more distant eyes. Chuuya could feel the bandages on his neck tickle his nape. “I *told* you, that’s later. Where’s my ring, by the way?”

His eyebrows flew to his hairline. “Beg your pardon?”

“Yes, do beg.”

Chuuya stepped on his foot.

“My *ring*,” the boy whined, attempting to knee him on the inside of his legs as revenge. “You committed, at the *Division’s* ball. Went around all evening calling me your fiance —“

“That was *your* idea —“

“And I kinda want to show it to Tanaki,” he insisted. “I think she might get aggravated enough that her brain will reboot into appreciating both of us again. Trust the process.”

He stared at the chandeliers, sighing. When a drunken *Lizard* woman passed by, he slipped a silver band from her finger — utterly simple, but carved like a braid on the upper side. Offering it to the hands crossed under his chin, Chuuya wasted no time watching Dazai satisfyingly slip it on his band aid covered finger.

“Wonderful,” he concluded, with a sigh. “This is so ugly it makes me want to die. Tacky is truly your *go-to*. You didn’t answer my question.”

“You know,” Chuuya let him know, “Some people actually *enjoy* syndicate events.”

“I’m sure that’s the case. ‘You met any?’”

“Ace.”

In lieu of a response, Dazai pulled his earlobe, disgusted. “Mori’s thinking of turning Executive meetings into yearly occasions,” He hummed. “*Less meetings* is a good thing. There’s a reason I used to lock myself up in the bathrooms when Mori was being annoying.”

“Thank *fuck* he is,” he grunted. “If you start another fight in the meeting room, I’ll end up in the dungeons for high treason.”

Dazai sighed. A bit too long — his breath smelled of alcohol, if faintly. He would have never let himself show up drunk to any location Mori was at, he knew — but *still*. “Here comes my ruthless, merciless Chuuya.”

His head pulsed. “I hate you.”

“It’s mutual.”

“So, then — Mori isn’t annoying anymore? That’s why you do it, these days?”

“Of course he is,” he scoffed. “He just paid to paint all the bathroom stalls *olive green*.”

*What’s wrong with olive green?*, Chuuya didn’t waste time questioning — the sky was blue; the *Guerrilla* had lost thirty seven members since Chuuya had been elected as their head; and Dazai was weird about *things*. He wouldn’t play a video game if the characters on the cover were placed *weirdly*, whatever it meant — wouldn’t wear any bandages but this old brand that a single pharmacy in the city sold.

“*Again* — looking for entertainment?”

“Why?” he challenged, turning his head to meet his eyes. “Offering some?”

“Depends,” Dazai said — all eyebags and a dangerous, magnetic edge to his cracked lips.

“On?”

“Would you accept?”

Before he could attempt to answer, the weight laying on him vanished, and three familiar faces appeared in front of him.

“Hey, Boss,” Hamamoto said, breathless — his escape from the table slowing to a halt, hands on his knees. “Enjoying the festivities?”

“More than you will once Elise finds out someone’s left mid game,” Chuuya replied. Dazai’s wet clothes had left imprints on his own, drooling shivers down his spine. He was laughing right in Hirotsu’s face, a few tables away; the man looked at him as he always — endlessly posed; unbearably fond. He doubted Dazai even felt it. “If you’re here to beg for paid holidays, you should know we have a mission on the —“

“The recruitment rumors are *actually* true, then?” X huffed, hanging off Hamamoto’s arm in a lilac Western-cut dress. “How many Ability Users can this city hold?”

“It’s Yokohama,” Sugita reminded her.

“That’s why I’m saying it.”



“Recruitment will be passed on to another Unit, I believe,” Chuuya interrupted. “We have to deal with one User in particular, now.”

The trio exchanged a glance. “Any details you can spare, Boss?” Hamamoto asked.

“*The countdown!*” some *Lizard* called, as she plastered her hands on the nearby windows — the enormous billboard towering over the center of the city had begun to change, dazzling numbers vanishing between sparkles and computer lines. “Come on, it’s starting!”

X pulled him by the wrist, respectful to the bone — they ran, crowding and mumbling, as the louder voices counted down from *ten*. Chuuya felt a hand on his hair; the end of Kouyou’s nails — the glimmer of Hirotsu’s monocle — Tanaki, in a corner, waiting with baited breath.

“...7...6...5...!”

He turned, holding onto his glass. Dazai was a dot, miles away from the crowd — head tilted to study the furthest of the windows.

There was something boundlessly vacant in his outline — an absence that was material on too long eyelashes and the dangling band aid only half stuck to his cheek. Fake candles from chandeliers painted his hair in dots of caged sunlight; the dark blue of his *kimono* fit him like an Hospital vest. He was seven steps away — he could not be reached.

*All at once*, Chuuya thought — he looked painstakingly sad.

“4...3...2...!”

He freed himself from Hamamoto’s grasp — walked through the crowd, heart pounding with irritation, reaching out to grab him by the collar and *claw* his face off. “*Mackerel!*” he called, a tad louder than the countdown, only a few bodies away. His glass was shouldered out of his grasp; it landed on the ground with a golden sound, and Chuuya laughed, uncannily drunk with the reality of it all. Dazai raised his head, startled — he found his eyes with instinctual ease, and the *cruel* thing in Chuuya’s veins longed to keep him there until he wasn’t unreachable. *Hoarder*, it spat, *hoarder* — “You gonna move, or —“

All seemed to grow still.

Crystal-clear; ear splitting — the windows closest to the game table shattered so promptly it did not have any time to be webbed in cracks. The distant thunder roared — the unmistakable pierce of bullets through the air came like a shriek.

Chuuya blinked.

It seemed to take eons for his eyelashes to tear from each other — his body was spread in front of his subordinates, glimmering scarlet; more than a thousand shards of glass floated mere inches from his face, trembling frantically over *Tainted’s* old. The crowd had parted in an unprepared chaos — the weapons they had hid under festive clothes were in their hands, Abilities lighting up some of the frames. All their eyes were on Mori.

The man in front of him was soaked — red to the very bone; ruined clothes and the gun he had held onto as he pierced the window still locked in shaking fingers. *Golden Demon* floated upon the Boss' head, her katana glinting with gunpowder from the bullets she had cut in halves.

They landed on the ground in a *tin-tin* — deafening in its simplicity. The purple-lined ripped armrest Hirotsu had struck through the assassin's chest made a strange sound when he inhaled — a wet, horrendously choking squelch that dropped coagulated blood onto the carpet.

“You,” the assassin tried. “You will —“

His knees cracked the ground.

*Almost* — the man turned, barely floating on his feet; stumbling heavy steps in the opposite direction, uncaring of the weight drifting viscera apart from his flesh. He dropped anyway, halfway to his arrival — crawled on his elbows until his lungs were no more, forehead flat to the ground.

Chuuya felt him die just like that; in a bowed stance, laying in a growing pool of crimson — right in front of Dazai's casual, blinking frame.

The sound of gritting teeth bumped on the shell of his ear; Hamamoto breathed shallowly.

Frame nauseatingly blurred behind *Golden Demon's* outlines, Mori's face didn't even twitch. Steadily, blood reached Dazai's shoes.

He took a step back.

“Dear,” Dazai lamented. His voice did not pause the storm outside; Chuuya could still hear every rusty mechanism in every mind in the room spin madly — *thinking*. When his single eye landed on him, the sheer hilarity in it was a trembling bridge on an abyss of delirium. “Could someone clean that up, please? Must the smell of corpses *always* ruin the New Year's dinner?”

Through the wrecked windows, fireworks bloomed in unstoppable waves of blinding flares — apocalyptic, midnight struck the clock hand.

kouyou: i miss when you and dazai were cute. now you're just doomed yaoi

i'm the very soul of solitude: actual nakahara chuuya quote.

"you sound a lot like him": wonder who gin might be getting trained by... who resembles chuuya... anyway.

unfortunately i have to run (once again) since i'm posting this in between classes, so this is where i thank you guys for all the love and comments and kudos and go away. i hope you enjoyed the chapter and i hope you'll enjoy the next ones even more, and i hope everything is going great in your life. see you soon and keep warm!!!

p. s. toe update i now have a funny pseudo cast. i'll write skk on it.

# HOW

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!! ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xviii.*

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*Case number: 73837882*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi Ango*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] began the process of recruitment on [...]*

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Kajii enjoyed studying the prisoners in the dungeons.

Despite his skepticism on the man's reasoning — *how to better understand God than near the dying ones?* — it was the first place where Chuuya began his search. On his way down

the stairs, he heard nothing but tired sobs and the occasional prayer, soaked in winterish air and the sticky dust always dripping from the steps.

The door was still there. Kajii wasn't.

He dragged his nails over it as he passed, gathering rust under his gloves; he wondered about the hum in his bones, a thing as constant as the sky — the urgency to separate his feet from any law, to remind himself of the nonexistent idea of being *crushed*.

Gravity had been an eyelash out of place since he had first breathed in. Sometimes, Chuuya still shook its hand like a stranger.

“Oh, *hey*, Almost-Executive!” Kajii roared, stuck under the largest table of the loft reserved to his lab. “Been waiting for you. *Viens ici, viens ici*. Guess what — I was wrong all along.”

“What do you mean —“ The man's fingers wrapped around his wrist, dragging him to the end of the laboratory — no care for his startled yelp or the post-mission blood stuck to his gloves. “Kajii, are you —“

“I was asking all the wrong questions,” he insisted, halting in front of a building station — endless metal pieces and unmade lemon bombs occupying every corner of the space, put together and then set apart again in some kind of crazed frenzy. “It's not about how death *works*, it's about what death *is*. God doesn't make things work — he just *makes them*.”

Chuuya stared.

The buzz of his small television was a rush of slightly perplexed waves in his ears, moving from one channel to the other with no command. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I've never been better!” Kajii laughed. He took off his goggles, throwing them to the side; the sound of glass shattering was as loud as a gunshot. The man leaned over the table, fiddling with toy renditions of atoms until he found the ones he was looking for. “See this?” he encouraged, lifting two spheres in front of their eyes. The plastic skeletons around the room stared at him. “You're the only other Physics nerd in this beautiful hellhole. Help me out here.”

“I'm not a nerd,” Chuuya said. His lab coat was still dripping blood and bomb ash. “Atoms, you freak. *And?*”

He leaned ever further, pupils blown out. “How many of these beauties are in our bodies?”

“Around 6,5 octillion — well, it's debated, but —“

“And how often do they change?”

“About 98% of them are gone by the end of the — Kajii, what's this about?”

“*See!*” Kajii exclaimed, waving his arms. He hit a scale; it broke on the ground. “We are *made* of science. Or God's will — I would argue they are the same thing, but that's another conversation. Some deities they are, *numbers* — look at the things they can do to our bodies;

to the things surrounding us. But *death*?” When he widened his eyes, they were bloodshot — a shattered vein on each side, framed by eyebags. “Even *they* cannot do a thing to it.”

*Ah*, Chuuya considered, slowly, watching as the man chuckled — taking off in a small run around his lab; muttering under his breath with every notebook he picked up from the mess on the floor. *He’s lost it.*

“And it makes sense!” he continued — as he climbed his table in a frantic haste. “Of *course* death would escape from life’s creations. Creations made specifically for the purpose of understanding its end — no way it would be that easy. It’s not about what death *does*. Death simply kills you. But *why*? What is it?”

“You know — when your heartbeat slows down,” Chuuya spelled out, after a pause. “Like, real slow. *Gone*, even. And your lungs don’t get air and all that stuff? Should be familiar.”

He waved him off. “That’s oversimplifying it.”

“Why over-complicate it?”

“Because that’s how you *understand*,” Kajii said. “What is life? A web. Weaved and weaved all over, unconquerable and phantasmal. Lemons! And numbers and atoms and every step someone takes in a direction instead of the other. You think your beloved poets have ever thought life simple?”

The television brightened up with a cereal spot of sorts, singing a jingle that fell in a strange rhythm with the snowstorm outside the windows. “Are you getting to a point?” he asked. “Perhaps one that pertains to your failed mission?”

“Didn’t fail,” the man replied, distractedly, through the scribbled pages. “Losses are bad for business, though. I understand that. Strength is in numbers. Numbers — *again*! I’m profoundly thankful for their sacrifice, still, and the help it will bring to my newly begun research. They gave me a perspective I had completely bypassed. A shame their death was such a blinding mess. I would have *gladly* welcomed a closer look —“

Lighting struck with deadly precision, muffling the hiss of Kajii’s body crashing forward — pulled down by the hand Chuuya fisted around his scarf, lowering him until their eyes met.

“Kajii,” he snapped, wearing the tone that got frozen subordinates to *move* during shootouts. “Watch your mouth. Your subordinates’ bodies are still warm downstairs.”

“I keep telling Boss I’m not cut for squad work —“

“*Kajii.*”

His eyes twitched.

All at once, he deflated.

Chuuya felt himself rattled by it; then *still*, stone-like — stuck between the reminder that he actually *liked* Kajii, and everything else.

“Since you think you’re allowed to wash away people who died by *your hand*,” he ordered, eventually, “You’ll be the one to inform their next of kins of their demise. Are we clear on that?”

Whatever Kajii saw in his eyes — a glint of the title he enjoyed mocking him with; something more similar to his avoided reflections — rubbed the maniac glint off his own. “Yes, sir.”

He let go of him.

The man rubbed his throat over the scarf, a distant sort of confusion making him frown. He waited for Chuuya to move a few steps back before he spoke again, eyes on the floor. “Anyway, I knew you wouldn’t get it.”

Chuuya watched a few of the toy atoms float in his hand, red with *Tainted* — they spun and spun, and he was not angry. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You mourn *people*,” Kajii shrugged. With a softer, less careless movement — his eyes set on the page he had ripped from the sudden scare. The broken goggles had left scratches on his cheeks; he patted them. “Everyday. I’ve seen it. All I mourn is heartbeats.”

“And you’re proud of that?”

Kajii abandoned the papers on the desk. Scratches down his hands, too; bruises and lines, nails ripped off — the unmistakable signs of struggle. *My bombs cannot touch me*, he had told him, once, after Chuuya had almost been caught in an explosion. And yet he had tried to stop them from exploding anyway — to save them. *Would you ask God to remember that the fools who pray to him can die?*

“And you’re not jealous?” the man asked.

Behind the windows, soaked to the bone from the unforgiving rain, Chuuya saw the glint of a grin — flesh and blood and a missing lung, and a wheezing last wish he could not allow more than pretense. *Help Doc*, he’d said, *I managed to* —

The television changed channels again.

“ — *marathon*,” the festive News anchor was saying, his smile bright. “*The end of this service will be followed by our yearly tribute to the late beloved actor, and the inauguration of the special channel dedicated solely to his projects. As we were recently saddened by the news of his adopted sister’s own demise* — “

“Fine,” Chuuya concluded.

“Hey,” Kajii called, awkward in that way of his — more familiar with equations and the smell left by explosions than with things that could still breathe. “Man. Listen—“

Chuuya walked to the only seat in the room — a cranky, faded beanbag abandoned to the side. Dragging it by the edge, he settled it in front of the old television, kicking the remote to float it in his hands. He raised the volume right as the pale, familiar lines of Lippman’s face

shaped themselves in front of him — make-up and winning smile; living and breathing and *being*.

“I’ll sit with it if you don’t.”

Kajii hesitated. “With what?”

“Your grief,” he clarified, leaning down, as *The Killer And His Moon* began playing. “From my experience, at some point, it’ll just be an itch.”

Where he could not see him, Kajii paused.

*Oh, I don’t know, good sir*, Lippman sighed. They had always put too much gel on his hair. They had always gone too far for a man none of them had known — ugly, *ugly* jealousy. Chuuya knew he had been mourned, with a fake name and a fake story, and Chuuya wanted all of it anyway. *Are there not worse things to do than live?*

He thought about his sister — how she had grasped his chin between two fingers. *They like freaks like us on a screen.*

Halfway through the second movie of the marathon, the scientist abandoned his unfinished bomb — and quietly, he sat on the ground next to him.

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*[Pianoman got shot, once.*

*He dragged himself to the Old World, as the Flags all tended to do when the Hospital was too crowded — when their shared penchant for, our business is our business, was stronger than the sting. The bartender knew all their numbers — and with enough prodding, she could be talked into not mumbling about the blood on the floor, and into calling the first number on her notebook.*

*Three weeks after he’d first been introduced to the group, the man who had dragged him there was shot — and Chuuya’s number was picked.*

*“I don’t believe for a second you didn’t fuck it up so she would call me,” Chuuya let him know, as they crammed up in the backroom — a small space with a tiny couch and just enough floor to spread the emergency kit.*



*He had not yet learned how to stitch people up; all Pianoman wanted, it seemed, was someone to pinch him — to make sure he wouldn't pass out; to clean blood and pass alcohol. All very professional; Chuuya studied the black and white of his blood soaked shirt and knew, with the certainty of a street kid, that he had been captured.*

*"I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive such manipulation," Pianoman admitted, cheerful in that gentle way of his. The wound was minor; but the beads of sweat rolling down his temples were relentless. "I would rather the group didn't see me in this condition."*

*Chuuya's eyebrows flew to his hairline. The man snorted. "You're new. Might as well stain your perception of me while it's fresh."*

*"I thought I wasn't part of your little band yet."*

*"You will be," he replied, unwavering.*

*He hated the certainty in his tone with bitter vitriol. I already have my own, he almost said — except it had been three weeks and two days, and Shirase hadn't shown up, and Chuuya knew better.*

*He kept his eyes on the bleeding flesh — the squelch of the needle; the fingers pinching the skin close; the trails of sticky red sliding down the heaving side of the man's ribs. His fingers seemed too delicate for the job — he had seen them wrap a piano cord around a woman's throat only yesterday.*

*(He hadn't kicked the head when it had landed on the floor. Albatross had, though; and Doc had grabbed it with scientific joy. Lippman had pulled Pianoman closer by the same bloodied wire, laughing; Iceman had drawn something with the blood on the floor.*

*Chuuya had watched them, machine and connected and friends, and for the first time since the underside of a precipice near the sea, poison in his body, he'd thought —)*

*"You seem skeptical," Pianoman said.*

*He knew better than to expect pillars to be unwoundable — knew better than to call Pianoman anything but a pillar, too. As rowdy and untamable as the other Flags might have been, he saw the way their heads turned at the mere idea of words out of the man's mouth. Youngest candidate to the Executive seat, the voices said — and Chuuya replied, if he kills me first.*

*"Why wouldn't you want them to see you like this?" he asked.*

*"You were a leader too," The man blinked. "Don't tell me you don't understand."*

*"I wasn't —" Chuuya caught a drop of blood before it could stain the couch. He thought of children standing next to the GSS, eyes widening only so, when he — gravity child and local roof roamer and their unbeatable Chuuya — for the first time, had stumbled. "You've bled in front of them before. No groundbreaking discovery on their side."*

*"Ah," Pianoman made a face. "Not the wound. That isn't the problem."*

*“Then what is?”*

*“The woman who shot me happened to use the same kind of weapon my mother used to kill my brothers,” he explained, conversationally, as the needle pierced him again. “I believe it might have — petrified me, for a moment. Doc would have heard my unstable heartbeat in a blink.”*

*Chuuya stared at him.*

*Tha man erupted in fits of laughter; his face tensed up at the bubbling blood. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”*

*“I’m not uncomfortable,” he snapped.*

*“You look terribly uncomfortable though —“*

*“Well, I’m not,” He crossed his arms. “It’s — so what. You didn’t want them to see you freak out over shit that happened to you?”*

*“Basically,” Pianoman confirmed. “I believe it could have destabilized them a bit.”*

*“You don’t look like you’re freaking out.”*

*“Oh, I am,” He blinked again, very slowly, eyes on the ceiling. “But I only let myself show it for — ah, roughly thirty seconds?”*

*Chuuya scoffed. “You got a timer or what?”*

*“A mental one, yes.”*

*“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”*

*“Is it, though?” he questioned. “Experience has taught me that forcing your body to gulp back instinctive reactions will do nothing but add to your weight. You know what Lippman’s publicist would say about that.”*

*“So what,” he echoed, “Better to let it all out where no one can see?”*

*Pianoman smiled — a softer thing. One that wouldn’t tear his stitches; one that Chuuya always felt on himself like a strangely sharp blanket. The Flags were good — the Flags were too good. The Port Mafia was holding him hostage, and Chuuya had put the chains on himself. The Flags were kind and he —*

*“Better to let it out,” Pianoman specified. A wink; he put the last stitch, and Chuuya snapped the thread. “And better to only entrust it to one person.”]*

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For no apparent reason, near the middle of January, the bathrooms of *Building One* were painted olive green. Absent-mindedly, Chuuya wondered if Dazai knew just how terrible the color looked under drying blood.

The circling movement of his hands under the faucet stole his attention from the drooling lines of crimson — he hadn't bothered to turn on the lights, but old instincts had had him kick all the stalls doors open, checking for intruders. The mirrors were all fogged up. He drew a window into them with the wet palm of his hand.

In it, he met Albatross' eyes.

Something got stuck in his throat. He leaned down to gulp it with the freezing water; held onto the cold porcelain until the image was erased from his brain — the exact shade of his eyes, never captured in pictures; the blood around them, turning the braid-escaped strands into something akin to his own color.

Chuuya turned to leave, and tripped on the upper part of Doc's body.

*No*, he thought, efficiently — it was Koda's brother, abandoned in his arms with his viscera all ripped out, surrounded by the children sacrificed for a cause he had no choice but to call *real*. It was whatever had been left of his squad's corpses after he had destroyed the building — not an ounce of respect for their tired spines; only focused on an excuse to scream until his throat was torn and have no one blame him for it.

"Hey," he protested, rough. "Hey, *no* —"

"Chuuya," someone called. "Chuuya —"

There were flies abandoning the caves where Detective Matsuda's eyes had been, empty and soggy — buzzing and shushing and crowding and *devouring*, uncaring of the blood dripping down his face faster than they could drink from.

It was a miracle that his body was standing — Chuuya could see bones peek all over his flesh; could see the layers of skin open and crack and pool all over each other — as the flies ate and the spiders crawled out of his failing lungs, the viscera landing on the floor with a squelch, the tear in his chest just as familiar as —

"*Chuuya!*" Matsuda snapped, hands on his arms — his eyes there and his skin unmarred. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

— *gravity*.

His lips parted.

He thought some sound was supposed to leave them; when it didn't, he sunk his nails in his palms and croaked: "What?"

"Why did you look like —" he trailed off.

Police sirens. Matsuda's hands on him. The concern slipping off his expression the more shut off Chuuya's own grew, as he forced his body into a frostbite of reality — to *snap* out of it.

He kept his eyes on the fogged up mirror until the man dragged him out of the bathroom — searched for the dead's eyes, and saw nothing but his own reflection.

"What," he managed to question, when the pain of his own scratches began to clear his mind. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Something like regret pooled in the man's face.

Abruptly, Chuuya was awake.

A commotion of police officers had gathered at the entrance of the building — police cars were parked all around the HQs perimeter, their blaring lights and sirens turned on, as they waited for the agents roaming through the main Hall and the corridors, defiant expressions on.

"Boss," Ace said, from Tanaki's desk, when the man made his way out of the elevator. The chaos had clearly called him back from some event; the smell of good Champagne was strong, and the glint of jewelry on him was fancier than usual. "Here you are. I was just about to call for you."

"These gentlemen are certainly virtuosos," Mori's grin could have melted the snow on the streets. He offered a hand to the most unimpressed of the uniformed bunch, as if untouched by the red-and-blue lights up in his face. "Head of Mori Corporations. What brings you to your job on one of the least snowy weekends of the season? Surely there are better ways to spend the night."

"We have a warrant," Matsuda spoke up, appearing from the bathroom doors Chuuya had stalked out of. "*Sakura&Co* claims to possess photographic evidence of plagiarism by *your* hand. Unfortunate timing, yes. Justice doesn't quite go on holidays, though, does it?"

The Boss' eyes sharpened.

He offered the officer his hand to shake — granted Chuuya a reassuring smile, when he made a beeline for his side. "Neither do oaths, Officer."

His tongue didn't manage to fight instinct. "What the hell are you doing here, Matsuda?"

Clouded, half-concerned eyes laid on him again — searching for whatever he had seen in the bathrooms; frowning when he found none of the discomfort Chuuya could still feel in his toes.

“Kid,” he greeted, carefully — as if Chuuya hadn’t all but ordered him to *stay out of it*. “You didn’t look in great shape just now. Not getting enough days off?”

“I don’t need them,” he brushed the matter off. “*Plagiarism*? Are you for real?”

“Chuuya.”

He insisted: “On manufacture? Why didn’t *Sakura&Co* contact our lawyers?”

Matsuda shrugged, accepting an evidence bag from one of his passing colleagues. It was still empty, but he fiddled with it as if meant to make Mori squirm. “The claim was brought to a judge; we were given a warrant. We have a right to check your database, if you don’t mind.”

From a few steps back, Ace scoffed.

Mori remained as pleasant as ever; moved an arm towards the stairs, his eyes dark enough to blind. “After you, then. Let’s hurry, shall we? I’m sure all of you boys want to go back to your nights as soon as possible.”

Grunts and murmurs glided through the group; Chuuya watched them all walk through the doors — unable to discern whether the pounding in his skull came from the police cars lights or his own head. Among the last ones to enter, Mori glanced in Chuuya’s direction.

Atrociously slow, he curled an eyebrow.

Chuuya stilled.

The doctor and some of the officers made their way to the stairs. He rushed forward; gripped Matsuda’s arm before he could follow them.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snarled. “Didn’t you listen to a word I —“

“This is the second appeal we receive from *Sakura&Co*, ” the officer replied, blinking at their point of contact. He’d grown more of a beard, since the time Chuuya had stumbled on him — he’d saved some kid who would be lost again soon enough, if the street voices had any truth to them. “The first one regarded child labour.”

“And selling my information the *Division* isn’t —“

“The *Division* is trying to help you —“

“You *know* you won’t find shit, Matsuda,” Chuuya hissed. Tanaki and Ace were whispering among themselves, eyes forward — humoring some hopeless officer searching through the datas in the woman’s computer.

The man paused. “Chuuya.”

“You’ll never have enough evidence.”

“Are you warning me, or threatening me?”

He let go of him; watched the ricochet land him into the back of one of the velvet couches. “I told you to *give up* on the Mafia investigations,” he spelled out. “Don’t you fucking blame me when you realize I wasn’t playing.”

Matsuda clenched his jaw.

“You don’t get to burn this city down to remake it as it fits you, Chuuya,” he called, eyes on him as he walked to the secretary desk — no care for the listening ears; no mind for anything but his *goddamn complex*. “No one does. I won’t let you.”

Chuuya didn’t turn, eyes on the odd face Tanaki was offering him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The officers were roaming the few doors on the ground floor; Mori directed them towards the elevators without a blink. Chuuya knew there was nothing to find; just as it happened during *Social Services Day* — a quiet, *boring* affair, that year; the workers barely interested in learning either Dazai or Chuuya’s names, and quick to run once they set itching powder into their dossiers — Ability Users had already rendered the building nothing short of a masterpiece of illusions.

Door held open, Matsuda stared at the place where the stairs that led to the dungeons should have been — pinched eyebrows studying the shelves of old archives appearing instead.

“Is that what your Ability does?” Chuuya asked, low, jumping on the marble of Tanaki’s desk. “You said it helps with our protection, but you never told me.”

“Something subtler,” the woman replied, vaguely. There was barely a twitching muscle in her face; her smile could have cracked her face in two. She nodded towards Matsuda. “Isn’t that the cop you and Dazai always complain about?”

“He’s obsessed with me,” he scoffed. One of the officers asked a question to Ace — the man laughed in her face. ““Thinks he can dismantle a whole empire just to put me into foster care.”

“That’s nice of him.”

“*What?*”

Tanaki kept his eyes on his uniform; her tone was *almost* what she’d worn before gazes got more complicated — when reproaching them was a soft thing. “I don’t know,” she admired. “I think we ought to be grateful for every soul who wishes to save us, shouldn’t we?”

“I didn’t ask for shit,” Chuuya pointed out. “And I don’t need to be saved from my people.”

“Me neither. And yet — isn’t it nice, even just a bit?” she insisted. Her hands ripped a loose thread in his jacket — the nostalgia in her eyes was a rock on his ribs, and he couldn’t figure out which part he was to blame for. “That you don’t have to ask?”

He frowned. “I don’t accept offerings just because they’re good-intentioned. I never have.”

She threw the thread to the ground. “No need to worry, anyway. Boss is going to make sure you don’t have the option.”

“*Chuuya?*” Executive Ace called, shoulders still trembling with hilarity. “Do you mind helping this gentleman to the prototype room?”

By the time the dejected officers were led to the doors, the sky had turned into a bottomless pit, rotund with snow and pollution-erased stars. Mori hadn’t stopped smiling in hours; Matsuda’s hands were spasming at his sides. Chuuya was quite ready to throttle any uniformed man that made the bad choice of landing in front of him.

“*Sakura&Co* will be more than glad to know their evidence has been falsified,” Mori was shaking every policeman’s hand. “You might want to look into that. While I know very little about it, it certainly appears to be the work of an Ability.”

Peeking from behind his back, Chuuya gave his best obnoxious blink. “But *Sakura&Co* doesn’t have an *Ability Permit*, sir — do they?”

Mori met his eyes with his widened own — amused, clearly, but with a sharpness that planted his heels to the ground. *Even if it’s not you the arrow is aiming for*, Albatross used to say, *never stand too close to an angry archer*.

“What a troubling possibility,” he sighed.

The officers exchanged glances.

Chuuya wondered if any of them had truly believed in a possible success — if they had entered any of the rooms with the lingering *hope* of seeing cargoes of human organs, or counterfeit money, or hitmen ready to be sold.

Unnecessary bother. He could have raised his foot and offered them the dried blood under his soles.

“We might be back,” Matsuda concluded, with one last heavy, frustrated glance around. “The precinct has three open investigations on its hands. I’m afraid they all involve accusations regarding your — work ethics.”

“We shall be waiting for you, then,” Mori shook his hand; didn’t bow a single inch. “If I may, though,” he added — innocent in a way that reminded him of Dazai’s most obnoxious blinks; pointed gun and round cheeks. “I would suggest you and your men keep some distance between yourself and my subordinates. I truly don’t see any reason why an officer should be so interested in the *children*,” His voice raised, just an inch; enough to harden Matsuda’s expression, and turn a few heads, “Who I have been providing for — for *years* now. Unless *Social Services* has granted a warranty as well?”

The officer set his jaw, untouched by the low murmurs. “Chuuya and I go way back.”

“Curious,” Mori laid his hands on his shoulders; Chuuya’s gulped down the instability of standing between two players. Feeling like a pawn was never an enjoyable thrill; the man’s hold was a known, trusted thing — cold. “He always seems to get in so much trouble when you two stumble on each other, doesn’t he?”

The officer didn’t speak. He looked at him.

Chuuya kept his face carefully vacant.

“Alright, then,” Matsuda said, a bit tiredly. “Hope your new year will be prosperous, sir.”

The Boss nodded. “Officer.”

Nobody in the Hall moved — not until the red-and-blue lights grew into blurred dots down the road. Mori’s grasp on his shoulders had relaxed; he leaned down to ask: “You stole their warranties information as you showed them around, yes?”

He bowed his head. “Boss.”

An amused chuckle. The man ruffled his hair; Ace said something about an interrupted game of Poker — *high stakes, Boss; you understand* — and flew out of the Headquarters as soon as he was done bending his spine in two. Tanaki turned on her TV again; the subordinates vanished. Elise appeared out of nowhere, attacking herself to his legs, demanding a game of *hide and seek*.

Mori’s lips brushed the shell of his ear — behind the snow-lined doors, the last of the cars disappeared. When Chuuya studied the bathroom door, on the other end of the Hall — blood pooled from the slot of it.

“Keep an eye on the Police Station,” Mori ordered, just as cheerily. Chuuya realized, with a startled breath, that his hands on his shoulders and Elise’s fingers on his legs were a sole, mingled taste. “If he steps out some more, I want that Matsuda of yours’ insides on the concrete, next to his shredded skull.”

A quick tap; an encouraging grin. “You can take care of it, can’t you?”

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*[On the first day of the new year, Mori sat him down in his office.]*



*“Say, Chuuya,” he began, eyes on the moon behind the windows. “What did you feel when the Sheep betrayed you?”*

*Anger, he almost offered.*

*The doctor was against immediate answers, though — he disliked instincts vividly. Rationality makes us unlike beasts, he had once said, so why waste it on our mind’s first colors?*

*“Kinda stupid,” Chuuya answered.*

*His eyebrows rose. “Stupid?”*

*The day had pooled at his feet like sweat, lined by what he could feel becoming a tradition — Kouyou had dragged every mafioso in the upper circle to the local shrine, to ring the bell and clap their hands and have their fate handed over. Chuuya — much to Dazai’s vocal scorn — enjoyed being stuck in traditional clothing. It satisfied some muffled part of his stubborn self — perhaps the one that watched Kouyou strut among more-sensibly dressed bodies each day, confident and untouched by the eyes slipping down her spine.*

*And the sandals were always heavy; perfect to leave bruises on the vocal-scorn-bearer’s knees — always too busy dragging him by the elbow to light his lanterns right.*

*He dipped his nose into the glass of wine he had been offered, in an effort to make his shrug look polite “Like I should have expected it,” he elaborated. “Like someone else would have seen it coming, and I had refused to.”*

*“Refused,” Mori echoed, again — savoring each letter with care. “And the Flags. How did you feel when you found out I had asked Pianoman to keep an eye on you?”*

*“Orders are orders, sir.”*

*“Chuuya.”*

*The new year had begun with a soft layer of snow; Chuuya tried to recall if he had ever stuck his tongue out to taste it. “Stupid.”*

*“And when you found out you had been too late to save your squad,” the man continued, hands behind his back, step after step. “When Beatrice put you under the effect of her Ability? When the Wild Geese Orphanage got attacked? When Yuan —”*

*“Stupid,” He bit down his snarl a moment too late — the rustiness tightened his grip on the glass, calling Mori’s vacant gaze on him. Chuuya stared at the floor. “Angry.”*

*“Why?”*

*He almost shrugged again.*

*Mori noticed — he smiled. “Caring is not something to be ashamed of, you know?”*

*It wasn't hard not to doubt it, out of his lips — Chuuya had seen it on the stubbornly loyal face of every subordinate unwilling to murmur about revolution. Mori's men were tied by more than fear — he wouldn't have sinned by calling a man in that crimson scarf gentle; but his presence was not the terror in the Mafia's alleys.*

*How unstrategic, something whispered in his ear. Verlaine's picture, gathering dust in the bottom drawer of a foolish officer. How are you meant to keep what you aren't willing to bleed out?*

*"There's a point to what I'm saying," Mori promised. "I'd like you to reach it on your own. Tell me this — what do all the people whose losses you've suffered have in common?"*

*Chuuya sank back into his seat, resisting the urge to cross his legs. He tried to think the way he saw Mori do — tried to hold his breath and calmly roam his eyes through invisible lines, like Dazai did when they had no time to plan out.*

*He thought of the Sheep's safe house, with the blanket-forts and the nights he had spent playing guard — until it hadn't been a game anymore. The haze of the Old World when the only clients left were too tired to be drunk, and the Flags' rumbles of victory were the only thing around. The feeling of the asphalt when the races landed him on the ground — still laughing, nonetheless.*

*Warmth, he thought. "Protection."*

*"They protected you?" He nodded, frowning. "They protected you, so you considered them yours. Until they were taken from you."*

*Hoarder.*

*Chuuya fought against that construction of words — the shaping of something that hadn't felt quite so selfish, when deep in his chest. "It's not about being robbed," he tried to explain. "It's about not giving them what I owed."*

*"Debt," Mori spelled out, bathed in silver.*

*"Yeah."*

*He watched him take a few steps — wander aimlessly, pensive. The Boss always looked somewhat unbalanced when Elise was not around — like he had given her too much, and then allowed her to hide it in whatever part of his skeleton she took refuge in when unneeded.*

*If you were like her, Dazai had asked, once, when there were still braces in his teeth, when would you choose to disappear?*

*Never, jerk, he had replied. But she's only gone when Mori doesn't need her, isn't she?*

*He had looked at him for a while, after.*

*"Chuuya," Mori called, squinting at some indefinite dot behind the snow-lined windows — one of the other Towers, perhaps; the sea that held their dead. "If you had a thorn in your*

*side, and it was tearing you from the inside out — would you care if the one to extract it was the one who put it there?”*

*A blink; then another. The wine had turned just the right kind of warm on his tongue; Chuuya tilted his head to the side. Rich men speak in metaphors, Yuan had said, once. That’s how you know they want you to give them an answer.*

*“I think,” he dared, eventually, “That I’d just want the damn thorn out.”*

*Mori’s smile was slow to bloom, this time. “Yes,” he agreed. His desk was full of documents; Chuuya had only managed to read the beginning of a double Mi — kanji before the man had opened the doors. “That’s what I believe, too.”*

*He met his grin with a friendly expression of his own — a confused attempt at it, at least; the question of why there had been a need to talk about regrets to mention thorns.*

*“Sir —“ he attempted.*

*A bullet pierced through the glass, wrecking a hole through Mori’s forehead — one temple to the other.*

*“Chuuya?” a voice called, somewhere behind the rush in his ears — Chuuya was standing, he registered, was cracking the tiles under his feet, a curse out of his mouth — “Chuuya, is everything —“*

*Raw bones settled around his upper arms — the little shreds of flesh still attached to them dangling with a nauseating squelch. Chuuya settled his eyes on the destroyed face looking down at him, ruined muscles tensing in concern — and when he breathed in the copper-flavored air, only Mori was standing in front of him.*

*“Chuuya,” the man called, again. His eyes wore concern over liquified curiosity; he looked down, and saw no cracks on the floor. No glass webs on the window. “Is everything alright?”*

*Clouds covered the moon; the candid glint washing the man’s office disappeared, leaving them in an uncannily vivid darkness.*

*“Yes,” he said, as if his voice wasn’t his own. “Yes, I — Yes, sir.” He cleared his voice, taking a step back — watched the man’s hands fall, unprompted, offering him space he wouldn’t ask for. The smell of blood was stuck to his nose. Graves, at the very least, did not make it linger.*

*The moon, he mused. Verlaine had written a page on that too; Rimbaud had never answered. He hummed, just to keep that train of thought in the same road. What about the — ]*

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Three hours after an assassin — the third, since January had rolled in; the fourteenth in total — was executed, Chuuya sunk his knuckles in the newbie from Ace's fighting rings' face, and when he raised his head, he met Hamamoto's eyes.

"Betting on you, sir!" the man yelled, from the bruising crowd — barely understandable, given the chaos echoing off the walls of the underground bar. "Try not to lose me the paycheck!"

Chuuya raised both middle fingers.

His adversary attempted to crash him into the ground by the knees, kicking around him in a death grip — he buried an unmerciful heel in his thigh, and focused on the shriek out of his mouth, instead of on the neon lights on the ceiling.

Hirotsu had a tendency to describe his visits to the fighting rings as *power trips*. Chuuya knew that the men and women on the training grounds would have been more of a challenge; there would have been more *tactic* in the flagging of their limbs — a blood-thirstiness that the Mafia refined like a paycheck.

He was also aware — *as per* his explanations to the Commander — that sparring with men whose backs had developed a Pavlovian response to his presence wouldn't match the thrill of fighting with the underground who wanted *Double Black* dead.

*I always win either way*, he had shrugged. It had seemed like a good day; one where the man's eye wouldn't squint behind his monocle to ask, *is it blood you're looking for, then?*, with that pensive air of his. *Might as well break the nose of someone who tried to put a bomb under my car.*

Hirotsu had made a face. *Please don't break Dazai's nose.*

"You know, I've definitely heard some of the Executive's girls talk about your thighs before," Hamamoto welcomed him, when he dropped on the table he had managed to claim. "Didn't think I'd have to take it literally."

"Hilarious," Chuuya said, making a face at the taste of the beer some over-excited bettor had bought him. Two new fighters were sizing each other up on the ring; he slipped his arms through the holes of his shirt. "'Got your money?'"

"Despite those stingy fuckers!" He waved the cash in his face. "How many rounds have you even played? I've caught some of them using bucks as tissues, with how much you won them."

He squinted, thinking about it. "Eight?"

"Yesterday's stakeout wasn't enough?"

“Missions are missions,” Chuuya waved the words away. The stakeout had lasted sixteen hours in total; most of the *Guerrilla* had been ordered to lay low and *wait*, while he tickled the sleeping dragon — namely, the secret hideout of six Ability Users who had recently escaped a yakuza group from Tokyo.

Only one of them had refused to be *convinced* to anchor himself to a new name. The other six had tired themselves out against gravity, before deciding the Mafia sounded more appealing than breathing through crushed lungs.

Hamamoto scoffed, leaning so far back into his seat Chuuya saw him on the ground — an habit no amount of nape-slaps from X ever erased. “Are you aware that only three people in the entire bar bet against you?”

“The underground develops brain cells, at last.”

“*And* one of those fools is not even around. They said he just opened a — permanent *bet-tab* of sorts, against you? Sucks to be him. You must be draining his account.”

“Doubt that,” Chuuya scoffed, licking his teeth in irritation as he downed the beer in a single gulp. *Disgusting*. “You ever read an Executive’s paycheck? Whatever number you’re thinking — double it. No, triple it. *Worse*.”

Confusion bloomed in Hamamoto’s face — it was short-lived, though; quickly drowned by the neon lights and the whistles of the crowd, as his lips turned downward. “Ah,” he offered, failing to sound blank. “Executive Dazai?”

He grunted. “Who the fuck else.”

Hamamoto inhaled. Didn’t add anything.

Chuuya did it in his stead. “Son of a bitch acting as if I couldn’t fold him in a half — as if I *haven’t*? He’s been spreading voices about stuff I *supposedly* did to the most brick-built bastards in the entire city — as if that’s supposed to make them able to *beat me*? He told *Skull Dude* — You know, that psycho from the *Hounds*? He told him I keyed his car. I don’t fucking key cars,” A pause. “Well, not anymore. But that’s irrelevant —“

“Doesn’t it bother you, sir?”

“*Huh?*” He blinked. “Of course. That’s the whole point, I’m assuming.”

“No,” Hamamoto clarified, landing his chair on the ground. “I meant — Dazai. Isn’t it hard? Being disrespected?”

Chuuya felt his eyebrow curl out of its own accord. “I believe being disrespected would be aggravating coming from anyone. *Executive* Dazai is certainly included.”

The subordinate took the jab with a simple pause. Clearly too fired up with having managed to bring the topic onto the table, he insisted: “I’m just saying, sir —“

“I know what you’re saying.”

“It’s *admirable*, truly — he’s your partner. No one is as aware of his motivations as you are, I understand — but there are things he might be hiding from you, too.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, sliding down his chair until his nape was pressed against the edge of the backrest. His shoulder burned; the first woman he had sparred with had almost managed to pull it out of the socket. “Like where the fuck he put my reports from last week.”

“*Sir.*”

His tone warped some indistinct bundle of muscle — he couldn’t place it; he only felt it creak against his bones. *Flame to the moths*, he thought, *what’s the opposite?*

“There was another assassination attempt while we were gone,” Hamamoto hissed. His eyes would have been frantic, had he felt any desire to meet them. “You know what the asshole did? Got herself shot by a *Lizard* and crawled all the way to Dazai’s office to *die* in front of his door. Marie has heard — there’s a whole wing trying to find a way to organize a secret meeting of sorts —“

“Let’s hope they offer *Executive* Dazai a ticket. If we catch him in his own net, maybe Boss will let me strangle him for real this time. A good enough revenge for the girls sagging my phone to *demand* I convince him to date them,” A sigh. “But how the fuck do I find my reports, then?”

“How can you take this so lightly?” the man snapped, *finally*. “After all that he’s —“

“Hamamoto,” Chuuya cut through, blank gaze on some leaking pipe on the ceiling. He thought of the executions in the garden — the last time someone had mentioned the *Nine Rings* and Kouyou’s name in the same sentence. “I really do like you. You’re fun. A great shot, too. *Do* try not to be a fucking moron.”

Silence answered him.

Inside the fighting ring, a bone got broken. The crowd cheered; banknotes flew out of too impulsive hands. Chuuya grabbed the one floating closer, rolling it up and hiding it in his belt hoop — Sheep style.

“I came on Executive Kouyou’s orders,” Hamamoto said, eventually, barrenly. “She asked to meet you at the Intelligence quarters.”

Chuuya’s head snapped up. He slapped the man’s nape, if only to watch him curse out in a familiar — less *dangerous* — way. “Dude, what the — Maybe mention that a bit *sooner?*”

Kouyou’s *You’re-Grounded* sandal wasn’t beating the ground rhythmically *yet*, when Chuuya managed to turn the corner of the fifty-seventh floor of *Building Two* — but only barely so. She took his disheveled appearance in and scrunched her nose up.

“Tell me you weren’t rolling around in the dirt with the enemy again,” she sighed.

“Tell your subordinates to stop calling me *sir* when they land one on me,” Chuuya tucked his shirt into his pants as quickly as possible. He left the waistcoat open; fixed the harness until it

wasn't choking the air out of his lungs and pressed: "Well? Why are we here?"

The metal doors that signaled the start of the Intelligence quarters opened — a grey-haired woman Chuuya remembered handing his reports to, in the past, was quick to bow. "Executives."

"Is he free yet?" Kouyou questioned.

"Not quite," she admitted. She glanced at them; cleared her throat. "But I'm sure he'll make time for your requests. Please, follow me."

Chuuya had never given much thought to what the Intelligence quarters would look like — rows and rows of computers, perhaps, framed by floor-to-ceiling libraries and people wearing glasses; all of it cocooned by a distinctive smell of drying ink and recyclable paper.

The reality wasn't much different. The woman led them through desks over desks of distressed mafiosi, their crooked spines and attentive eyes exorcising any form of disarray. Most of them spared a bowed head to Kouyou; Chuuya met the eyes of a particularly tired man, scribbling something on a file dubbed as *Double Black* — and had to clear his throat against the open animosity foaming at the subordinate's mouth.

"Was the trip any good to that subordinate of yours? The feisty one?"

"Hamamoto?" Chuuya frowned. "What do you mean by *feisty*?"

"I had to give him something to do, or he might have set fire to the demon's office," Kouyou kept her eyes forward and the tilt of her mouth serene — her words of little importance to any distracted glance. "You heard about the attempt?" He nodded. "Dazai had no further reaction than whining about the blood on his door. Hamamoto seemed ready to do something — unwise."

"He's not that crazy," Chuuya insisted, hands in his pockets. "Just — very loyal. Boss kept him alive despite the executions during the *Nine Rings* mess, with the people contesting our reign — he's grateful. With the way the bastard has been acting —"

"Loyalty is a powerful thing, Chuuya," the woman reminded him. The golden pearls of her *kanzashi* dangled with every step. Chuuya recalled being fifteen, sitting in a corner — watching her clean blood off the spot he had bitten in his effort to escape her grasp. "A treacherous one, too."

He stared at the ground.

"You care a lot about the men under your command. I understand. But the demon *is* one of Mori's Executives — an attack against him is an attack against *all* we represent."

Chuuya squinted at her. "So what?"

"So," she insisted, posed, "If Hamamoto keeps stepping out of line —"

She trailed off.

Realization struck him like a blow from the stronger adversaries at the fighting ring; he bit back a disbelieving laugh. “I’m not punishing a good man for the sake of that bastard and his crazy plans,” he spluttered. “He put himself into this mess, you know? He can deal with the assassinations and —“

“Chuuya,” Kouyou tutted. “Far from me to remind you, but he is, technically, your superior —“

“He’s my *partner*,” he reminded her. “And — you don’t even like Dazai, anyway,” The words felt stupid on his own tongue; a stubborn clinging to a truth too complex to be grasped — memories of watching her study his frame with *something* in her eyes, and then refusing to look back on it again.

“Neither do you,” she sighed; a distant, bitten note of fondness in it. “And look at us.”

“Here we are,” their guide said, pushing the last door open. “Executives.”

She left in a hurry. Chuuya barely had time to take the most hidden room of the Intelligence quarters in — dusty bookshelves everywhere he could look, towering upon a mahogany desk absolutely *flooded* in documents; an absurd lack of windows as far as he could search — that the only man occupying it snapped, eyes still on his papers: “I *said*, I wish not to be disturbed —“

“Have you had any luck with the research I asked of you, Sakaguchi?” Kouyou asked, smiling.

The man’s seat *screeched* in his hurry to raise his eyes on them. He stood, eyes wide behind round glasses, and bowed. “I, *ah*, — my apologies, Executive Kouyou. Vice-Executive Nakahara —“

“Chuuya’s fine.”

The wince hitting his shoulders told him he shouldn’t expect the nominative any time soon. “Between the Cleanse and the recruitment process — my apologies.”

“Nothing to worry about,” she assured. “As long as you have good news for me?”

Chuuya nodded. ““Sup, Glasses.””

A hint of irritation flashed behind his lens; given that Sakaguchi Ango had made the willing choice to befriend Dazai, it was expectedly quick to disappear. “You’re here for the Ability User you believe the *Division* might have hired to sabotage *Plan The Courier*, correct?”

“Found anything on half moon marks and people flipping out?” Chuuya asked, dropping on the closest of the two — *horribly* uncomfortable; *perhaps*, he considered, *as a willing technique to keep visitors fast and ready to leave* — guest seats, as he pulled Kouyou’s own back for her.

“Not quite,” Sakaguchi admitted, searching for some specific dossier underneath his desk, as Kouyou laid her umbrella next to her chair — *always* in her interlocutor’s visual. “We



received word from our men's autopsy — since we had no access to the actress' body, we focused on the one Nakahara and Akutagawa found in the alley, and the men from Kajii' team — for similarities."

"And?"

"Their wounds match. Not in dimensions or shape — but in *purpose*."

Kouyou frowned, eyes on the photographs the man was spreading on his desk — rotting corpses under white lights, wounds already grown grey. "Purpose?"

The man fixed his glasses. "They were all trying to kill themselves."

An awkward sort of silence cocooned them. After waiting a few moments — for *dramatic effect*, Chuuya assumed, because there were only so many differences Dazai and his friends could have — Sakaguchi continued: "Kajii's men were killed by his bombs, yes.

Nonetheless, the signs on their bodies show a struggle that was self inflicted — as if they were trying to rip their own flesh off."

"So the Ability, whatever it is," Kouyou concluded, "It's supposed to cause a — feral state, of sorts?"

"How does that relate to the moon mark?" Chuuya asked. "Is that just a sign that the Ability is influencing them? Why would it stay *after* they're dead, then?"

"It's complicated," the man sighed. He extracted a specific paper from his file; passed it to them. "See this? His name is Ueda Akinari."

From a strangely aware corner of his brain, he saw Kouyou's eyes roam down the scarcely filled information page of the Ability User — a man not older than thirty, with hair so black they seemed blue, and an assortment of corsets and trinkets shaping into something like clothes.

Chuuya tried to focus as well. The sight of the woman's bare skull, dripping fresh blood and viscid brains and *ripped* flesh right onto the paper made him pause.

"We only gathered data on him recently," the man continued, unaware of the single strands of red hair dangling on his careful ink, swarmed by flies. "Some of the recruits talked about him as an *underground secret* of sorts. We don't even know what his Ability is called — only that, supposedly, it targets people who are..."

Kouyou's skull moved — her tongue blue and ashy, blood seeping from what had been lips, once; and was now a single path of frail skin all the way to the throat someone had torn apart. "Who are *what*?"

He felt something too liquid — something *sticky* — inside his gloves, and he knew —

The archivist said: "Particularly receptive to past grievances, let's say."

The woman froze.

Chuuya cleared his throat — again and again, until the air in his lungs tasted less rotten, and there was no decay in the corner of his gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean? What does this guy do?”

Sakaguchi took the paper back; frowned at it, clearly aggravated by his lack of answers. “The most sensible theory, that we haven’t proved — is that his Ability sort of works like Q’s.”

With an hesitant voice, Kouyou wondered: “Hallucinations?”

“Something *deeper*,” He shook his head. “Q can manipulate the way someone perceives reality — Make them think the people around them are enemies. According to the recruits, Ueda might go as far as to steal material for his visions from his victim’s psyche.”

“And that’s why they kill themselves?”

A shrug. “I’m assuming there are stages to it. If guilt is truly to be taken into account — well. I’ve seen less deadly things send stronger men into an early grave.”

The contemplative silence lasted less, this time. “And the half moon mark?” Chuuya asked.

“That’s the thing,” Sakaguchi said. “The stories and the wounds match — but the recruits who have met him or his victims swear the Ability left no visible signs. It was part of his power — no one but the person could notice what was going on, and in most cases, they feared saying so.”

Chuuya thought of olive green bathrooms. “Why fear?”

“It seems talking about the visions worsens the condition exponentially,” over his slow tone, Kouyou’s fingers closed around the handle of her umbrella. “That is — if it *is* Ueda Akinari’s Ability. As I said, the mark makes no sense.”

“What if —” He squinted; thought back to what he had assumed was a tattoo on Lippman’s sister’s neck. “Could it be two Abilities?”

The sound of Sakaguchi’s pen scribbling paused, right as Kouyou quickly turned to stare at him. “What?”

“You know,” Chuuya insisted, embarrassed by the sudden attention — then, speaking more forcefully because of it. “Like during the *Nine Rings Conflict*? Two Abilities on the same body. Maybe the moon is a mark for someone’s else’s influence, and it does — something.”

“Very eloquent,” Sakaguchi blinked.

“You wanna *fight* or —“

“Spreading,” Kouyou murmured, pensive. She set her eyes on the archivist. “Do we have any idea of *how* Ueda’s Ability spreads? It can’t be just by coming into contact with him. How would it have managed to hit the entirety of Kajii’s squad in one go?”

Understanding crowded behind the man's glasses, along to *something* slightly less appreciative — something Chuuya didn't manage to catch, before Sakaguchi's eyes were on the documents on his desk again, hands searching. "It could," he said, under his breath, "It *could* be an *Epidemic* level Ability. Something to make sure it has a wider reach — a way to slow the organization down."

"Especially right now," Chuuya continued. "With the last steps of the *Cleanse* and with the recruitment, and the whole revolution bullshit — a destructive Ability spreading so easily could be a real issue."

The windowless room felt suffocating, all of the sudden — soaked to the bone by the turning gears in the archivist's brain. Chuuya stuck a finger under his glove.

It came back red.

"Chuuya," the woman said, eventually. "I'd like you to go talk to Q."

"You think they know something about this man?"

"They did spend some time in places the worst Ability Users flock to like moths," Kouyou explained. "Maybe they've heard whispers, if their Abilities are so similar — it could tell us something about whoever they might be collaborating with."

"Moon mark," Sakaguchi was muttering, on his feet, searching through the bookshelves with a humiliating skip in his steps. "Moon mark, moon —"

"You're not coming?" Chuuya asked.

"No," He thought he wasn't supposed to notice the lightning-quick glance she threw to a corner of the office — a *lingering* gaze, forcefully removed and laid on the documents again. "I will try and see if the Kyouka family can help me. They know more about Rogue Users than I do. They may be refusing to give up on their freelance state — but perhaps a collaboration well done might convince them to give up on their hesitation."

Chuuya gulped back the question on the tip of his lips — pretended not to see the knowing gaze she dragged up and down his body. Calming breaths pressed against his teeth — he told himself to hum where Glasses couldn't watch him descend into unavoidable madness.

"We will talk," Kouyou offered. Her smile was her best attempt at encouragement — the bitter corners of it spoke of a sense of déjàvu. The two of them; hands tied again. "It will be fine."

He laid his gaze elsewhere before he dared to nod. "Of course, Ane-san."

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Of all the mafiosi Chuuya could have bumped against on his hurried way out of the Intelligence quarters — it was the least likely of them to almost step on his foot.

“What are *you* doing here, Curry?” Chuuya said, eyebrows bruising his hairline.

Oda Sakunosuke blinked. “It’s you.”

For unexplainable reasons — perhaps depending on the memories of their last and only meeting; curling around the cramped *need* to be grateful Chuuya’s healing scars felt, and the lack of trust he was able to offer to that man — the words made him stiffen.

From the little he had seen, Oda sometimes gave off the impression of a stray cat — most times he had managed to bump into him, despite Dazai’s best efforts, *judgemental* had always seemed too strong of a word for the honest flatness of his eyes, completely devoid of interest.

Nevertheless — Chuuya knew the man was always observing all of them.

“I had some documents to bring over to the archivists,” the man explained. His hands dangled next to the pockets of his coat; Chuuya got the feeling weapons should have been there, between his fingers. “Mind if we share the elevator?”

He didn’t have a good enough reason to say no; didn’t care quite *enough* to do it either. “After you.”

*Too quiet*, he considered, listening to his steps. Assassins’ feet — too light for a sniper, too heavy for a spy. A tad too good at pretending he didn’t care about every moving inch of the world around him. A tad too innocent, for a man who had been knocking on the chosen walls of Dazai’s reclusion — closer than any of them could reach.

“You might want to know,” Oda said, once they passed the fiftieth floor, standing resolutely in front of the elevator’s glass doors. “Dazai asked us to egg your bike, the other night. I believe he might attempt to do it again.”

His teeth creaked against each other.

So endlessly awkward Chuuya *had* — for his own sanity — to believe that the absolute lack of awareness on his face was genuine, Odasaku added: “I believed you might not appreciate the idea.”

“You’re the smart one, ain’t you,” Chuuya commented, voice dull.

“Don’t take it to heart,” Oda specified, a beat later. “He once begged me to lock Ango in the tiger cage at the Zoo and throw away the key. I’m pretty sure it’s how he shows appreciation.”

He retched, holding onto his mouth.

Like it was nothing more than a judgement on the weather behind the glass, the man studied him and concluded: “You two really have issues with verbalization.”

“*We*, ” Chuuya pointed out, “Have no shared *issues*,” The doors dinged; the moment they opened, he breathed in a less socially inept oxygen. “Thank you for the ride, Coat. Go find your other two lost bears. Be mindful of golden curls trying to steal your bed and soup.”

Oda blinked. “I — wasn't that a fairytale?”

“See? Told you — smart one. See you the next time his esteemed *Demon Prodiginess* deems it acceptable.”

Chuuya was already halfway down the stairs of the entrance, scrolling down half-drunk emails from the *Guerrilla* — when the man's voice broke the traffic-lined silence again.

“That's a lot of phone charms.”

He dangled his phone by a good half of them, barely looking back to curl his eyebrow in his direction. “Yeah.”

“That Officer,” Oda asked, then. Chuuya stiffened. “The one that directed the raid the other morning.”

“You were there?” Chuuya tried to keep the mistrust out of his voice; he thought he might have failed.

“Commission.”

“*Ah*, ” He frowned. “What about him?”

“I've seen him around our territory more often, these last few months,” Oda explained. “He's been gathering eyewitnesses from most of the local neighborhoods.”

“Matsuda has big ideas and a small nose,” He shrugged, noncommittal — because it sounded better on his tired ears than, *Matsuda is ready to sell anyone out for an ideal*. “Perfect for snooping around. I've warned him off his investigations more often than not. If he's smart, and if he holds his life to any regard — he'll listen to me.”

“And if he doesn't?”

Borderlining exasperation, he turned.

Worms crawled out of the bleeding caves of Oda Sakunosuke's eyes, gathering at the edge of his concrete-colored lips and the dirt-crimson hole in the middle of his throat — a crater that began there and ended somewhere on his waist, showing off munched-on ribs and falling organs.

“Vice-Executive?” the corpse called.

He cleared his throat — settled his eyes somewhere over the man's decaying shoulder, blinking. "If he doesn't, standard Mafia procedure will begin. What else?"

"You seem to know him."

"He probably aspires to be as good of a samaritan as you are with your orphans," Chuuya replied. He dared one glance more; wondered just how real the smell of *rotting* in his nostrils could be. "Fails at it, clearly. Unless you've got plans to sell that brats of yours out to —" He clenched his jaw, shocked by himself. "Doesn't matter."

He could feel the man's gaze on him — a different kind of skin-deep attention than he had been granted during the *Dragon Head Conflict*. He knew more about him than Chuuya did about the untouchable mask on his face; the idea made the leather of his gloves creak.

"Either way," Oda said, his grey tongue swarmed by mindlessly hungry flies. "I hope you won't have to kill your friend, Vice-Executive."

"A paragon of manners," he complimented, aware there wasn't a real reason for his bitterness — aware that he had sat near dirtier dead, and yet was keeping his eyes on the sky for the talking one in front of him. "Bet the bastard would kill you if you dared to refer to him as *Executive*."

*I only care about the ones I can save*, he had said.

Chuuya hadn't cared — except for the split second where he had. He thought, if he focused, that he could overhear Sakaguchi's bored voice, at the end of a shift — Dazai's laughter, as unstrained as it never was. Could see the eyes he always laid on those friends of his — *human*.

"I don't know," the man offered. "Better than *Demon Prodigy*, I'm assuming."

"As if it's not true?"

"You don't say it like it is."

He jeered.

Cockroaches were climbing out of the man's shoes, making their way to his drenched own. He wanted to take a step back; wanted to give a final, merciful hit to the ghost in front of him. He set his eyes on the street lights; tried to *pretend* he couldn't recognize the faces of the corpses he saw hanging by the neck from them.

He wondered if Oda Sakunosuke *knew* — if he was cunning all the way to his heart, enough to see the bone deep *devotion* shattering Dazai's face into unsharp pieces at the mere mention of his name. If he took pride in it; in being the resident Mafia jewel's most focused reflection in the water — untouched by ripples of a soul-sick coldness he wore with deadly precision.

*Unfair*; Chuuya thought, sometimes, when his graves were more silent than usual to his aimless stories for them. *Unfair. Unfair. I had a family too.*

“He’s no prodigy,” he mocked.

“And demon?”

“A piece of shit,” Chuuya snapped. *No way he doesn’t want something from him*, Kouyou had mused, about Oda, once. He had thought about the delicate quality of his motions around Dazai’s frame; the *understanding* drooling down his face when he looked at him. “An insufferable, know it all, *annoying* piece of crap. That’s what he is.”

Oda studied him some more. He stared at him until the colors blurred; until the sick color of his skin returned to a pale kind of lividity — something *breathing*. He could still hear Dazai laugh — he wondered if he would have pretended to care, at the very least, if he’d seen his best friend bleed.

“Alright,” he concluded. Like *Judgement Day*, he thought — like having failed it. “Have a good day, then, Vice Executive.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya turned again, willing himself not to follow the escaping cockroaches on the ground, all the way to the dead suburbs of the city. Blood dripped from the lifeless feet of one of the hanging bodies; he felt it land on his forehead, and *dig*. “You too, Odasaku.”

It was the second — and the last, as far as the stars knew — conversation they ever shared.

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“Q,” Chuuya called, arms crossed, refusing to move from the wall he was leaning on. “Stop that, or I’m telling the guards.”

The child offered him their dirtiest glance — and, promptly, they continued to munch on the bars of the only window their little cell offered.

The square was a good distance from the floor; to reach it, Q had mounted an assortment of their bed, an absurd number of pillows that could *not* have been there from the beginning, and pieces of dried blood stuck to the wall — handholds of sorts. Chuuya didn’t know why they had gone through the effort. The window didn’t even face the outside; the cell was too secure for that.

“I told you already, *nii-san*, ” Q whined, still tight in their monkey grasp. “I don’t know this guy at all. Not all Ability Users know each other, you know.”

“That’s not my question anymore, I told you,” he replied, sinking a bit down the wall. “I’m saying — your Abilities are similar, allegedly. You could help me understand what the reasoning behind his attacks is.”

“You *said*,” the child accused, “That he attacks people whose guilt he can use.”

“Grief. Yeah. But *how* does he know that?”

Q blinked, very slow, eyes wide and oddly shaped. Then, noncommittal, they shrugged.

He took a deep breath. “How do *you* decide who to bump against?”

“Boss says so,” They nodded, brightening with the knowledge of a correct answer. “I do what Boss says. Boss says to stay here — so I stay here. Even if the guards are mean.”

Chuuya paused.

Despite the new trail of theories — collaboration between two Ability Users among them — no answers had yet been offered to their prodding, and no *half-moon maker* had yet been found among the whispers of the underground. The possibility of a mastermind from the shadows wasn’t improbable — the question of *how* they selected their victims still stood.

Q’s feet dangled from where they were hanging. They’d hardly grown an inch since Chuuya had first met them. They were always too much — too pale, too tiny, too bloodthirsty; too saddened by themselves.

“Alright,” He stood and stalked forward — held on to the sides of Q’s body, despite their yelp, pulling them off. “Let’s do this a bit differently.”

“Hey — *oh!*” Their protests faded into something more of a giggle, as Chuuya wrapped an arm around their middle and raised Q at eye level from their armpits. “That’s — *help!*” The giggles grew more firm; by the time Chuuya was twirling them around in a makeshift dance — something he’d seen Dazai humor them with since forever — they were laughing.

There was no music; if he focused, he could hear the distant roar of drills. It didn’t seem to matter to Q; they kicked their feet again, bumping against his knees with something less *malicious* — they grinned.

““Calmed down yet?” Chuuya muttered, making sure the hold wouldn’t press on the bandages around the kid’s arm. “Let’s put it like this, then — how do you decide who’s most likely to cause more damage with your Ability?”

Q blinked — once, twice. “That’s easy.”

“Do tell.”

“They’re all —” They hummed; spread their arms. “They kind of look like you.”

The invisible soundtrack his feet had been dancing to slowed down to a halt.



“Not *like* you,” Q added, unconcerned, nesting their cheek between his shoulder and neck. Their skin was always clammy. “You’re *pretty*. And your eyes are weird. Like mine, kinda. But they’re like you — very strong. They’re the *threat*.”

“Oh,” Chuuya frowned. “You just pick the biggest fish?”

“I know they have ghosts,” Q insisted. “I have them too. We walk the same way.”

“Ghosts.”

“Yes. I can see them,” In a show of agility, they let go of him with one hand — tapping under their star-shaped eye. “It’s like a cloud. Boss says I don’t really see it, but I *do*. People with ghosts are much easier to use. They already see things that aren’t there.”

He set Q on the ground.

They protested: “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Chuuya said, distantly. January had been cold all around — he stared at the shut door, and reminded himself he had never been claustrophobic a day in his life. “I — You didn’t do anything wrong. But you better not be lying about not knowing anything else about this guy.”

“I’m not *lying*,” The kid stomped his foot. Then, a bit more tentative: “But I could help you look, if you want.”

Chuuya momentarily let go of the bundle of *things* in his chest to stare them down. “Q.”

Their face fell. “I know.”

“Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that, if we let you free, you won’t cause troubles?” he insisted. Silence answered him — the child kept their gaze to the naked ground. “You’re part of the syndicate. It’s not like Boss enjoys keeping you here.”

“You guys have caused troubles too,” Q murmured, pulling at the edges of their bandages. “Why am *I* the only one that’s locked up?”

*Because you enjoyed it, Chuuya almost said. Because I saw you smile while they died. Because Boss said so. Because you’re —*

“Different,” he concluded. “It’s different.”

“It’s *unfair!*” they protested. “I helped you. I told you what I know. What do *I* get out of it?”

“An hour of playtime with Elise, maybe,” Chuuya said, knocking the usual signal on the door. The persistent *need* to leave that room was all but unfamiliar; the urge to sit on Koda’s grave was a bit louder. “I’ll talk with Boss — try to make it two. If you stop attacking the guards, I can make it three, but you need to collaborate —“

“Chuuya —“

“Chuuya,” Hirotsu’s voice washed over the hellish creak of the door — a man in uniform was very careful not to brush either of their shoulders as he surged into the room, grasping Q right before they could attempt to cling to the back of his coat. “Are we done here?”

“Unfortunately,” he confirmed, making his way down the hallway. Q’s screeches grew more and more distant — *louder*, too. His own name disappeared amongst desperate prayers and insults. “Nothing new. Almost.”

“Almost?”

“Yeah. Give me a second.”

They turned the corner. Chuuya wrapped his hands around the waiting General’s collar — crashing him so *violently* against the other wall, he heard it crack near the center.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he warned, low, pressing until his nose was brushing the man’s own.

“Sir,” he attempted.

“*Listen*,” Chuuya snapped. He could feel his body stiffen under his own — not shaking, either a matter of pride or some spine; but petrified in a way that meant he knew *exactly* who Chuuya was. “Not a visit goes by without the brat telling me your men treat them like shit. I was inclined to believe them to be whines — now I’m tired.”

Protest crowded on his face. “Orders are — the Ability User must be reigned in at all costs —“

“They’re *nine*,” he snarled. “And they don’t have a way to activate their Ability. You’re telling me your *best men* can’t fucking handle a brat that stopped wearing diapers seven minutes ago with no *violence*?”

“No, sir.”

“I didn’t quite hear that.”

“No, sir,” the General repeated. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple — Chuuya only saw it because of its reddish reflection, stained by the glow he hadn’t even realized he was wearing. “I will — I’ll talk with the men. We will make sure to be gentler.”

“Do that,” Chuuya confirmed, pushing himself off — watching the man half slide down the wall in return. “If I hear complaints from them again, I’ll make sure to tell Mori a new holding cell would be a *wonderful* idea for the new year.” He curled an eyebrow. “That would be *terrible* for your reputation with the Black Market, right?”

The man clenched his jaw.

They left him there.

The only reason he turned to look at him, mere steps from the exit, was a blow of wind. When he saw him bloodied and destroyed from the inside, wretched on the floor like a melted candle — Chuuya did nothing but breathe.

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“*Psst,*” a voice over his body whispered. The slumber fixed to his bones made it sound miles and miles away. “*Psst.* Chuuya. Chuuya. *Chuuya.* Wake up. You need to help me bury a body.”

“Go ‘way,” he mumbled, vaguely.

He burrowed his face deep into the padded fabric of his futon, eyes forcibly shut. The world was a blur; vaguely, he could remember not having had time to sleep in a good two days. Everything was warmer than it had been in a while; Chuuya let it wash over him like melted concrete, waiting for it to solidify over his muscles.

Then, he registered.

“*What?*” he snapped, pushing Dazai — a creepy, nightmarish sight; eye bright like a demon’s and on all fours over his resting body — off hard enough for him to land against the wall. “Bury it *yourself!* Why the fuck are you asking me!”

“But it’s so much work,” he whined.

Grabbing a pillow from Albatross’ bed, he slammed it on his face.

“*Hey!*” Dazai’s eye was black and swollen — it hadn’t been the pillow, but he prepared himself to be blamed for it anyway. “*Bad dog!*”

He flopped back into his futon. “You’ve got ten seconds to leave, before I turn your spine into a yo-yo,” Chuuya let him know, voice muffled by the pillow.

“It’s not like there aren’t a thousand places I would rather be than here,” the replied.

“Nine.”

“Unfortunately, someone has to check on the dog — lest he accidentally chokes on his own drool as he sleeps —“

“Eight,” he groaned. “Seven.”

“Good job at the fighting ring, by the way! You’ve lost me a good amount of yen. Sucks that it was your money I bet, though.”

“Si — you did *what?*”

The spare pillow was thrown on his back. The impact was nearly nonexistent. “You useless slug. Help me bury a body.”

“No.”

“I heard you visited Q,” Dazai offered, undeterred — *rolling* on the floor; kicking stuff off shelves like a misbehaving cat. “How were they?”

“How do you even know all this stuff?”

“I know everything that concerns you,” the boy replied, easily waving the matter away. Chuuya peeked from underneath his pillow, studying the somehow *irritating* way his bandages had become the brightest thing in the moon-bathed room. In a deeply, horribly shameful pang — Chuuya realized he was wearing one of the shirts the boy had left behind. “And I’m head of security, so I’m aware of this stuff.”

He frowned — subtly hiding behind the blanket. “That’s a lie. You’re head of the *Escape and Recruit Department*, not security.”

“That too,” Dazai conceded. “And head strategist. And head of the backup. *And* of the executions — you’ve seen how that’s going.”

Chuuya’s lips curled around nothing — uncertain, and slightly uncomfortable with the twist in his gut. Not even Kouyou had more than one department; the secret Executive and Ace even mostly divided the training process.

*Jealousy*, he decided, searching through the viscera and the mocking breaths in the back of his skull. It had to be, because otherwise —

Silence.

It startled him. A cold bucket of water straight in the face; the most familiar burn an old stove in the house of a lifetime could give. The echoes in his skull were something he would never describe aloud, not at the risk of falling victim to empty-headed jokes — and yet there was no other way to put into words the abyss of *nothing* left between each particle of his body; suddenly held by no more than a less haunted blood.

*The Guivre isn’t a god*, Verlaine had written in his diaries. *And neither is this Arahabaki I have heard of. They are merely codes — their words are nothing but ours, and we are nothing but them.*

*The issue is this: to convince them of it.*

Dazai kept his eyes on his forehead, tracing lines from a scar Chuuya had gotten that morning — debris from a falling building. “Q was no use at all,” he said, eventually. “They’ve heard nothing of Ueda. Seemed pretty excited about him, though — maybe they could bond over all the mind control fuckery.”

“How mean,” Dazai mused. “Why are you so scared of a nine year old?”

“I’m not *scared*, jackass. Last I checked, you don’t enjoy spending time around them either.”

A hum; the feeling of a blunt nail, down a line wrinkles. “Yes, but at least I know *why*.”

And Chuuya — he didn’t need a reason. He looked at them and saw Koda’s hand tight around their smaller own; eyes absent and shoulders low. *Do me a favor and don’t die*. He looked at them and saw a kid sinking his teeth in cockroaches, and in the vomit they would cause him — a child haunted and used as far as the ghosts would concede; and then locked up again.

“Chuuya.”

“*Hmm?*”

“Why are you wearing your gloves?”

Chuuya didn’t want to be locked up again.

*All-encompassing*, he thought — that was the kind of feeling the unnatural silence strangled him with. “My fingers are cold.”

A pause. Weirdly, agonizingly *not* unkindly, Dazai tapped the center of his forehead — loud and purposeful; a reminder of the one thing that wasn’t fabric and wasn’t death that could make it all a bit more *corporeal* — and murmured: “That’s pathetic even for you.”

Chuuya basked in self-illusion — strived to convince himself of the nonexistence of *venom* in the deepest parts of his skeleton; begging him to tear the layers of Dazai’s mind apart with his own hands, until he could *hammer* the idea of *Chuuya* and *safety* close enough inside it he would never doubt their inevitable burrowment.

It had worked flawlessly with the Sheep; it had *worked*, until —

*Make him trust you*, the *thing* inside him has always insisted. *Make him come close enough to kill*.

He sighed, sitting up.

Dazai’s hand fell at his side; the absence of silence felt like the presence of it — overwhelming. “Fine,” he concluded. “Who did you murder by accident when you slipped on a banana peel?”

Pure, unfiltered *contempt* spread through Dazai’s face, faster than he could muffle it — it gave a distinctively childish curve to his mouth. Dazai was always too far to be reached —

Chuuya thought him stupid, still, for not assuming that he would find the same glee in being the thorn in his side as he did.

Sock-wearing feet roaming through the rooms of his apartment, as if they owned it, as if they could leave it whenever they wished — no bloody footprints on the crime scene; not for the Mafia's prodigy. Chuuya couldn't recall when he had started falling asleep in his bed.

"You'll be glad to know," Dazai replied, climbing to his feet. "He was already dead. We are merely returning him to his grave."

Hirotsu was waiting with one of the more inconspicuous Mafia vehicles — a black, enormous beast with a trunk big enough to hold bodies.

"If he's here, why am I coming?" Chuuya questioned, climbing onto the passenger seat — *kicking* the other boy away from it. "I get that he's like, a bazillion years old, but the *Lizards* regiment *is* widely appreciated. If he managed to carry your ass back from that time you got knocked out by the *Hounds*, he can carry a body."

"I didn't get *knocked out* by the Hounds," Dazai grunted, pettily, crawling on the backseats on all fours. Starting the car, Hirotsu winced at the sole-shaped dust stains left on the leather. "I was getting tortured for informational gain."

"Potato," Chuuya said. "Poh-tay-toh."

"For your information," Hirotsu said. "I'm not even fifty yet."

Dragging up the notebook some archivist had left on the floor, Dazai shoved it in between the front seats, offering wide eyes and a *bad* drawing of what was probably meant to be the *Big Bang*. "Did you witness this?" he asked.

The Commander ripped the page off — with the slightest of chances he would hang it on his fridge.

The car swerved through empty streets, as Dazai laid on his stomach on the backseats, kicking his feet in the air as he discussed executions for the next day on the phone. Flickering street lights flew by; occasional stray roamed the sidewalks, as the borderline soundless engine of the van lulled him into tempting slumber.

When the car clock ticked at 3:00 A.M, the Commander asked: "Are you alright, sir?"

Something like electricity curled around his shoulders. Chuuya threw a look at the rear view mirror, following Dazai's distracted eyes — felt the real, unexplainable need to jump out of the car.

"Dazai keeps falling asleep under the desk in my office," he rattled off, eventually. "The Intelligence seems to find seven new Ability Users every half an hour, and none of them are particularly enthusiastic about joining. I had to bring Elise to shop for underwear the other day and she asked me how to understand bra sizes," He offered Hirotsu his best blink. "And Kajii keeps waking up late for the funerals I have to drag him to."

“That seems stressful,” Hirotsu admitted.

“Standard procedure. How’s Miranda?”

“As lively as ever,” Then, swiftly: “Why do you keep showing up to every execution we put in place?”

Chuuya directed him his dirtiest glance.

The man stared back, undeterred.

“Dazai directs those, you know,” he insisted — familiarly casual, now that the Executive was too distracted to hear him. Privately, he sometimes wondered if Hirotsu had the same tendency to drop formality regarding Chuuya as well, when he wasn’t around. “You could refrain from worrying about it. It sure takes a lot of time out of your day, considering —“

He trailed off.

“Considering how many people we kill on a daily basis, lately?” Chuuya encouraged, scoffing. “That’s kind of the point, Gramps. ‘You missed Ace’s thirty minute speech on the, *importance of showing compactness among our ranks, in these traitorous times — blah blah blah?*’”

“Is that enough reason to check on Mori’s new guards every hour?”

“Well, someone —“

“And the training regime you’ve put up for the entire syndicate,” Hirotsu added. “Plastered on the training grounds’ wall with all of Executive Kouyou’s punctuality — even Gin was breathless by the end of it.”

Chuuya huffed. “The Flags’ training regime was way *worse*. I was going easy on them — and Mori told me I could —“

“Chuuya.”

The rusted gates of the Cemetery appeared in the distance; a bundle of that sight and of the ancient, *carved* touch of Hirotsu’s tone made him feel unbearably younger — paper thin; too thin for a body that was only his in blinks. He hated the feeling enough to sit up straighter, offering a *look* to the driver next to him.

Pointedly quiet, Hirotsu asked: “What is it, exactly, that you’re scared of?”

*[He was eight years old the first time a Sheep died from something other than a battle wound.*

*Concept like sickness evaded Chuuya — it was a well known truth amongst the group, and a hopeful addition to the plans he could sometimes see in the older kid’s eyes. He was powerful and he was fearless and he was healthy — and when he saw Kazuo’s body on the ground, he didn’t get it.*

*“Like the bread,” he told Shirase, pulling the sleeve of his overgrown shirt.*

*He watched him blink with those big, slightly stupid eyes of him. They were always very warm — and he didn’t waste a second to drag him closer and whisper, with a nod towards Kazuo’s pale skin and the lines of vomit some of the kids were cleaning up: “He’s sick.”*

*It was his turn to blink. “And?”*

*“Momo thinks he will die.”*

*Chuuya frowned. “But there’s no red.”*

*“Blood,” Shirase reminded him. He spelled out the word a few times; made sure he learned it well. Sometimes he felt like that old blanket Yuan always clung to; tens and dozens of pieces of fabric sewn up together. Ugly, but made. “He didn’t get hit. He’s just dying. Natural causes.”*

*He didn’t quite understand. He didn’t ask. He detested the strange look the Sheep got when he was slow at grasping a concept — not pity, but something distinctly worried. A silent prayer, maybe — catch up, for our sake.*

*He spent Kazuo’s last two days at his makeshift bedside, night and day, only leaving to hunt for territory — a lonely search; but fun, sometimes, because the men’s faces were always a bit funny when they were terrified.*

*“Aren’t you sad?” he asked him.*

*Kazuo’s lips had long since lost all their vigor; the Sheep wetted them every once in a while, but they kept losing skin. Chuuya had proposed using the lip balm Yuan had stolen from a passing tourist — they hadn’t really listened.*

*“Sad?” he replied. “About what?”*

*He was the oldest of the group, at thirteen years old — and three months, he always added. The Council took his opinion very seriously. Chuuya suspected it was the reason why he was constantly out there stopping thieves and intruders. “Dying.”*

*“I don’t think that’s sad,” Kazuo answered, with all the severity of a quiet child. “I’m a bit scared, though.”*

*“Scared,” Chuuya echoed. A strange feeling; he had been explained its concept, and decided he didn’t much enjoy it — had decided not to tell the Sheep if he ever felt it. “Of what?”*

*“Being alone,” the boy said, after a fit of coughs. His eyes had a yellowish tone to them — pus and bubbles were spread on his skin like a particularly smelly sunburn. Chuuya ought to kill whoever had caused this to him, but none of the other kids were good at explaining it. “Don’t you think it’s scary?”*

*Chuuya thought there were scarier things — the face Katsuki made when a bullet grazed him; the moments when he was tired and he was hungry and the gravity didn’t answer as it should*



*have, no matter the snow attempting to blow their safe house into pieces; having to guard the crater on the nights when it thundered. Sitting next to the smell Kazuo's decay emitted.*

*Chuuya thought there were scarier things, but he didn't tell him. It felt mean, when his lips were all chapped.*

*"Do me a favor," Kazuo told him.*

*"Yes?"*

*"Take care of them," he said. Mechanical and wet; Chuuya didn't know if his terror made sense, but he saw it in his eyes all the same. "And don't let them lose you."*

*The Sheep were all so complicated. Chuuya didn't think it could get any simpler than the sky and the ground and the red — blood. Care was a senseless idea; Chuuya would die for them. "Alright, Kazuo."*

*"And," A fit of coughing. "Another thing."*

*"Yes?"*

*"Stay with me," Kazuo laid his cheek on the blankets they had offered him — a chaotic bundle that wasn't a bed; but Chuuya had never seen a bed, so he believed it just fine. "And if you see me cry, don't let the others see it too."*

*Chuuya did as told. Kazuo died seven hours and thirty-seven minutes later; he knew, because he spent the time sitting next to him counting. His hand grew warmer between his own; then, absurdly cold. Strange fluids left his lips, no matter how much he wiped them. When he stopped moving, his eyes stayed on the sky.*

*There were tears on his cheeks, though. He made sure to get rid of them. In the morning, they found him sleeping on a corpse].*

*"I'm not scared," he echoed.*

His voice seemed to ricochet against the endless trees of the Cemetery, as they parked. He tasted the sounds in his mouth as if strangers.

*Scared?*, his mind insisted. Chuuya had lived seventeen years — none of them had been as hopeful as the one behind him. He was young; he was alive; he was next in line for an Executive seat. He had a *roof* and he had food and the beings he cared for were safe — he had the means and the strength to make that a certainty.

He thought of floating in darkness; of a child eating cockroaches — thought, *could he ever be that ungrateful?*

Hirotsu studied him. A familiar sight: a man who refused to change with the passing years — the Mafia's ever-standing pillar. Despite the unfruitfulness of it — despite the proof of its inconvenience — someone who cared for him.

*Could he ever —*

“Here we are, finally!” Dazai exclaimed, nonchalantly shutting the call in some poor fool’s face. “*Hop-hop*, Chuuya. Hirotsu, you wait here in the car. You have official orders to strike whoever attempts to enter the Cemetery, yes?”

He didn’t recognize the corpse when they opened the malodorous trunk for *Tainted* to float him out; he didn’t recognize it as he stalked behind Dazai’s too-cheerful skips through graves either, the hems of the pants he used as pajamas sinking in the low snow; he didn’t recognize it when Dazai declared a random spot underneath a tree *The Location*, and began moving autumn leaves — until a dug-up hole and a new stone appeared.

When he read the name on the tomb, and finally squinted at the face they had laid on the snow — he paused.

“This is the guy from the theme park,” he gasped. “With Tanaki. The worker with Murasaki Shikibu’s name carved on his arm.”

Shovel in hand — merely taking aim to throw it in Chuuya’s own grasp with maximal added bruises — Dazai nodded. “And we’re lucky he wasn’t one for cremation. Come on, dig.”

He stopped the shovel inches from his nose; then glared at him, attempted to swing at his feet with the bar, and began to remove some of the muddy ground — *the sooner this was over*, he let himself know, *the sooner he would get to sleep again*. “Why did you dig him up? The police already gave us the corpse pictures.”

“I needed to check if he had a mole,” Dazai replied, flopping down on a bundle of snow — right next to the corpse, and entirely uninterested in helping him dig. “The pictures didn’t show it.”

Chuuya imagined the earth to be his face. He sank the shovel. “Why?”

“To check if he was Murasaki’s nephew.”

He paused, raising an eyebrow.

“The one who gave the *Division* everything they needed to stage her fake suicide,” Dazai said, with that intonation that meant, *why aren’t you reading my mind right now?* “Amazing how fast the *Ballerinas* have become their own chess piece, don’t you think? Anyway — he had strong ideas about his family’s terroristic inheritance. He wasn’t described as having any remorse over the trap, but he did die with her name carved on his arm.”

Chuuya studied the rotting, greenish lines of the corpse’s eyebags. “You think he carved it on himself. Not that the *Division* was trying to take us away from Ueda’s trail.”

“I think he saw his grandma,” he replied. “I think he saw her until he went crazy enough to cut his skin open. Given that we don’t know the full scope of Ueda’s Ability, and that all of you mafiosi have some semblance of grieving guilt stuck to you — it seemed a relevant theory to confirm.”

If Dazai noted how utterly quiet he'd gone, he didn't outrightly state it. Chuuya traced the mud and the snow; traced the darkness at the end of that hole, and the wooden roof of a casket.

*At the very least*, he considered, calmly, *his arms were already carved out*.

"*Us mafiosi*," he echoed, eventually.

"Yes," Dazai nodded. Something he was fiddling with was glistening, occasionally struck by moonlight. With a perplexed sigh, he recognized the ring Chuuya had stolen for him on New Year's day. "I don't have much time left in my life. I can hardly waste it with unnecessary grievances."

He threw the shovel to the side; lifted one finger, beckoning the corpse' flagging limbs to the open coffin six feet underneath. "I think the point is that you can't really avoid it."

"I have nothing to avoid."

"You have nothing to blame yourself for?" Chuuya scoffed.

"I know I do," the boy corrected him. His gaze was avidly following the slow descent of the dead body. One of his hands was under his chin; the other, by his calf, twitched intermittently. "But what am I meant to do about it?"

Something was stuck in his throat.

Sharp tongue and cruel teeth and the moon in the sky; maybe there existed a wall hard enough in this world Chuuya could crush his skull against — until he learned what it felt to actually hold the weight of *something*. "I'm not —" he gulped down the too loud tone of his voice. Kouyou was always talking about being too easy to read. The man landed inside the coffin, and he shut it — and that was it. "I don't feel guilty."

Dazai's sole eye always seemed to overflow — forcing itself to bear a weight meant for two; *piercing*, because of it. He twirled one finger in the air; traced, suffocatingly focused on every inch of him — *what do you feel?*

There was nothing ephemerally rotten in that place. Only a corpse, and a boy who wanted to be. The smell, if real — was under his nails.

Offhandedly, he threw a glance behind his back. The Flags' stolen graves were only a few trees away; for a moment, he could have *sworn* he'd seen a severed silhouette crawl on his elbows between the stones. Could have sworn he wasn't crazy at all — only cursed.

"All of it," Chuuya concluded, shrugging. He threw the shovel in Dazai's lap — given he had no *Tainted*, all he could do was howl when it hit him between the legs. "*Hop-hop*. Switch."

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Of the rows of newcomers from the Ability Users scouting process, Chuuya managed to only get saddled with testing three of them.

“These are Kobo, Fumiko, and Mishima,” Hirotzu introduced, fiddling with his latest wrist watch — his old, cracked one still fixed around Dazai’s wrist. “Some of Ace’s men recruited them from a mercenary underground group.”

The trio was waiting for them, sprawled on the couch of Tanaki’s Entrance Hall. A small woman in a vibrantly red attire and a pensive face, and two men — a brunette with incredibly thick glasses and a blond with an amazingly long beard — each of them much taller than Chuuya would ever comfortably meet the eyes of.

“I must say, I much prefer the term *begged to join*,” Fumiko tutted, offering him a bow. Her hair was an unnatural crimson rainfall; if it hadn’t been braided as severely as it was, he thought it might have brushed the ground. “Makes me feel important.”

Kobe coughed, fixing his glasses. “Or makes our new organization seem desperate.”

“Did you even see the bloodbath they left at our meeting spot?” Mishima pointed out, barely raising his nose from the book between his hands — a collection of depictions of what looked like Christian saints. “Desperation would have been *much* messier. That was pure *purpose*.”

“Yes. The purpose to cause a bloodbath.”

“Guys,” Tanaki called, a bit distractedly, from her desk. She nodded towards Chuuya, both a warning and a *point* — smiling as unassumingly sweetly as she always did with recruits. “Perhaps discuss it elsewhere?”

“If the *heads* of the pack aren’t aware of their issues, no one should be,” Fumiko replied, with no hesitation. “*Come on*, now, Tanaki. Some bravery. Some shamelessness.”

“You used to be so polite.”

“You know each other?” Chuuya asked.

“Sure thing,” Fumiko winked, bowing once more. “She once hired me to get rid of her — what was it, Madame? Third? Fourth husband?”

Tanaki tapped away on her computer — offered Chuuya a clever glance that almost tasted of old times’ complicity. “Who knows.”

“*Ah*, whatever. I’m sure she’s happy to have me here, now. I insist on my point!” the woman offered him her hand. “Who else are we meant to complain to?”

Chuuya shook it — was unsurprised when her grip lingered. “I hear diaries are a thing.”

“But if we want *change*?”

“Then we should stop wasting time and begin complaining to the revolutionists,” he offered, holding onto her fingers as *insistently* as she was. He refused to lower his gaze. “And see if we want it badly enough to bleed for it.”

Fumiko grinned. “I like you.”

“You like all things red,” Kobe huffed.

“Well, *his* red is particularly *fascinating*,” she insisted, annoyed. “Unlike that fur of yours.”

Before Chuuya could ask what that meant, the air in front of him seemed to shatter into pieces — a blink and a strange sense of nausea later, a fox with remarkably intelligent eyes was jumping right into his arms, laying its muzzle on his elbow to tilt its head back and study him from up close.

“Oh,” Chuuya grinning — the excitement he’d felt at eight, figuring out he could fly. The animal preened; from behind his book, Mishima sniffed. “That’s cool.”

“Sir,” Hirotsu intervened, clearing his throat. Lower, he explained: “These three are our main witnesses on the search for Ueda Akinari.”

He straightened.

“He hired us for a job, last summer,” Fumiko elaborated, eyes set on Kobe’s frame in his arms. “He needed a small group for the transport of Black Market goods outside of the state — the *goods* being Ability Users. He said his Ability alone would be too — *messy*, for it.”

Chuuya tightened his grip around the man’s fur, unaware — offered his clever, little eyes a grimace when he snapped his teeth near his wrist. “You saw him use it?”

“Indescribable,” Mishima murmured — gaze still on the book, but lost somewhere much further. “I’d never seen such a conspicuous group of beings hate itself so viciously — so *unwillingly*.”

“So it *is* him? You can confirm it?”

“I had my doubts,” Fumiko admitted, throwing her head back. Her voice came out both muffled and strained. “Until yesterday’s attacks at Yamashita Park. A TV crew managed to film it all live — I would recognize that bubbling insanity in their eyes *everywhere*.”

He frowned. “He’s targeting civilians too, now?”

Hirotsu offered him a glance that matched his own to the dot — pure understanding. The *Special Division* wouldn’t have gone that far, not to slow down the Mafia’s recruiting attempts — the protection of the city had always been their priority. “The User has to have been granted some freedom over personal attacks,” the man theorized.

“And the half-moon mark,” Chuuya asked? after a beat. “Is it on all the victims?”

“Not one missing,” Mishima shrugged himself out of his remembrance — made a face. “I said it to that man in glasses, I’ll say it again: Ueda’s Ability left no visible sign. You don’t force a sick man to wear a red scarf around his neck — not if you’re going for a whispered epidemic.”

Fumiko scoffed. “A suicidal one.”

Hirotsu cleared his throat. “And your time underground never brought you into contact with some — *spreading* Ability of sorts?”

“We’d remember it,” the woman assured. She nodded towards the fox in his arms. “Kobe has never forgotten an Ability he’s seen. Not once. It’s why we’ve been helping out your archivists.”

“Be mindful, Vice Executive,” Mishima insisted. “Keep searching — as we will. But it’s imperative for Ueda to be found and eliminated, first and foremost. You —” His knuckles grew white around his book; only slightly relaxing under Fumiko’s subtle hip check. Chuuya thought of the man behind the *Division’s* window; the trails of fresh blood leaking from the claw-holes in his arms. “You don’t want to face this Ability.”

Kobe chirped, a bit sad. Ever so posed, he felt Hirotsu’s eyes pierce his temple. He raised his chin. “We’ll worry about that problem when it comes,” he concluded. “About your Abilities —”

The three — four-legged exceptions, too — exchanged a devilishly intense gaze.

They challenged him to an oddly vicious, pseudo-training session. Chuuya, who knew the fire in his veins just enough to call it excitement, dropped his coat in Hirotsu’s amused arms and eagerly joined them at the training grounds — eyes squinted and mind alert to grasp *what*, exactly, their Abilities could do.

“It’s hardly entertaining against *me*,” Kobe sighed, by the third time Chuuya had pinned him to the ground with a clever flick of the wrist. “*The Face of Another* is a pretty intuitive Ability. Great trick on the first try, though.”

He had changed four times for each round — uncanny birds, growling dogs; animals strange enough Chuuya was half sure they were meant to have gone extinct; on the harshest of the rounds, a camouflaging butterfly.

*Don’t step on him*, Mishima had groaned, *or you are never gonna hear the end of it*.

The man only agreed to put his beloved book down and fight him when Kobe went down for the fifth time — lamenting cracked glasses.

“Does the beard ever get in the way?” Chuuya asked, squatting in preparation — eyeing the endless, golden mass of hair dangling from his chin like a somewhat grim clock hand.

“Not really,” Mishima replied, blankly. “Do you hit from the left or from the right, first?”

He blinked, perplexed. “The right.”

It was only when his jump already had him in the air, and the man was swiftly moving to the left to miss him, that his words hit him. “Why the fuck did I say that,” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” the man shrugged, turning to watch him roll a good stone-throw from him — immediately climbing back to his feet. “Is your hair a choice or a consequence?”

“They were cut all shitty last year and never regrew correctly,” Chuuya answered — the words morphing on the tip of his tongue, mere seconds after he had *considered* telling a lie. “Hey!”

Fumiko laughed hard enough to shake all four walls.

*Confessions of a Mask*, the man explained, as they rolled back and forth around the mostly empty training room, *was a delicate power* — while it *could* force the truth out of any mouth, it could only do so under the specific condition that the interlocutor had been *trying* to lie.

“Which means my questions must be carefully planned,” Mishima added. “I have to ask things nobody would wish to offer sincerity to.”

“What happens if you don’t?”

The User shivered. “*I’m* the one forced to tell the truth.”

“And it’s always *so* amusing,” Kobe sighed. He elbowed Hirotsu in a friendly manner; took a step back when the man curled an eyebrow in direction. “*Ah* — just ask the Commander here. Mishima made the mistake of asking about his love life, thinking he would never answer — and he had to spend a day telling Fumiko and I all his nasty, embarrassing little secrets.”

“Beard products’ rants aren’t truly what I was looking for, though,” Fumiko sighed.

Fighting against them turned the slumber in his muscles into something distinctly *bright* — Chuuya hadn’t even realized how much he longed for a squabble with someone who didn’t just have *strength and stubbornness* on their side. Their past as mercenaries peeked through every deadly move, unrefined but *purposeful*; they rotated their knives like missing limbs, and twirled on their feet like the ground itself would move along.

“We started selling ourselves when you were still a thought in your Mama’s brain,” Fumiko let him know, when she almost — *almost*, though — managed to drag her knife down his cheekbone.

“Men may have nothing on gods — if the voices are true,” Mishima was quick to add, going for his legs mere instants before *Tainted* stuck him to the ceiling — horrendously, offensively precise. Just for that declaration, he made sure to crack the ground under his feet — trapping him abruptly enough to make him land on his knees. “But desperate people get pretty close.”

Chuuya won — Chuuya always won, and Chuuya always won with breath-catching ease; be it a curse or be it a boast, never too shaky on his feet. But the feeling of his lungs heaving made him grin wide enough it *burned*.

“And what about you?” he questioned. He nodded in Fumiko’s direction, watching her tie the edges of her red skirt around her thighs. “I doubt I simply haven’t noticed it. What’s *your* Ability?”

It was subtle — unignorable, because of it. From the wooden bleachers, Hirotsu played with his second cigarette of the afternoon, and leaned a bit forward. “*Mmh,*” Kobe tapped two fingers on his chin, exhaustedly star-sprawled on the ground. “This could be interesting, actually. I wonder what you would look like to him.”

Chuuya curled. “Look like?”

“And here she goes,” Mishima sat on the ground again, book open — failing at pretending not to be regarding Fumiko’s panther-like advance in his direction.

“You’re a shapeshifter, too?”

“Not quite,” she hummed. Mere steps from him, she twinned her hands behind her back and smiled. Her braid swayed with her, hypnotic. “*The Waiting Years* deals with shifting, but it has more to do with you than with me. May I, sir?”

Hesitation rusted the muscles of his back; he rolled his shoulders back nonetheless, throwing one last look to Hirotsu’s interested gaze. “Go on.”

Her teeth glistened like blades.

It defeated all rationality — she did not fly to him, and she did not curl her fingers into a fist to attempt to tear a hole in his chest. Chuuya only blinked once, and found her a mere breath away from his face — *Tainted* already drooling from his pores. Nonetheless, she raised one forefinger — and peacefully laid it in the middle of his forehead.

Chuuya stared at the bittersweet curve of her cherry lips. “What are you —“

His mouth dried.

Thunder struck some corner of his gaze — he saw nothing but liquified shadows. The ground vanished underneath his feet. He raised the arms he couldn’t *feel*, attempting to fight back — instead, he fell.

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*Black.*

*It was deep enough to make his head pound, its weight physical — a never ending valley of a nothingness. Everywhere his eyes searched, it grew a bit deeper, sucking the air out of anything that might dare lay underneath it. It took his arms flagging through what could only be called water, for him to realize he couldn't breathe.*

*His lungs burned; their flesh-wet screech was audible. He attempted to look at his hands — he saw nothing but the thin material of the medical vest floating around his kicking legs — a tag with a number that scratched his brain, that did not soak and did not tear off.*

*He screamed. His lips stayed shut.*

*The water stayed black.*

*He tilted his head up, searching for a roof to break — was overwhelmed by a sense of nausea, legs and eyes and hands pulsing, no roof and no ground and nothing at all — until there was.*

*White, he thought, and bright — a trick of a light that wasn't there. He forced his body to find a direction and swam down; blinked uselessly against the itch of his eyes, his throat; the bubbles out of his lips and his nose, the weight on his chest.*

*The boy was wearing an oxygen mask, its plastic shaping bubbles into that not-quite-water. The band of it got lost through reddish curls, shorter than he could ever remember keeping his own — the vest danced around his numb limbs like curtains in the summer, framing a deadly pale skin.*

*His eyes were closed. When he cupped his cheeks and forced the eyelids apart, he met two blue irises.*

*He dragged his hands down the warmth of his body — sleeping, he thought; sleeping, but alive and breathing. He limbs fought the clenching water, the lack of air, and a voice thundered —*

*Take the mask.*

*It came from nowhere at all — it split his skull in two, a headache laced in poison. He held the boy's cheeks so hard he tasted their bones rubbing; wondered if bruises could form underwater. He listened to his heart, racing faster and faster and faster, ears ringing and tongue swirling around white noises.*

*Take the —*

*He let go of the boy, and swam to the other direction — swam and swam and swam, until the rush of a last burst of energy reached the tips of his fingers, and his body shut down — floated to depths that did not exist, falling, falling, and —*

*He was on his elbows and knees.*

*The landing hurt — it rattled his skeleton, as he rolled down the strangely dusty ground. Sand, he realized, as he coughed it out — an endless beach, spreading to faraway horizons in every direction, caging a calm sea in. He rubbed his eyes; breathed in gulps of air, desperate and hungry and cursing with words he could not hear. He resisted the urge to tear the white vest off his skin — and saw a corpse on the sand.*

*She stained that golden bed in a relentlessly flowing waterfall of scarlet, pooling from a wound in the middle of her abdomen — a hole clawed at the edges, offering lines of tissue and slowly rotting viscera to the sea-salty air.*

*He tore her dress apart, removing the fabric from the bleeding gash as delicately as he could, eyes frantically searching for something that was not sand and salt — the woman shrieked, choking on the blood clawing up her throat.*

*He dragged his eyes to her pained face — had to search through sticky strands of red hair, losing themselves amongst the blood; through the tears in her gently lost eyes. He couldn't focus on her traits — couldn't see the color of her irises.*

*For the first time since the maceries and the sun — every bubbling cell in his body was quiet.*

*He was a sandcastle to the wind. “Mama?”*

*She smiled. The wound seemed to spread like a tumor; her hand dropped from his face, leaving it wet and breathlessly cold — she gasped.*

*Save her, the voice thundered.*

*“How?” he asked. No answer came; he held onto the layers of her dress — something familiar and something never seen before, her eyes drinking in every inch of him — “Tell me how!”*

*Her hands climbed the heavy air — shushed his protests, lips trembling, to tap a gentle index to the middle of his bloodstained vest.*

*He glanced down, and saw his body split in two — a void of a red so utterly dark it was black, bleeding him out into the sand, into his mother's own blood.*

*It was a strange thing — knowing where to reach and where to dig to get to your heart, through the viscera and through the bones. His body was numb to the feeling; his body was*

*screaming, and when he clenched his fingers around the beating organ and pulled, his whole being burned.*

*He stuck the bleeding, fleshy heart into the woman's wound — watched her eyes widen and sob, felt her nails sink into his chest, her lips trace a word he knew, something he could not recall, something he knew —*

*A house in the countryside.*

*He'd never been there. Nonetheless, studying the warm yellows of its walls, he got the feeling he would have known how to reach every room behind the wooden porch. The sky was crowded by clouds — gently threatening to drown the field of flowers he was standing knee-deep in.*

*The promise of a storm didn't scare him. He caressed the flowers with a palm, and felt the urge to smile.*

*A cross stood in the middle of the field — an old, rusted piece of metal, covered in flower crowns and unfamiliar trinkets. The man sitting under the porch was looking at it — dangling along to the little wind on a carved hanging couch.*

*He walked up the two steps of the porch, and sat next to him. It rattled the couch — they waited quietly for its rhythm to return, soft; listening as the creaking screws muffled the distant thunder.*

*"Isn't it nice?" Verlaine asked.*

*He breathed in.*

*The air tasted faintly of metal, like all rain did; but if he closed his eyes, he could taste a warm meal on his tongue — the heart-wrenchingly sweet smell of well-worn clothes; the too-well-known tickle of blades being washed after a bloodbath.*

*There were no houses to be seen in miles — nothing but that little square, drowning in nature and an absence of sounds. He knew, somehow, that in that place fireflies could be seen every night. He knew it was always that silent — a quiet that reminded him of familiar fingers wrapped around his wrists; only it was his to have; never to ask, never to live without.*

*The quietness of not being torn apart — of having his head just for him.*

*“It’s nice,” he concluded.*

*“I was stuck, back then,” Verlaine explained, distractedly. His pale-grain braid was longer than he remembered it; his clothes less elegant, lined by sewn flowers. He kept his eyes on the cross. “You were so young — I could imagine it. Teaching you a new language wouldn’t have been hard. There was no need to stay in Japan, where they might have found you.”*

*“France, then?” he guessed.*

*“No,” He frowned. “No, they would have found me. If not them, then —“*

*He studied the cross.*

*Trailed off.*

*“Where’s this, then?” he questioned.*

*“Who knows,” Verlaine blinked. At last, he turned his head, just a bit — enough to offer him a curled up corner of his mouth. The complicity in that gaze was a soft piece of clothing that had to have been his, some realities away. “Does it matter? We are safe here. No gods and no men.”*

*He tilted his head back until the edge of the backrest was digging into his nape; hummed along to the next push-forward of the couch. “And what are we?”*

*A chuckle. Verlaine’s Japanese was accented in a somewhat entertaining way — he knew, some realities away, that he had spent hours and hours and lifetimes making fun of him for it, and that no one had died for it. “The unlucky two in-between.”*

*Stay, the voice offered. Stay.*

*A scream broke through his ears.*

*He flinched; turned wildly, until his eyes set on the window behind his back. Inside, instead of a living room, he saw the road at the end of the Port Mafia Headquarters’ stairs; saw the blood puddles and the torn apart bodies on the ground — the light of fighting Abilities; the wide-eyes corpses of people he knew, the people he loved, the people —*

*“Chuuya?”*

*Verlaine’s eyes weren’t kind; but the honesty in them was soothing enough to feel just the same. He had scars too, he noticed, for the first time — circular lines of white and pink, staining his neck and his cheeks and his hands and every part of him; like locked gates to a being larger than life.*

*I know, he longed to say, abruptly — longed for it so desperately his throat seemed to constrict, robbing his lungs. Longed for it so vividly his eyes stung, as his every scar pulsed in understanding — I know, I know, I know —*

*“I can’t,” he heard himself say. “I won’t.”*

*“You could,” Verlaine swore.*

*“No,” Battle raged behind the window — the storm thundered some more, and he wondered if it ever rained, in that place. “No, you know I —”*

*“You’ll lose it anyway,” the man reminded him. His clothes were the color of the clouds; Chuuya was still in that white vest, still in his mother’s blood, still drowning with the other him — still haunted by the noise inside his skull, and the cross in the grass. “How many times can you bleed for the vanishing air?”*

*“As many as it’s needed,” he said. He climbed to his feet — rushed to the door next to the window and pulled, rattled, and fought against a locked thing. “Let me out.”*

*“It will never stop being needed,” he mused, eyes on his cross. “Haven’t you learned it yet? Gains are temporary. Only what we feel is eternal — that burning edge you detest; that loudness that haunts you. They’re the only things that cannot be taken away from you.”*

*“It was you,” he snapped. “I had them, and they would have stayed. You took them away from me.”*

*“And I was kind. I did it fast and clean and when they hadn’t festered inside you yet,” Verlaine confirmed. “I am not your losses, Chuuya. I am merely a piece of something that has claimed you as his. And if it hadn’t been me — it would have been something else.”*

*“I would have stopped it. I would have —”*

*“If it hadn’t been me,” he swore, still gentle and elegant; still as similar to him as Kouyou had sworn; still dead. “It would have been you.”*

*The doorknob left a bleeding cut on his palm. He choked on a sound — a horrible thing; a gasp and a breath and a sob; something pooling from the hole in his chest, the one eye Arahabaki had stained and stolen and never returned.*

*“Chuuya,” he asked — Verlaine; the voice; his mouth; his mother’s bleeding tongue. The door stayed shut. “Chuuya, aren’t you terrified?”*

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*“— but lies on our name,” one of the Mori Corporations’ public representatives was insisting, on some News interview the manufacturing side of their business had demanded.*

*“We have nothing to hide, and no developments to defend. The Special Division is a noble, fundamental branch of the trusted Government that holds our country together — if they wish to make certain we won’t cause issues to our city, they’re welcome to. After all, with Ability Users on the line, doubts can never be enough. I’ll say — given the wretched results the mixture of weapons and Users brought during the Great War, I can’t see any reason why anyone would dare mix the two again —”*

Sunset came when the village appeared at the edge of the windshield, lined in a golden frame.

Chuuya turned the radio off.

“How old were you when they took you?” he asked, studying the makeshift houses and the rusty wells; the woods surrounding the living areas and the distant silhouettes of some women stretching under the falling sun. If the village had a name, he didn’t know it — Kouyou never called it anything but, *the place I came from*.

“Five, the old Boss estimated,” she offered. “I couldn’t quite remember if my birthday had yet come or not. He didn’t care to linger.”

“Damn. What an asshole.”

A snort. She cleared her voice. “Language.”

He huffed. “He’s dead and cursed.”

“You can never know.”

“Trust me,” He thought of candid strands and a bloodied scythe — the sound of Rimbaud’s bones digging the earth. “I know.”

She made for an odd sight in the driver seat. Despite average driving ability, Kouyou was made for tightlipped Mafia-paid drivers and blacked-out windows — for rattling off the torture schedule of the day, and cleaning her blade on her inner gowns while the others took her where she’d requested.

He curled up on the passenger seat, in that way she found undignified; laid his cheek on the headrest and studied the delicate grip of her fingers around the steering wheel — as she rounded the village, never quite going in.

*“— continues the protests,”* the other News channel buzzed, *via* the utterly bored voice of a man. *“Suribachi City has infamously appropriated an astonishing number of our city’s funds — and for what? Despite the protestors’ — frankly idealistic — insistence, there is virtually no proof that investing in the settlement would bring better results than a massive loss of sources by the hands of gangs. There’s been no minimal sign of betterment, and certainly nothing auspicious enough to demand a project of the might of —”*

*“But what about the children?”* the second interlocutor from the radio insisted. Despite the protest, it all sounded strangely detached — as if the home Chuuya had abandoned to the dust and the bedbugs were a particularly entrancing piece of media. *“Are we just meant to assume*

*they cannot be rescued? According to the S.R.A. — the Suribachi Renovation Association, for our viewers at home — more than seventy percent of the inhabitants are under fifteen years of age. If we can't stop the gangs before they can be created, how are we meant to —*

He rubbed his shoes against the car floor. The leather did not stain; it cost more than the car itself.

“Why aren’t you talking to Hirotsu?” Kouyou asked, eventually, when the car swerved into a thin, particularly rough street.

The bumps of it knocked his knees against the dashboard. Chuuya scratched the scar on his hip, faded and still soaked in rat poison — recalled empty training grounds, and the way Hirotsu’s steel-made eye had looked through the monocle he had shattered on mere waking-up instinct.

*I know Ueda Akinari got you*, he’d said, low and unaffected by his bubbling rage. *Do you?*

“I am,” Chuuya replied, blankly. “It’s not his fault if he’s got a thing for orders.”

Kouyou threw him a *look* — like she knew; like they both knew she did. “Whose orders?”

*Who else*, he could have scoffed. Disrespect was more rarely punished, these days; perhaps she could perceive it as the blunted blade it was. There was bone deep frustration in all corners that weren’t immediately receptive to what Chuuya had learned through blood and sweat — curled on a rock, wondering if his blood would dry under that cliff for the Sheep to find; realizing, with ease and repulsion, that Dazai Osamu would drown who he needed and save who he wanted.

*He found Fumiko and introduced her to Hirotsu’s bleeding heart*, he could have explained. Intuition kept children alive, and he had given the local demon more than what was intuitively clever — and it still wasn’t enough. *He found Hirotsu’s bleeding heart, and he found me.*

Chuuya still wasn’t sure about what he had wanted to prove.

“One of the new girls,” he offered, instead, eventually. “Fumiko.”

“The redhead?”

“Her Ability could help out tons with your *Torture Department* —”

Kouyou winced. “You ought to quit calling it something so distasteful.”

“So,” he concluded, tracing the cut she had managed to trace on his cheekbone, while he was in that trance-like state — the *only* one; because Chuuya didn’t lose, and Chuuya had no time to waste in hallucinations. “You might want to try and steal it from Ace’s grasp.”

The village appeared fully in front of them — sprouting homes and running children; wood and leaves and something so *un-Kouyou-like* it was a wonder she hadn’t yet disappeared from

the sheer discrepancy of that reality. It all seemed awfully warm to the touch — seemed like the kind of fire *Golden Demon* would put out with no command.

The Executive's eyes were dead set on the rear view mirror, though — staring at the allegedly empty space in the backseats.

“Hey,” Chuuya called. “It’s not real.”

Her profile was a stain on his eyelids — a flower blooming in pinks and blood red; familiar to all the corners of himself he has reshaped to fit people he’d die for. Her hair was untied, whipped by the wind from the car window — blood-lined waves. When she turned, he saw something akin to heartbreak in her eyes.

When she turned, she was a corpse.

He recalled the first time she had brushed hair off his forehead — how it had felt like being burnt alive; recalled the first time she’d looked him in the eyes and called him one of hers.

“Little god,” she said, simply, through wet bones and peeling off flesh. One of her hands left the steering wheel; tipping off his hat, she tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. “You know, I really like that tune you’re always humming.”

Chuuya blinked against the touch, unable to focus on anything but her sharp nails and the sound her skin was making against the leather of the car as it got ripped off — feeling bitterly short and suffocatingly small and *loved*, loved, Chuuya was so, so, *so loved* — how could he ever waste any drop of it, undeserving and still rewarded — how could he ever bleed for anything but it —

He blinked, and she was alive again.

She offered him a smile. “Must we always match, when aggravating Abilities are involved?”

With a snort — quiet, as to not disturb the bleeding sunset — he reached for the edge of her sleeve, pinching it. *Sticky*, she would tut. “At least this time we’re aware of it.”

“I do prefer the horrific hallucinations to the traitorous mind control,” Kouyou sighed. “But I would rather not deal with my people’s blood.”

They got out of the car.

Some carved benches stood through grass and abandoned fishing hooks; they sat, studying the village at the end of the valley. Chuuya vaguely wondered if someone would come ask them who they were — if his village had looked anything like that. If anybody had heard him scream when he’d been taken; if he’d screamed at all.

“So,” he started, again. “Any idea of how to *not* watch people decay as you talk to them?”

A pause. She tapped on his knuckles. “You already see that much?”

“You don’t?”



She shook her head. “Just the corpses. And — people from my past. I never saw them die, but they would follow me with enviable vigor.”

He blinked. “*Saw?*”

Kouyou straightened. She let go of him; gathered her hair on one shoulder, freeing her nape for him to study. “I came here this weekend, too. I went to my old house. It was abandoned,” If she felt anything in particular about it, it didn’t show — she talked about the village the way one would have about a particularly blurry dream. “I needed some silence to — reflect. When I came back, it was like this, and the visions were mostly gone.”

The half moon mark on her nape was skin deep — heavy like a tattoo, shaded in a gentle blue. It was more faded than any of the corpses’ own had been; if he didn’t squint, only Kouyou’s pale skin remained.

“Where’s yours?” she asked.

“I didn’t check,” he admitted, leaning back on his palms. Chuuya wasn’t the type to try and convince himself something wasn’t real because he couldn’t see it; he just didn’t want to bother with one more scar. “Probably on my back. You mean all you had to do to get rid of it was go through a free discount self-discovery trip?”

“I wish,” Kouyou sighed, tilting her head back to bask in the falling sunlight. “I made the mistake of mentioning my condition to Boss — it worsened my condition exponentially. Going back to my roots helped getting back under control — at the very least, I don’t have to fear it happening again.”

He frowned. “*It?*”

The collar of her *kimono* was moved to the side; she lowered it down her arms, holding it close to her chest for modesty — much to Chuuya’s spluttered, red-eared protests. At last, he laid his eyes on the porcelain skin of the higher part of her back.

“Those are —” Chuuyas stiffened. “Those are from *Golden Demon*’s blade.”

“Which she seemed very apologetic about,” Kouyou confirmed. The blade lines were clean and uncrooked, and not particularly vivid — but they had clearly been deep, and they showed an effort to cut the shoulder blades out of the woman’s body. “There is nothing to blame. I ordered her to do it.”

“You,” he started.

Felt the words leave, along to the next whiff of sea-tasting wind; felt the bench pierce through his gloves and his tailored pants and his skin.

“I saw...” Kouyou cleared her throat, fixing her *kimono* in place. “I saw things. I was *convinced* — it was difficult. The relief of a wound helped me clear my head, but —” She reached for his hand again; traced a meaningless *kanji* on his knuckles, her complicated expression shattered in pieces by strands of hair. “Chuuya, you need to reign it in. Or to kill

Ueda. It would be better — “Her face did *something*; the unwanted crisps on waters that were meant to rule over nameless heads, to suggest the most efficient solution at all times. “I’d rather you didn’t have to put yourself through that.”

He stared at their joined hands. “It’s just an Ability, Ane-san. I’ll try to deal with it, but — Boss needs all the help he can get, right now.”

“Ueda Akinari is targeting civilians, too,” the woman insisted. “The Port Mafia was born to keep bloodthirsty Ability Users under check — if the city is forced to denounce more Ability-related emergencies, the *Special Division* will tighten its control, and we will be caged in like rats.”

“But he *is* one of their puppets?”

“No way of guaranteeing,” she admitted. “But we do know the actress’ murder came from their orders. Whether Ueda has now run free from their guidance matters very little — the Mafia will not be taunted by a *single* Ability User.”

Huffing, he tucked a strand of hair behind Kouyou’s ear, stopping it from ending up into his mouth. “Like that hasn’t happened before.”

“Let us not let it happen again, then,” She glanced his way. “I think this might help.”

She extracted a notebook from her sleeve; a square of leather, its pages vigorously rubbed clean of pencil notes — something like the annotations Virgil used to carry around, just in case inspiration for his book struck. “I wrote down every vision I got,” she explained, placing it in his hands. “Every single one. It helped remind me they weren’t real; going back and re-reading them turned the worst moments into something less — tangible.”

Chuuya dragged one nail down the first page; tried to identify the erased *kanjis*. “You want me to journal my slow descent into being nuts?”

“Quite,” Kouyou smiled. “Like old times. You can consider it a calligraphy test.”

“I’m not showing these to you.”

“No,” Something in her tone raised his eyes — she clenched a sour grip around his fingers again, and swore: “No one should have to know a thing about what you saw. Ueda Akinari is —” She set her jaw. “No mercy should be shown.”

He didn’t ask.

He pocketed the notebook.

“I’ll worry about Mori, Chuuya,” Kouyou started again, with a deep breath. “As I always have. You know that. The earth will end before that man willingly creates chaos for any outcome that is not the best possible for the organization.”

*That’s what I thought of myself, too,* he said — *almost*; bit his tongue at the very last second.

Lately, Mori tended to be decaying in some way whenever he laid his eyes on him. Mori Ougai, who he had kneeled in front of — who had given up an *Ability Permit* not to lay another betrayal on his shoulders. Mori Ougai — who had watched him ruin the only people he had ever led, and still called him invaluable.

*If he dies*, the wind told him. *If he dies, then who do you think will —*

“You worry about yourself,” Kouyou said — like she didn’t trust he would. He wished he could vocalize the lump stuck in his throat — explain that he wasn’t half as good as she believed, and didn’t deserve half the love she had to give.

*How many times will you bleed?*

*As many as are needed*, he swore.

Her side was a warm reminder against his body; Chuuya had never leaned on anything the world had to offer but its gravity. *Loved*. Starved for it like a child in the slums; hungry for it like a starless sky. *Loved*.

“And the next time you see me in any state of distasteful rot — *please*, do let me know,” she added — seemingly genuinely pressed by the idea. “I’ll fix my lipstick just for you.”

Chuuya laughed like it was ripped out of him. She held his hand tighter.

Over the benches spot, the valley bloomed in shades of the darkest crimson. Quiet and dead, the Sheep’s corpses laid all over its grass, asking and abandoning — their absent eyes set on him.

## Chapter End Notes

ango: you are cursed when you’re mentally unwell

kouyou and chuuya: is it cause we’re redheads. is that it

ango: i am an archivist

“If you had a thorn in your side, and it was tearing you from the inside out — would you care if the one to extract it was the one who put it there?” what do yall know about mori literally bringing mimic in yokohama just to destroy them... i hate that man.

hey there guys!! i need to run home immediately, so posting this before i disappear! i'm gonna answer to all comments soon, hope i manage to catch up by today!! thank you so much for all the love and for reading, and hope to see you soon!!

keep warm and have a wonderful day!

# IT

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end! ;))

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xxix.*

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*Case number: 67862344*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were  
tasked with the [...]*

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**Notebook extract — [Page 13]**

*Dead people.*

*More dead people.*

*Ane-san. Strangled?*

*Am I supposed to make this discursive? Hirotsu's brain splattered on the floor. Seriously, am I — blood on my hands. Guerrilla squad hanging from their necks. Is that better? Hirotsu again. Elise torn apart.*

*Mori with blood on his coat. It might have been the latest assassination attempt, though. The underground gets too cocky the moment things get nasty. As if we don't already hold control over the damn — off topic. The Guerrilla squad all over the ballroom. Voice in my ear in the shower? Might be the piping system. Call landlord.*

*Albatross.*

*Albatross. Is this really supposed to —*

*Albatross. With Doc.*

*Lippman, head ripped off. Call landlord. It's for sure the piping system.*

*Tsuchiya's eye on my nightstand. Noguchi hanging behind the window. Iceman burned alive on the desk. Kouyou torn apart. Blood on my hands.*

*The Flags.*

*The Flags.*

*The Flags. Pianoman in my trunk. Take the car to the washroom. The Flags. Am I supposed to go into details?*

*Ver —*

*Verlaine, for some fucking reason. He looks good with his skull blown up to pieces. Tried to step on him; passed out and woke up on the couch? Hope that one returns. Hope —*

*The kid.*

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...

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It was raining when he opened his eyes.

It tickled, at first — it grew somewhat itchy, somewhat *painful*, the moment his skin managed to feel its impact fully. It sneaked and curled gently around freshly disinfected skin, and the sensation of being a living bruise wasn't new — but the ache poisoning his limbs was the *tik tok* of a clock.

Chuuya never recalled why he was hurting.

Calloused palms — *known*; a matching scar down the thumb; a ridge between the index and the middle finger; a constant coldness, unbothered by the tapping, nearly too-hot water — answered the question.

Blood came with the night streets — silence came with touch. Dazai came with sorrow.

“Up to two minutes and a half, this time around,” the boy commented, only barely louder than the rush of water landing on wet tiles. Drops of it stuck Chuuya's eyelashes together — through the blur, he recognized one of the showers of the HQ's spare bedrooms. “Keep it up, and you might even actually win the dog racing competition.”

The upward turn of his tone didn't grow into an exclamation. Chuuya didn't know if it was the rush of his dwindling heartbeat in his ears that muffled it, or the hands cupping his ears — an effort to tilt his head back, letting the water wash away the blood he could feel skin deep all over.

*Corruption*, he decided, rationally.

The cracks of his scars felt distinctively circular; the drops landing on his cheeks came from Dazai's hair, too — he hardly ever chose to shower, when he could bathe. *Leave what you have destroyed clean*, Kouyou used to tut.

There was responsibility in partnership, Chuuya assumed — either that, or Dazai couldn't refuse a chance to watch him breathe through his death so viciously.

He always looked somewhat taken aback.

“It's fine,” Chuuya managed to mumble, attempting to escape his grasp. Brusque. He did not remember his name fully; but he recalled the vacantly regretful look on Hirotsu's face — Fumiko's fingers on his forehead. The mixture of drowsiness — and *how* had that bag of weak bones even dragged and held him up in the shower? — and warmth slowed him down. “Get your fish skin off me. I'm awake.”

“Can't have you stumble near the drain,” Dazai replied, unbothered. “Small as you are, you'll be sucked in and you'll end up somewhere in rural China. And then *Golden Demon* will whip me.”

He stepped back, heels slipping. Distantly, he heard himself snarl. “You *don't* —“

Two thumbs traced the skin under his eyes.

It was an ungentle scrub — only delicate enough not to reopen recently stitched wounds; but merciless in its quest to get all the blood out. Chuuya tasted debris — a fallen building, maybe; Arahabaki stubbornness to crash his skull against the closest surface, as if gods and codes could bleed out of an open head. The hands dug through wet hair — they scratched sluggish, mnemonic circles on his scalp, until his legs' grip on reality wavered. Chuuya blinked at the ground; the scarlet shade of the dirty water.

"I don't," His tongue felt heavy. *What's the point*, he wanted to snap. *Why do this and then* — "What was the — mission?"

Dazai hummed. The hands had to be his — the lingering consideration in them was the ghost of something Chuuya suspected he would never be awake enough to feel. "*Double Black* mission."

Distant flashes. "And?"

"Four Ability Users we tried to recruit attempted to start an earthquake near the City Hall," His palms left his head; the drag of skin down his nape awoke goosebumps everywhere his mind could reach — scarred skin protesting and *begging* and falling quiet in a *hush*. "You stopped them before it could become wild enough to be a real emergency."

*You knew what I'd see* — his throat refused to shape it into words. Fumiko's Ability kept her from seeing what she was causing; Dazai had only wanted to know he was haunted. *I know you knew*.

Chuuya frowned.

*Corruption* wasn't a feeling, not quite — more like what he imagined dreams might be like. He was a permanent guest, and the body was his. *This is my hand*, he recalled. When he tried to flex his fingers, it didn't quite work.

"A building fell," He squinted, torturously slow, as if underwater.

Dazai nodded. "The Users got buried," A pause; imperceptible to someone a bit further from the heartbeat in his wrist, maybe — to a less attuned skeleton. His fingers found the strand of hair he'd burned for the Flags; they pulled, and he considered killing him for it. "So were ten men in my *Unit*."

He stilled.

Another pause. "It was inevitable," the boy added, like he *knew* it would make Chuuya mad. "They went in to get all civilians out — managed, too. And I stopped you before it could be thirty of them. Don't start."

Frustration bubbled up. "*Don't st—*"

"Chuuya."

He fumed, eyes on the ground.



Blinked hard against the water drops — studied the fading scars up his legs, the spirals and the scratches and the falls. He hung from the apathetic shade of Dazai's voice; not quite mean, not quite touched. Inevitable. "Give me their names," he concluded, curtly. "I'll let the families know."

"Your tiny brain might have forgotten, but that is actually not your —"

"Dazai."

Perhaps he felt some of the frustration that had stuck since waking up on the training rooms' floor — his mother's face a blur and Verlaine's grief a physical itch. He kept quiet.

The rush of water echoed off the walls. The rooms at the Headquarters were all painfully non-descriptive. Albatross had dragged him out in less than a week — he recalled the unbloodied back of his head with the longing of a fool.

A forehead knocked against his own, hard. He hissed; pinched the closest patch of skin, near a wetly bandaged clavicle. He settled curved fingers — still clawing, still sinking into flesh, still *waiting* — on Dazai's waist, and refused to lower his gaze as he let him back him into the shower wall.

It was freezing, despite the condensation — each inch of his spine was a needle dipped in snow, and Chuuya cursed out, softer than intended.

Energy rushed in, waking him up fully — it let him blink, free from the direct spray of the water; let him gather a less blurred understanding of the red hair stuck on the wet wall, and the flimsy curtain hiding the lightless bathroom.

Dazai took his turn to wash — kept a foot upon his own, obnoxious and only ever gentle when it was quiet. He shrugged his hair under the water like a wet dog — *wasn't that something* — and stuck his fingers under his bandages to throw them out of the bathtub, untouched by their landing *flop*.

*Two eyes didn't quite fit him right*, Chuuya thought. The scythe scar on his chest sneaked down his ribs like a tear out of a page — settled and old, but never faded. *Mori wants me to keep them all*, he had told him, once. *So I will*.

It was cold — his skin was abandoned to dry off to the air. Each water drop falling from his hair landed like a bullet. Chuuya leaned onto the wall until the ice *stung*, and watched.

Dazai met his eyes, innocent. "What?"

His hair curled at the ears, badly cut and rarely cured — boyish, somewhat; easy to tuck away to even gravitationally challenged fingers. "The mission was a success," Chuuya said, slowly. *Nonetheless*, he could have added. Mori might have, he thought. "Right?"

"When is it not?"

A beat.

He breathed, eyes forward. “You know, you could have just asked me to test Fumiko’s deal.”

Dazai’s shrug was utterly familiar. It grated against his nerves — all of him. He stepped on the toe of a sock with one foot to take it off the other, every single night, like a clockwork — left his shoes all over the entrance. He wouldn’t really eat food if it wasn’t off somebody’s plate, because it felt less like hunger and more like mischievousness — and clearly only one of those was allowed. Unlike the corpses who had bled under Chuuya’s eyelids in the last few weeks — he was alive.

He’d probably only brought him along to bury that body so that Hirotsu could take a look at him, and be reminded he was the prime subject for limits-testing.

“You don’t have a bright track record of admitting to weaknesses,” Dazai rebutted, as if it was utterly simple. “And the surprise element was relevant. If her Ability works that great on even *you* — what with your circumstantially uncommon self control to matters of mind invasion — then it’s powerful enough to keep around.”

“That’s all?” he pressed.

He had a new wound — something like the carving Pianoman’s chords left around his victim’s necks; only, it traced the middle of his sternum like an equalizer. He gazed at him, calmly. “That’s all.”

Anger bubbled near the outer layer of his skin. He reminded himself the bathroom walls had done nothing to him. Reminded himself it was the warm water stuck to Dazai’s palms that was the unusual part — not the mind games.

“Fuck you,” Chuuya said.

He took it in stride.

Then, studying the carved line. “Tell me.”

“You’re in no luck,” he replied, stretching further and further — until he was a sharp arc of muscles most didn’t expect and pointy bones, thin with malnutrition. “It wasn’t me, this time.”

He frowned. “That looks like a rope burn.”

“My book covers the art of hanging oneself in enviable depth — thank you very much. I know better than to wrap the rope around anything but my neck,” A sigh; long and dramatic. “Besides, that’s not how I want to go anymore.”

“*Mmh?*” Disgust gathered at his fingertips; Chuuya felt Dazai’s own wrap around his wrist before he saw them. He let himself be pulled closer by some distant haze — under the jet of water, he tilted his chin up until he could nudge the boy’s head away from the warmer current, and mocked: “And how do you want to go?”

“Licking an electric fence,” Dazai said, very seriously.

He glared, blinded with anger and gaping with ache — felt it get stuck somewhere up his throat, like a breath he couldn't take. Wanted to laugh, just a bit; suppressed it anyway. He didn't notice his fingers were shaking until the boy had to take the bath foam bottle off his hands, and open it in his stead.

Lips brushed the end of his cheek, where his ear started. He unclenched his jaw on pure instinct — felt his fist tighten too close to where he would bruise him. “Don't go and get mad, now,” Dazai rebutted, lowering his tone into something that would *tickle*. “It's the busy season, you know?”

Chuuya thought there ought to be sneakier ways to leave a kiss; gentler ways to bite. Something pooled in his guts — a mixture of urgency and warmth and frustration. He knocked his temple against the boy's own. “It's you. I ought to be,” he warned, only ending up with his teeth too close to his Adam's apple — close enough to feel him gulp, along with the grip of his nails on an old scar on Chuuya's thigh, *slippery* and *warm*.

*Alive*, he thought. He would hate him until the end of his days. Rotten, yes — but breathing. Alive and unchanging and stuck in time; there at the end of the world, too.

He winced against the thought.

“Convince Arahaki to stop flinging you off roofs,” Dazai dragged a finger down the tattoo between his clavicles. Chuuya waited for it to crawl upward, brushing his chin and tilting it up, before pretending to bite. “Or to bother me less when he does it. One of these days I'll pass out from the effort of chasing his whims, and you *will* explode. Imagine all those Chibi confetti falling down.”

Chuuya wanted to tear him apart. He'd never bring up Fumiko again, he knew. He was far too removed for it to be more than a step in a race. “I don't think *exploding* is the right verb.”

“I do,” he assured. “Trust me, I've seen it.”

The water crowded between his toes, scarlet. “*What* does it look like?”

Something passed by Dazai's eyes — a light too far away to pin down. It was gone too quickly — he grasped Chuuya's hands, kissed his knuckles with visible mock, and offered: “Like a remarkably ugly garden gnome self-detonating.”

“Says the glorified off-button.”

“Says the glorified bath bomb.”

Chuuya crashed the foam bottle against his head, and he screeched in pain.

It was a cue; he didn't watch him leave the bathroom. His face frowned the moment he was alone — he crouched down, dragging his fingers through the crimson water. It stuck to his nails.

When he looked up, blood was splattered to every corner of the walls — and a single heart, torn out with bare hands, beat weakly on the tiles on the other side of the shower. Dazai's

corpse was a pale line at the edge of his vision — knees on the stained floor; back bent unnaturally over the tub. His head was under the knee-level water, dark hair floating in a void of fading blood and knots.

He dragged his feet across the water. *Just get him out of there*, something suggested.

And Chuuya didn't move.

*If it hadn't been me*, Verlaine had promised. *Then it would have been you.*

He found Dazai breathing and unbleeding, lazily planting bullets into a human-shaped target at the shooting range on the sixth floor— hitting every part of the silhouette except its vital points.

“If it wasn't you,” he started, not bothering with hushing his step, “Then who was it?”

Dazai hummed, cheerful, holding his gun in all the wrong ways. He shot one more sequence; left a smoking hole right over the target's shoulder. He'd worn new bandages, but left his shirt and tie on the ground — the silver ring Chuuya couldn't believe he hadn't thrown away yet was between his lips, like a biteable pacifier.

When Chuuya wrapped his arms around his waist, chin on his shoulder — seemingly for no purpose; stiffening his shoulders with mistrust because of it — water drops from his hair landed on his nose. “Lise got your tongue?”

No answer.

Dazai shot again.

Subtly — temporarily; he knew he would be discovered — he used his encircling grasp to try and figure out how fresh the new scar was.

“Fell into the tiger cage at the Zoo again?” he insisted, tracing it with a nail. The aim for his next bullet was only a *bit* off — Chuuya hid an undignified, mean snort in his shoulder blade. Dazai stepped on his feet, teeth gritting around the ring until they made an audible sound. “Elise tried to cut you in half to match with those half bust creepy dolls of hers?”

A shrug. *I find them artistic*, Dazai signed, with the bullets he fired.

“Disturbed jealousy?”

A dirty glance.

“Don't fucking look at me like that,” He sunk his chin deeper, eyes on the board on the wall — the scribbles from the training men; points and jokes and tallies. A name caught his attention; his hands dropped from his skin. “I get to ask.”

“Do you?” he replied, vacantly.

His jaw ached with the insistence. “You get to peek,” he spelled out. “I get to know.”

He felt his amusement slip — knew Dazai had felt it as well; his next bullet, while just as lazy, hit the target right where his own new scar rested.

Chuuya walked until he could sit on top of the closest supplies-table, hands in his pockets. *You'll lose it anyway*, Verlaine had said.

Unhesitatingly, he asked: “Which ones?”

The target kept all of Dazai's attention. He was pale; February was still far from his sunburned days. His frame was cursed to familiarity; Chuuya would recognize the lines of him in a sandstorm. And yet he looked *different*, somehow — a growth that he had missed. His knees were less sharp; his features more settled. “Failed attempts count as insubordinations,” he informed him, unimpressed. “Which you know damn well. And if *my men* try to kill the Boss' prodigal dearest, I have a right to know. Maybe I'll even shake their damn hand.”

Dazai lowered his gun. He ranked his eyes up and down Chuuya's open silhouette, never willing to show anything but a challenge. There was no reason to fight. Chuuya had no idea of how to revert to anything cleaner — not when the Mafia's dirtiest ones were involved. Nimble fingers traced *kanjis* in the air: *wasn't yours*.

Unwillingly, he felt his shoulders relax.

He tilted his neck back until he could stare at the ceiling; stretched the last of *Corruption* out of his legs, letting out a groan.

“What did I tell you about this scheme of yours?” Chuuya half mocked. “You're waving a red flag for the revolution bulls. As if the targets on Boss weren't enough —“

*Care?*, Dazai whistled — a hummingbird.

“As *if*,” he scoffed, laying down on the old wood of the table. “But it would definitely reflect on me if my partner was enough of a moron to get himself sliced in —“

The underside of designer shoes dangled from the ceiling, right where his eyes were set.

He checked the air — tried to understand if someone had offered a cursed chant to awaken the thing in his veins; to figure out if he had *missed* something — a better explanation for the way his entire body seemed to halt, ribs piercing his lungs until his exhale managed to crawl through.

Chuuya lowered his eyes, and saw nothing but a gun on the floor.

Hanging from the metal beams, Dazai's lifeless body swung gently along to the nonexistent wind. Chuuya studied the tips of his fingers — their blueish shade; turning grey with each second he spent staring at them, utterly quiet. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth, hidden from his lowered chin. *Chuuya*, he considered, *never leaned on anyone* — he had Dazai's weight carved on his bones, nonetheless.

A drop of red landed upon his upper lip.

A bullet hit the target. Chuuya blinked; kept his eyes on new bandages and scarred skin. When Dazai curled an eyebrow, he pretended it wouldn't be enough for him to understand.

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**Notebook extract — [Page 18]**

*Him.*

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Senator Fukuhara Naoki opened the door of her hotel room with telltale exasperation.

“Yes, what?” she urged, cell phone in hand and eyes uninterested. “Get on with it, Makoto. It better not be more reports on the rivers deal — I’m already an hour late to the event, and —”

Chuuya struck his fist through her chest.

Her phone fell first; the woman barely had time to gape at her pulsing, squelching wound, before he retracted his arm — then she fell, crooked and lifeless, leaving a sliding crimson line down the door.

“Some party trick, sir,” Marie said, behind her rifle, as she and half a dozen of the *Guerrilla* kicked the door. “Is it a bitch on the knuckles?”

“Mostly tickles when I touch bones,” He shrugged; snapped his fingers. “Seven minutes. I want every piece of paper in this suit with the words *Mafia* on it gone — don’t really care if you have to blow up one or two *pulp fiction* DVDs.”

“How dramatic,” Hamamoto lamented, shoulder-checking him on his way through.

“Like your crime scene’ll be when I murder you,” Chuuya kicked the back of his knees. “Get on with it.”

A chorus: “*Yes sir!*”

He made his way through the suite — a temple of luxury and silk, boredly expected from one of the top Hotels in central Tokyo. Flower shaped lamps Tanaki would have *loved* framed every entrance; Chuuya stepped on top of the table in the living room, tapping the horse-shaped glass statue that acted as a centerpiece.

The *Guerrilla* squad roamed through beds and tables, burning files and ripping apart research photos gathered by the Yokohama PD. Chuuya caught X’s eyes as she made a subtle beeline for him, offering him one of the thicker files.

“And don’t steal anything,” he warned.

“But there’s *golden bath soap holders* —”

“No, Marie.”

A pile of dossiers abandoned on the couch behind the table — left open for later scrutiny; but highlighted and scribbled in a way that denounced exhausting insistence — caught his attention. He leaned down just enough to grab the closest; a set of photographs picturing familiar landscapes had him frowning. In a messy handwriting, on top of a blurred overview of the Suribachi settlement, the Senator had written: *calculate yearly funds? 57% of loss in campaign.*

Under the picture were papers of papers of statistics, results of protests, and testimonies from journalists Chuuya’s oldest memories were more than well acquainted with. He recalled their clean dress shirts and the way they used to point cameras right in his face; recalled the older kids shrugging.

*Some of the Senators really do want to fix this place, they would say. But it’s not enough. And anyway — we’re probably just a pity project.*

“Hey,” Hamamoto called, bent under the couch — searching through a briefcase. It put a pause to the familiar humming he hadn’t realized was slipping between his teeth. “All good, sir?”

Chuuya had been following the news far too closely — the governmental side that was sort of neutral to the idea of renovating Suribachi City was small; but the fraction that was actively asking for it was imperceptible. He snapped the dossier shut and threw it on the couch again. “Shame she had to die,” he offered, curtly.

Something like understanding lowered his shoulders. Chuuya waited for him to turn again to fold the more relevant sheets and stuff them down his pants.

“Thought you might be interested in just *who* has been giving her information for her appeal to the City Hall,” X intervened, jumping over the couch. Then, a bit lower, she wondered:

“Sir, has Executive Kouyou informed you of her request for us —“

“— to aid her on the *Le Directeur* deal?” he concluded. “Sure. As far as I’m concerned, obey her orders as if they were mine — though I doubt you need me to say it. She would crack you open in two if you dared not to.”

X sighed, seemingly enamoured.

Chuuya flipped the file she handed him, leaning his arm on the chandelier brushing his shoulders — he dragged his eyes down analysis over analysis, and he landed on a familiar signature over the Yokohama PD stamp.

He stared at it for a long time.

He sighed, ripping the paper into shreds. “Damn you, Matsuda.”

There was a *click!* in the air, right as the last piece of paper floated down the table. Quicker than his brain could follow, he ripped a spare gun off the pocket of the nearest *Guerrilla* member — and threw it right into the opposite wall, where it sank all the way to the hilt.

Among the alerted mafiosi, frozen in their stop — silence fell like a piece of roof.

The wall the gun was deeply embedded in trembled. Something like participles of light and smoke pooled from the thin cracks of the entrance; with a rumbling *thud!*, the grenade hidden inside the drywall died down in a muffled burp, drawing webs all over the pillar it was leaned on.

He clasped his hands. “You’re welcome.”

In the endless rose-tinted ballroom of the *Black Lotus Hotel*, a podium had been set up at the end of the rows of circular tables and dancing couples, framed by a live orchestra that periodically muffled yawns into their elbows. A man in a long mustache was on that stage, agitating his glass of tasteless Champagne around with glee.

“...the word to perhaps one of the most *vital* collaborators in this election campaign,” Senator Ikai exclaimed, raising his voice to speak louder than the impersonal claps around him. “I do recall Senator Fukuhara’s wished to introduce him herself — so if she could please make her way to the stage!”

A waiting hum passed through the crowd. A few gazes were exchanged; Ikai’s smile twitched.

Chuuya stole a glass of red wine from the refreshment table, and toasted in Kouyou’s direction — stealing her twinkling eyes from the undoubtedly charming convo she was dancing through with some handsome ally of theirs.

*One word*, she mouthed. *Efficient*.

*As always*, he mouthed back.



*That's two.*

“I’m afraid she might have gotten stuck in the queue for the party’s pins. Understandable. I do hope you’ll have picked one up too — they are *handmade*,” Ikai laughed, amiably, much to the crowd’s amusement. “I’ll do this myself — please, give a round of applause to the public relations head of Mori Corporations, Ace!”

As the blond man grinned widely into the microphone, barely hiding revulsion when the Senator vigorously shook his hand, a voice noted: “You should attempt to drill punctuality into your squad, Chuuya. I *almost* thought Fukuhara might step onto that stage.”

Mori leaned onto his same column, keeping one hand into Elise’s beautifully styled hair, and holding a glass of water back with the other.

He had dressed up for the occasion — his red scarf was nowhere to be seen. It was utterly disorientating. “I’m the one who tells them when to come in, sir,” he rebutted, clinking their glasses. “Ane-san’s the one with time management issues.”

“Of course,” Mori’s smile turned amused. “And you will let her ground you?”

Ace went on a spiel regarding the support their organization had given to the winning party; wished a prosperous future to the new heads of their beloved city — and a peaceful collaboration. From the other side of the room, Kouyou threw her head back to laugh.

Chuuya shivered. “As if anyone could stop her.”

After a moment of consideration, Mori shivered too. “This is wonderful news, isn’t it?” he started again, curling one finger around the red ribbon in Elise’s hair. “The *Cleanse* was certainly a busy deal, but it ended in the best way possible. If the archivists are to be trusted, the syndicate had never held such a satisfyingly spread influence on the political side of Yokohama.”

“It’s reassuring,” Chuuya offered, carefully. Dazai was nowhere to be seen — probably already back to Yokohama, dragging his friends into some trouble. Nonetheless, he thought he could feel his gaze on him — warning him about the words he decided to offer Mori. “Maybe this time around we will actually have a peaceful year.”

“Only a few bothers left,” he sighed — still smiling. “Hopefully, we’ll be able to say the same for those assassination attempts. I’m thinking of calling a meeting for those, at last — a particularly long one. Perhaps the last one for a good while.”

Chuuya blinked. “You truly want to cut back on the Executives meeting, sir?”

“It would send a strong message,” Mori explained. “Don’t you think?”

There was more than one question there — he weighed his words, studying his wine; dared: “If the Executives need to discuss the future of the syndicate only once in a while — then it probably means the syndicate is prospering efficiently.”

The Boss smiled. “Precisely,” he said. After sipping on his water, he added, only a bit coyly: “It might be a shame for any — *new* addition to the seats, of course. Unless they had already gotten to enjoy the thrilling experience the meetings offer.”

Excitement growled in his veins. He cleared his throat, trying to remember what Kouyou had said about *appearing untouched*. Pathetically, he landed on: “Yeah, that’d be cool.”

“*Cool*,” he repeated, like a foreign language. “Chuuya, forgive the change of topic — I wanted to talk to you about the *Permit*.”

He straightened.

Before he could add anything, Elise came alive like a particularly tall wind up toy — tearing herself from his grasp, and pulling on Chuuya’s jacket. “Dance!” she whined, pulling his hands to drag him towards the few couples swaying. “Dance with me! I’ve been — *oh!*”

The yelp out of her mouth morphed into high-pitched giggles — Chuuya wrapped an arm where where her thighs began, raising her to face level; with an apologetic look to Mori’s amused face, he waited for his permitting nod and twirled them around to the dancing high society — she laughed, holding onto the chain of his hat.

Ace was still talking the room’s ears off. He thought of Q’s cell — let Elise talk *his* ear off about the latest fight she’d started with a kid at a clothing shop.

It took him a while, through the genuine contentment running under his skin, to realize it was a hand of bones he was holding.

From the outlines of the dancing circle, two familiar frames — steadfastly dripping blood on the frescoed tiles — raised their glasses to him in a greeting. “What brings you guys to the least interesting part of the whole ordeal?” Chuuya questioned, doing his best to blink against the fake layer of reality, as Elise ran off to steal some cake.

Mishima exchanged a glance with the purring cat settled over his shoulders. “We ought to see just how good of a facade we’ll have to wear during our more — official jobs,” he explained, at last, as if Kobo’s feline nod had meant something to him.

“No Fumiko?”

“She’s got enough experience with pretense as it is,” the man huffed.

One of his little fingers spasmed in his grasp; Chuuya thought of a cross on a field — and then he didn’t. “And your conclusion?”

“That the Port Mafia is astonishingly good at playing high society,” the man admitted. “Even more at gathering allies.”

Kobe purred, settling too-clever eyes on the most observed silhouette of the evening — Mori’s satisfied face, hand subtly attempting to steal a strawberry from Elise’s cake. He thanked Senator Ikari — pretended not to care for the stargazed, *terrified* half-bow one of the most powerful men in Yokohama offered him.

“No place that can’t be reached with some polished words,” Chuuya recited. Privately — where Kouyou couldn’t hide a grin and punish him about it — he thought the same about fists. “And no good words that can’t reach any place.”

A nod. “He might be a devil, but I would probably have a worse time not being one of his damned. Wouldn’t want to see what he does to the angels in the sky.”

The flashy metaphor painted a grimace on his face, quickly hidden behind the wine. Kobe, in a similar spirit — pulled the man’s beard with his claws, making him squeak, undignified. On the ceiling, the chandeliers glistened a coagulated, dirty crimson.

“Mishima,” Chuuya heard himself say. “I have a favor to ask you.”

Kobe meowed his interest, in tandem to the man’s curling eyebrow. “I’m at your service, sir.”

Hesitation crowded in the space between his teeth — he breathed in the lingering scent of copper, pooling from every corner he had walked since he’d first heard of Ueda’s existence. He wiped it clean. “I need you to ask me a question.”

All of the high-nosed, slightly amused calm dissipated from Mishima’s face — his shoulders fell with abrupt caution, as his ashy face went through a large variety of complicated expressions. “Is that an order?”

“Is that a problem?” Chuuya frowned. “Is there a cost to your Ability?”

“No, that’s not —“ He exchanged a glance with Kobe, again — a strange sight, but clearly a motion they were well used to. If cats could shrug, that was what Chuuya saw. “Something about your tone just makes me think you’ll ask for more than I should reasonably get to be privy to. The Commander was in such a hurry to get us out of the training rooms when —“

“I asked for a reason,” he interrupted. “I need to know, so — it’s better to just get it over with. I need you to ask me what I’m —“ His lips curled downward. He thought of Hirotsu’s broken monocle; Dazai’s two eyes, studying him under the jet of water. “What it is that I’m scared of.”

On stage, some woman in pearls spoke into the microphone. The crowd laughed; Elise did her best to drag Mori to the dance floor — whiny and incorporeal and blinking between ephemeral flesh and hard bones dripping blood.

Chuuya refused to lower his eyes.

“Truth is a delicate thing, Vice-Executive,” Mishima said — studying, he realized, the hands he kept in his pockets. “I would know. I learned it when I was young. I can’t give perfect judgement — I cannot ask both a ripe priest and a newborn if God is real, and expect the same answer. Does that make them any different? Make one of them *less* valuable?”

He tightened his lips — thought of Q, for some reason; the way they fell quiet when scolded, and grew louder when called a liar.

“My Ability has its limits — whatever it is that you believe to be *truth*, that’s what I’ll be told. I cannot offer you more than what you already know — whether you’re aware of it or not.” The man studied him. “But since you asked —”

He held his breath.

A sigh. “I suppose it costs me nothing.”

Kobe purred, blinking oddly gentle eyes in his direction. He fixed himself around Mishima’s shoulders and, surprisingly, made sure his head and his tail would cover the man’s ears, hiding his own under his jacket — burying Chuuya’s answer under the music, the crowd, and his fur.

“That’s —” He cleared his throat, staring at the ground. “Nice. Thank you.”

The User’s nod was calm — a bit *respectful*, he thought. Uncannily so, for a feline.

Standing close enough that nobody else would hear, Mishima’s lips parted, and he asked: “What are you scared of, Nakahara Chuuya?”

He felt it, this time around — he had been too focused on the flow of *Tainted* in his veins, in the training room; too distracted to care about the surge of air climbing his throat with relentless insistence, reshaping lithe words into something *sharper*.

*He’d make for a good torturer*; Chuuya let himself think; didn’t consider whether that was a normal judgement for a new acquaintance or not.

Everything was scarlett when he blinked — a grumous, dirty coagulation, dripping from the chandeliers and glistening crimson from the shards of crystal, painting blinding squares on the corpses on the floor. Everyone was dead; everyone was *crushed* — the horrifying shrieks and the haunting smell and the whispers were a storm, and he was in the eye of the hurricane.

His arm was elbow-deep inside Mishima’s sternum.

*Sorry*, he tried to say.

His mouth tore itself into pieces, and under Kobe’s moon-shaped eyes, he answered.

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**Notebook extract — [Page 21]**

*A building falling. He's under it (???)*

*The twins. Yuan?*

*Yuan.*

*The Sheep. Brains on the floor. Chipped table; let Kouyou know. Skeletons.*

*Pianoman (???) — had that ugly dress shirt he wore whenever we had a mission together. Maybe Lippman? Debris. Fallen building? Mackerel.*

*All of them.*

*All of them.*

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Despite his usual over-awareness, Matsuda only saw him when the last batch of ambulances arrived.

“I thought mafiosi didn’t go back to the crime scene,” he commented, fiddling with the pen in his pocket — a bright yellow, that day, with a little cartoonish sheep on top; *funny*, Chuuya thought, distantly — sliding under the police tape to reach him.

Crunched down on top of his police car, Chuuya shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. But if that’s the case, how do they get rid of the bodies?”

“Abilities.”

“Abilities?”

“There must be at least one or two that can take care of it.”

“You’d know better than me — given your late best friends at the *Special Division*,” he noted. Before he could reply, he added: “That wouldn’t work, anyway. Abilities are regulated.”

“Yes, Chuuya,” Officer Matsuda exhaled an exasperated — not *unkind* — sigh. “I’m aware.”

He jumped down — landing roughly, as he'd never needed *Tainted* to be agile; and he had skipped through the roofs of Suribachi with or without the service of an Ability. Not waiting for an answer to make his way down the sidewalk, he called: "Come on. Let's promenade."

Matsuda scratched the bridge of his nose. "You're spending too much time with Dazai."

Mostly by accident, he cracked the road.

The port was quiet at that hour; the end of the festivities had long since chased tourists away, and the afternoon sun was framed by lonely birds and a few fishermen. Chuuya considered walking on the rusty railing, testing his balance — recalled the weight of Detective Murase's shoulder against his, inside his jail cell; the way he had sat next to him and talked about passersby mistaking them for father and son. *Wouldn't that be funny?*

"How are your kids?" he asked, once the man began to grow antsy.

The Officer's gaze was unimpressed.

He held it.

Matsuda sighed. "They're fine. On a trip with their mother, right now. America. Having loads of fun. Mina told me to see *hi* to you."

A vague memory — sitting in the man's cell, watching a woman in a *tailleur* bring lunch into Matsuda's open office. Winking, and secretly offering him a chicken wing between bars. "I never did get why you two divorced."

"You certainly seemed to have *big ideas* on why," Matsuda muttered.

He made a face. *Standard Island Accident*. "If you're referencing *that* night, you might want to know that I barely remember shit from —"

"You implied my," He cleared his throat, staring forward. "My hairstyle might be to blame."

A beat passed.

"Is —"

"Of course it isn't."

"Alright, alright," Chuuya raised his hands. "I was just wondering if —"

"We wanted different things," Matsuda cut through, defensive. "She needed someone who'd place her above anything else — it's not an unfair request. Just not what I would have been able to give her. My job has always come first."

Beyond the railing, ships dangled gently on the unmoving waves, painting the bay into shades of a metallic, discomforting grey. Chuuya curled his fingers around the loose threads inside his pockets, and offered: "I know."

Matsuda didn't say anything.

*I know you've been in my office again*, he imagined him accusing — thundering and yet *insistent*, like a man locked in a cage with some unknown, immature beast. *I know you've gotten rid of my files. I know you know I won't stop.*

“Chuuya,” he called.

“Present.”

A beat went by; silence carried by the wind. “You probably don't remember,” the man started. “But the first time Murase and I met you —“

“Are you about to go down the memory lane? Because I *really* don't have time for —“

“And what did you come here for?” he challenged, disbelieving. “To threaten me, maybe? To — to drag me to some shady alley corner and talk about how you're going to leave my ex wife's carved up body on my porch?”

“No,” Chuuya studied the trash floating in the bay; beer bottles with no messages inside.

“No, I'd do it with your kids.”

A speechless, insurmountable silence shut the Officer's lips with eerie efficiency.

He didn't let that wisdom last more than a breath go by. “The first thing you ever did, the first time we met, was attack us,” he recalled — *chin too proud for a man with a family*, Kouyou would have said. “We hadn't spoken a word to you. 'Couldn't have been older than ten — you were carrying two kids back to your base. You would have had to put them down to go through with the attack — only reason you didn't.”

Chuuya scoffed. “Must have made an impression if you wasted time remembering.”

“You broke my nose. So, yes. Kind of. I still have the scar,” Matsuda tapped the bridge of his nose, absent. Bit down a smile. “My ex wife — she always said that scars are a result of being touched, *just a tad too kindly*. That if you're given one, that person is bound to come back in your life.”

Over the sidewalk, the after-lunch traffic raced itself at a torturously slow pace. He counted car tires until it all felt a little less unimportant.

“I'm not coming back, old man,” Chuuya offered, finally. “You guys are the ones who always failed to give up on a lost cause.”

Something *revolting* settled on the man's face. “You're not a lost cause, Chuuya —“

“I'm not trying to sell you a sob story,” he cut through. “I'm telling you the truth. *You're* the lost cause here, Matsuda.”

The man's steps came to a halt.

“You’re doing all this — for what?” he insisted, kicking the dirt. *You’ll ruin your shoes*, he could hear Kouyou tut. “What do you figure is going to happen if you get me out of here? You put me in some orphanage for the next few years, and I make a life you’ll approve of for myself? You’re an idiot if you think someone could run and not end up dead,” He stepped closer; raised his chin. “And you’re an idiot if you think I want to run.”

A familiar sight caught his attention from the corner of his gaze — the entrance to the Cemetery, as quietly untouched as it always was, on this time of the day. He raised both eyebrows to the Officer’s face — made his way inside with a careless skip in his steps.

Matsuda caught up quickly. “How am I supposed to know, if I don’t try?”

“You have examples,” he nodded towards the first grave on their left — thirty tombstones over the entrance; then right, then left — not slowing down. “You have Murase. The case you’re so *obsessed* with — enough to make a deal with one of the most powerful pilasters in the city. He ended up dead, you know?” He felt the man stop and stare at the grave; didn’t bother to do the same. “You’re the only one who can’t accept it.”

It was quiet for a long time.

He was already halfway down the trail that would lead him as far from the Flags as possible — unwilling to lead the officer to that place — when he heard him ask, scornfully bitter: “Can you?”

Chuuya thought of the concrete under his knees — a cross that carried Verlaine’s name; the shape of Adam’s strangely comforting presence at his back. A dead man in his arms. “I have,” He shrugged, pointedly devoid. “I’ve accepted all of them. Did the best I could with it, too — learned a lesson from it. That’s how you survive, Matsuda — not by playing with fire the way *you* are.” A humorless laughter shook him. “The way *I* am — standing here, trying to fucking *warn you* —“

Matsuda eyes’ appeared in front of him. “Why are you doing that?”

He studied him; let out a frustrated sigh. “A friend told me I should think it *very* nice, that someone would be willing to try and save me — despite me not asking for it,” A pause. “This is my payment. And my demand for you to stop.”

“Chuuya —“

“Most of the PD has already given up on most investigations regarding the Mafia — you’re the only one with files still open.”

“The *Special Division* is still searching —“

“The *Special Division* is *different*,” Chuuya snapped, voice low. “And you know it. Otherwise, they would have left the investigation to you guys, and they didn’t — you *stole* the files from them, didn’t you? Sent them to the Senator?” A flash of guilt passed by the man’s face; Chuuya stared, lips trembling. “I could almost be proud. Look at you — little *criminal* in the making —“



“I am *not*, ” Matsuda hissed, “A criminal —“

“I am.”

Surprise bloomed all over the wrinkles of his face, with no subtlety at all.

“I am,” he insisted. “And, as my Boss told you, if you keep interfering with —“

“You want —” the Officer interrupted him, speechless, “The Boss *mafioso* you work for to call *Social Services* on me?”

“If it’s necessary. Not like I regard those fuckers as any particular entertainment. But if it gets you to stop, that’s all I ask for,” Chuuya waved his unconcerned, dizzying goodbye with his hand still in his pocket. “That’s all I had to say to you. Have fun. Whatever.”

Despite it all, at the very least — the Flags’ fake graves were the same as they always were.

Chuuya had stopped expecting them to change a long time ago — had accepted that the passage of time was more of a long term deal, and he wouldn’t be there to witness spider webs and growing grass on that play-pretend of his. Anyway — their ashes were probably already corals and fish food; sticking to the ground of the bay with the same laziness they reserved for quiet Saturdays.

Something inside his chest pounded. Bile, he thought — the nauseating realization that it never got better. Just duller.

“I’ll tell someone else to visit if I’m not around,” he promised them, inspired. Maybe he could convince little Akutagawa to develop a taste for respecting the dead. He imagined his dark silhouette, huddled up in his too big coat with a vividly displeased face — telling tales of Dazai’s worst moments to five graves he didn’t know.

Matsuda’s arrival wasn’t sneaky.

He considered screaming into his face until he left; tried to remember why he hadn’t wanted him near his friends. Stared down Albatross’ stone until he stopped laughing at him.

“Why did you bring me to the cemetery?” the man asked, eventually.

He stood at a respectful distance; Chuuya sat on Doc’s grave, dragging his nails up and down the *Little Doctor* set he had stolen from Elise and left there, and shrugged. “Don’t know. ‘You never walked aimlessly somewhere?’”

Matsuda’s face dropped so quickly it was startling. He got the unpleasant feeling of having said something wrong.

“Chuuya, you’re seventeen,” the man said. It was hard to place the note in his tone; too sharp not to be *personal*. Begging, perhaps. “You shouldn’t be *aimlessly walking* to the Cemetery.”

“Would you prefer I broke into the Arcade again?”

“You’ve memorized this place’s map — you didn’t even hesitate at any turns,” he insisted. “The guardian greeted you by name. How often do you even come here?”

Defensiveness crowded tightly in the spaces between his bones; Chuuya tasted poison. “You know, I’d be an orphan even if I wasn’t with them. So I really don’t know what you —“

Matsuda took a step forward. The tips of his fingers tickled. “Chuuya,” he echoed. *Chuuya, Chuuya* — always the same melody. “You want to tell me you haven’t lost more than you would have if you hadn’t —“

“I don’t know,” Chuuya snapped.

Every scar down his body seemed to sizzle. Graves and blood and destruction; buildings being torn from the ground and the sky clawing itself open. Stitching himself up; asking Kouyou to help him put a tie on for a funeral. Mori, calling him — “But I do know I have *people*, now, and I have no intention of losing them. I know what I’m doing is the best course action to make sure I can *do that*. And if you just *listened to me* —“

The words got stuck in his throat — a mixture of ire and frustration, and the crawling bad feeling he had felt on his nape ever since Mori had smiled in the Officer’s direction.

Chuuya had nothing left of Suribachi City. He had destroyed it all himself.

— *I wouldn’t lose you either.*

“This job is my whole life.” Matsuda had stepped just close enough to touch. His coat was swept by the gentle wind; he studied his badge, and recalled being ten, and sure no man *that* tall would ever be kind.

*You don’t expect kindness*, one of the Sheep had told him. Kazuo, maybe; he couldn’t recall if it was on his deathbed, though. *If you do, you won’t be able to save everyone.*

Years later, bleeding under a cliff, Chuuya had thought: *you can’t save everyone either way.*

“Murase was a partner,” Matsuda breathed — and the *grief* in his tone was a known beast; as rough and scratchy as the rock he was sitting on. “A friend who got caught in something bigger than him, and who died for it. And I bet he did it with no regret — because he died doing what he *wanted to do*.” His eyes roamed through the graves — all the way to the skyline, half devoured by the sea. “Making this city a better place.”

Chuuya bit down a scoff.

“You asked me what would change if I only saved you, or a handful of kids,” the man echoed. “This is my answer: *something*.”

The knot in his throat was a hated enemy — he recognized it all the same. *Helplessness*; well hidden under fortresses he didn’t remember building, but had never failed to dive behind. Something deeper, too — a revelation that took his mouth by surprise, but never his bones.

“I’m *fine*, Matsuda,” Chuuya concluded. “I don’t want it to change.”

A light in the man's eyes shifted. For the first time since they had met, he realized — he *did* believe him. The desperation he saw pool down the branches of his body was a stab in the chest.

“I’m sorry,” Matsuda said. Pity and loss and *something* so ugly he choked on it; felt as angry as everyone swore he always was, *Tainted* ticking like a bomb under his gloves. The honesty in his tone deserved to be trusted fully. “Chuuya, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your —“

He stilled.

“Chuuya,” he heard the man call, slow — muffled and roaring, like white noises and waves and buzzes, distant in the way of memories. “Are you —“

He didn’t hear a thing. His eyes stayed stuck on the arm he had waved aggressively in the man’s direction — the raised sleeve, the edge of his glove. In between, his skin, scarred and known.

Framed by *Corruption* marks.

Chuuya stood so fast he almost fell against the graves. “What the —“

He choked on the sentence; the painful burn of the corner of his mouth *ripping* itself was familiar like a *deja vu* — something his body knew, but his mind had always failed to remember. A mark tore itself apart on his cheek, pooling warm, poisonous blood into his mouth — he coughed a scream out, throat soaked in that bitter taste, hands tight around it to squeeze the air out as the ground cracked under his feet.

His knees hit the dirty grass — soaked in clotted blood, all the way to the five gravestones he knew so well — now nothing more than rubble and intelligible names. Heaving for oxygen was pointless; and yet Chuuya tried, gagging against the never ending magma in his veins, snapping his bones in two —

His hands grasped something fleshy.

Doc’s halvened body stared at him.

Something tore free from his shoulders — as if his skeleton had refused to fit his flesh, at last. There was someone laughing. Chuuya watched the towers behind the entrance of the cemetery — the skyscrapers and the building and the Ferris Wheel, as they were sucked away from the ground in a horrifying whirl, devoured by a sky redder than his own wounds.

“No,” he heard himself say. He had to stop his hands from grabbing; he was standing upon a sea of corpses, and each inch he touched of them cracked itself open like the crust of the earth. “No —“

“How marvelous.”

A man was standing near the cobblestoned road, seemingly untouched by the chaos — his clothes weren't even ruffled by the wind. Beads of sweat crowded his bald head; he wore traditional clothes in shades of grey, and a pair of glasses that had been taped back together countless times.

He offered him a small smile. "Not many minds are haunted enough to be creators. You should be proud of the masterpiece you store."

Chuuya crawled up the sea of corpses, rage blinding his torment — and cracked a chasm into the man's face, dragging the earth out of its roots.

"Wrong target — as always," Ueda Akinari informed him, having somehow moved behind the destroyed graves. "I've noticed you have quite the recurring issue with that —"

His fingers closed around the edge of one of the knives hidden in his shoes. Throwing it was more of a reflex than a decision; when he raised his eyes, something between a groan and a scream got stuck in his throat.

"— You hardly ever understand who the real enemy *is*," Ueda's voice concluded, through Iceman's lips — seemingly untouched by the knife stuck through the wet layers of his throat.

Chuuya was sinking. The intricate weaving of squelching bodies was pulling him in, lifeless and unmoving and *slippery*, faces he knew passing by with their vacant eyes and bloodied teeth — faces he had never seen and knew belonged under the rubble of the buildings caving around them.

He tried to snarl; no voice came out of the chasms in his jaw — only whiny screeches, nothing more than an animal's cry.

"Come on, now," the Ability User tutted — his voice deep inside his skull, carved into the sky, *everywhere*. "Don't tell me you never expected a god to get hungry, eventually."

Chuuya blinked — framed by lightning spears of a ache *so blinding*, N's torture had been nothing but a child's whims — and found both his hands around Ueda Akinari's throat, burning flesh plastered against his, pressed on the nearest tree.

"Look at you," he cooed, unimpressed by the fingers tearing into the flesh of his throat — he touched vocal chords and he touched wet, bloody tissue, and the man only *breathed* between his palms. Chuuya could feel himself snarl; could feel his mouth spread wider than possible, torn by the *Corruption* scars devouring his cheeks. He couldn't *spea*k; he couldn't — "What was the point of asking for the truth, if you refuse to accept it?"

*I'm not scared of you*, he thought. The world was blurred at the corners; what he believed to be blood, stuck to his eyelashes, soon revealed itself to be visions — a quick, nauseating sequence of them, dripping knowledge and details into his subconscious faster than he could see them. *I'm not scared of* —

"I know you aren't," Ueda promised. "I'm in your head. How could I not?" He tilted his head to the side; disgusting bundles of flesh dangled from his neck, where Chuuya had clawed his

way through. “You fear loneliness. You fear to be seen exactly how you are, under this play pretend of yours,” He curled a finger in the bleeding tear under his eye; traced the spiral with a nail — pain so irrelevant, compared to it all, that it tickled. “Under this fragile, stolen skin of yours.”

“Most of all,” he mused. “You fear you’ll be the only cause for it.”

The Sheep’s viscera on the floor; Shirase and Yuan reaching for him — his hands through Kouyou’s sternum, watching her scream and *scream* — blood on Mori’s mahogany desk, the organization in revolt, shaking the doors to open them as his clawing hands *waited* — Hirotsu’s crushed skull under his sole — his old apartment building, Professor N hanging from the red thread on the ceiling with a grin — the rubbles of it, crashing Dazai’s skeleton into dust, as he blinked a code to Chuuya’s too far, too far, *too far* —

The glint of Iceman’s lighter blinded his eye. A piece of concrete fell on Dazai’s body. Pieces of his brain landed at Chuuya’s feet.

— *told you it was a bad idea*, Kouyou tutted, hanging off Mori’s arm. Her gaze on him attempted to be subtle — the curve of her lip was disgusted. *Must you truly place a bomb near the innocents and call it responsibility?*

A doorknob under his hand; something too different from the neck he was meant to hold. The call on his tongue — useless, and hopeless already before it got out. The *Old World* — its blood-stained pavement. Entering and entering and *entering*, and never changing a thing.

*Your fault*, Adam had said. Torn, but logical.

“The truth,” Ueda whispered, old lips too close to teeth that just wouldn’t *bite*. Chuuya was coming undone in a body that wasn’t his, and he had no place to go. “The one you know — is that it’s easier to give up.”

His limbs protested the motion; struggled against the notion of destruction inflicted on anything but himself, struggled against the notion of being *killed* and thus *contained* and thus *never again* — Arahabaki a whisper that was never helpful outside of selfishness.

*Be selfish, then*, he snarled, and hoped the man didn’t feel it. *Eat shit and choke*, he thought, then, and hoped the man heard.

“The truth, Chuuya,” Ueda insisted, one hand in his hair, his voice N’s, his voice Verlaine’s, his voice his own — pushing his face into the sea of rotting flesh, again and again, *again and again* — “Is that you’ll never stop opening doors, expecting to see a massacre on the floor — and every inch of its blood dripping from your hands.”

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**Notebook extract — [Page 13]**

*All of them.*

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Yuan was sleeping.

So was Kouyou, inelegantly slumped over documents on the couch of her office. Hirotsu wasn't — but Chuuya stayed long enough to watch him direct his *Lizards* to some suspicious activity near their shipment's freight location, and deemed it enough. Nobody knew where Mori rested — but Tanaki seemed content, cleaning her revolvers under the desk. Kajii had fallen asleep on his table, surrounded by scribbles of lemons.

Yuan slept — surrounded by an amount of stuffed animals and abandoned homework that had his head spinning; dyed red hair brushing the floor from her strange position, as she snored just as loudly as the *Sheep Snorer Champion* always had.

She breathed — so did all of them.

Chuuya hid a good number of banknotes he knew she'd think were from Shirase under her desk, and made his way to the dumping site.

Only a cat was there to welcome him to the mountains of trash and malfunctioning parts; it blinked at him with a lazy sort of intensity, as he floated towards the shipping container not to dirty his shoes — as if the idea of clawing his calves to raw skin was *tempting*, but not enough.

“Trust me,” Chuuya muttered, attempting to slide the door open quietly — since he was clearly going nuts; haunted Cemeteries uncounted for. “I don't fucking know why I'm here either.”

The container was just as eerie as it never stopped being — framed by confusingly placed shadows, crowding over the only three pieces of furniture, the empty alcohol bottles, and the

boxes bandages on the floor. If he squinted, he could see the leftover traces of the messy art that had once decorated the walls.

He wondered, not for the first time, what had made him wash it all away — moods or whim; or something less childish.

On the bed, Dazai slept.

No debris from a fallen building that the one being who could stop gravity hadn't grabbed; no crushed lungs. He was curled up to the wall — only that mop he liked to call hair visible. Chuuya hadn't expected anything different — Chuuya had dissipated that irritating weight between his ribs by the third visit of the night, the further he walked from the Cemetery.

*There's enough bad stuff in the world*, he'd told one of the younger Sheep, once, when she'd cried about ghosts.

He leaned back onto the door frame until the pressure of metal on his skull didn't *burn* — he closed his eyes, exhaling.

It got creepy rather quickly.

His coat and waistcoat were shrugged off; Chuuya left them on the minifridge, their hems covering his kicked off shoes. Dazai tended to sleep as plastered to the wall as possible; slipping under the covers was easy and spacious. He settled his back against the boy's own, and moved his foot just *right* — until their naked ankles were the only parts of them touching.

It was quiet.

Warmth seeped from the body-print left on the squeaky mattress; Chuuya burrowed until only his eyes emerged from the blanket, glaring at the line of moonlight painted on the wall from the slot of the door. It took Dazai half an hour to stop pretending he'd been sleeping at all.

He turned, disruptive — one side and then the other, trying to kick the blanket off Chuuya. He only rolled more firmly on his side of it.

Dazai turned some more. He slid closer and closer, until even his icy veins heated up the flimsy sheets. He pressed his chest against Chuuya's back; flopped his arm around his waist like a particularly slimy snake, heavy and somewhat sweaty.

He settled.

Chuuya blinked, cocooned — *surrounded like a cage*, his instincts let him know. It was weird.

"This is weird," he spoke up.

"*Maybe*," Dazai replied, tone sleep-laced and genuinely irritated, "If you weren't moping so loudly, no part of this would be happening."

Somewhat comforted by the notion that he had managed to aggravate him, he tapped two of his nails on Dazai's forefinger — clicking until there was no flesh under the digit, but only the silver of the stolen ring. "I'm not moping."

His finger twitched under the motion. "I can hear the sound from all the way here."

"And *how* would you do that —"

"This is a small, empty space, Chuuya," He moved the arm around him very inefficiently, perhaps in an attempt to show off the container. "Things *echo*. You should certainly be familiar. It must happen in your skull all the time."

Chuuya slammed his foot between his legs. The boy's shriek was muffled by the *bite* he left on his arm; he gaped, attempting to pull the pillow off from under his head — before Dazai laid on it with all the might of his bony, stubborn body.

They caught their breath.

"Bastard," he hissed.

"Simpleton," Dazai bit.

Outside, the wind howled, rattling the flimsy walls of the container with the dedication of a particularly pissed ghost. The shattered lightbulb on the ceiling dangled with a hellish screech.

Chuuya sunk a bit further into the bed; lost his concentration amongst the erratic heartbeat in the arm pressing against his ribcage — the absurdly cold quality of Dazai's naked skin. He concluded: "I fucking hate this place."

"That's not very nice."

"I'm not nice."

"No, you kind of are. It's pathetic. You're only *un-* nice to people who call you short."

"Of course, I'm not nice to *liars*," Chuuya moved the ring slightly upward on his finger; when he traced the space underneath, he noted it had left a delicate bump. "It's a shithole that's gonna get picked up and shipped somewhere, someday —"

"You mean like you tried to do that time I put all your belts in the incinerator —"

"And I will laugh so hard about it — but if you had some rationality, you would just —" For some inexplicable reason, Chuuya was struck by a crystal clear image: Dazai's shoes, thrown in every direction of their safe-houses. The stupid mug he kept making jokes about. His blood on the tiles of the bathroom.

"— Get yourself a damn apartment."

Dazai scoffed. "That's stupid."



“Why would that be —“

“I can hear the sea from here,” he said, as if it was obvious. Chuuya courteously did *not* point out that with that howling wind, all one would hear was an upcoming headache. “And such bare living conditions assure me I’ll leave nothing of any value behind, when I kill myself.”

Briefly, he thought of the bloodied grass of the Cemetery — debris, falling like the first snow on an open, bandaged hand. “What about the food in that pint-sized fridge?”

“Recognizing the familiar?” he approved, shifting his legs — just enough for them to press against the back of his thighs. He shivered, slightly disapproving. “There’s no food in the fridge, Slug. It’s broken.”

He turned his head just enough to glare. “Why the fuck is it there, then?”

Seemingly very serious, Dazai offered: “I like to crawl on top of it, when Mori is annoying enough to come around — and hiss at him.”

Chuuya stared.

“It always freaks him out,” the boy added. “I turn the lights off for dramatic effect, too. Kind of like that phase I had where I sneaked around the vents over his office? Remember? Surely you do.”

He flapped back onto the bed, unwilling to face him. “But *I’m* the damn dog.”

“You’re reaching self-acceptance, at last. I’m glad. Have you seen the tattoo?”

“*Tat* — what tattoo?”

A beat. “Don’t worry about it.”

“*Don’t worry about* —“

“Maybe,” Dazai interrupted, speaking right into the shell of his ear, “I’m talking about the half moon one. Ueda’s.”

There was a line of rust, on the underside of the bed. He dragged one finger over it, tracing the sharp edges with the velvet of his gloves. With nothing in particular in his voice, he asked: “You saw it?”

Instead of answering, his hand — so *cold* it was startling; scraped and carved in scars Chuuya knew too well — moved away from his waist, and ventured under his ragged dress shirt. It trailed up and down his hip to land on a spot at the small of his back — there, all five of his fingers *pressed*.

Blood flashed behind his eyelids — copper filled his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue.

“Right here,” Dazai said, very quiet.

He fought against the urge to close his eyes — wasn't able to shake off the feeling of being watched, despite the known presence guarding his back. Silence was always a balm; touch was a needle through the upper layer of skin on a finger, like the prank Shirase used to pull on the younger kids.

*It doesn't hurt*, he would swear. *As long as you don't take it out.*

“Alright, no,” Chuuya snapped, sitting up to bodily turn the other boy around, deaf to his yelps. “This is so fucking uncomfortable —“

“What am I meant to — *hey!*”

The turn and twist made the bed screech to the point of a responding — annoyed — *meow* from the cat outside, muffling even the wind, as a wide variety of limbs bumped against the metal wall on the side of the mattress. Right when Chuuya was sure the bed frame would not survive, he managed to lay Dazai on his hip, facing the wall — and wrapped himself around him.

“*There,*” He hummed, satisfied, rattling his knuckles against the bandages peeking from the edge of his pants. Dazai's waist spasmed just *so*.

The boy let his discontentment be known with the efficiency of a soaked cat. “I'm too tall for this, you deranged fool.”

“Propaganda.”

“Pro — do you *know* what propaganda is?”

Slowly — dragging that night into a never ending itch — Chuuya's spine unveiled a calmer layer. Dazai was a bit too bony and a whole lot too cold — sharp in weird places; annoying to hold in others — but he was known, and he was breathing, and he was real, and most of the things Chuuya had ever held onto were buried in the Bay.

*Real*, he hummed. He wanted to trace it on his waist; didn't quite want him to understand. Things got stolen from his death grip so very often; tightening it was a fool's last march. He tried to taste those words without bitterness: *real*.

“The engine didn't sound like your car,” Dazai said, voice muffled into the pillow.

“Ane-san got me a new one.”

“*Already?* Hedonism will be the ruin of you,” A sniff. “What for, anyway?”

“Long story.”

The name of the car didn't seem to surge any sort of excitement; recognition, even less. Chuuya huffed. “You know, there are only five models of this car in the *entire fucking world* —“

“That is *so* redundant,” he replied. “Are you sure you aren't compensating for something?”

“For the bundle of teenage angst that calls himself my partner, maybe,” he muttered, sinking his fingers where he knew a bullet scar rested.

Dazai gasped. “*Rude.*”

His slap was too lazy — it barely raised his arm from the bed. When it fell against Chuuya’s knuckles, though, bandages mostly undone — he felt scars under the pads of his fingers, all of them too precise. *Kanji* strokes. He settled his bitten lips on the naked portion of his nape, pretending the ink of his Port Mafia tattoo would pool between his teeth.

*You’re my partner*, he recalled. And wasn’t that complicated — wasn’t that the point of it all. *You should know me.*

“Say,” Dazai continued, after pretending to snore for a good twenty minutes. “What has Ueda been showing you?”

Chuuya didn’t know if it was a naming matter — if it was the tightening grip around his lungs, out of nowhere; quickly pushed into the corner of his body reserved for panic and torture and *Corruption*. All he did was blink, registering — and Dazai’s body was soaked in blood.

*Drenched*, perhaps, would have been more correct — he could feel the sticky, nodulose liquid seep through the fabric of the old shirt he wore to sleep; seep into his skin with a hum, as sickly warm as ever — as sweet to the back of his skull as always. He knocked his forehead against the blood-matted hair, very quietly. The bone poking out of his skin was rough to the touch; the squelch of brains was known, but he couldn’t recall the first time he had heard it.

Chuuya knew, with strange certainty, that he had been the one to kill him.

“A lot of corpses, mostly,” he offered.

The hopeful texture of Dazai’s voice spread nausea where the smell of rotten hadn’t reached. “Am I one of them? What do I look like?”

“No,” he bit — too fast, too angry, too late to take it back. “No, it’s — the Ability is meant to make me lose my mind. It’s people whose death would mean something to me.”

“Oh,” Dazai said, as if rational. The motion drooled blood from his hair on his lips. “That makes sense. A feral dog is a dangerous thing.”

“Shut up,” The feeling of bones and viscera under his grip was unpleasant — Chuuya couldn’t allow himself to let go. He had let go of Albatross for a second — just enough to glance back at Doc, because he’d *sworn* he’d saved him — and he had been dead in his arms a moment later. He had told Koda to stay alive, and he hadn’t.

Dazai was always flinging himself off the higher ground, anyway — skydiving off his rocker and tumbling down between the urge to die and the urge to find something better. Chuuya had seen it all, like a particularly repetitive, undeniably seat-gripping movie. It was always

learning. It was always mourning. It was always the same muscle ache — sinking its teeth where his flesh was tender from loss and blame.

He curled himself around Dazai's body — like a corpse could be kept warm — and thought, *fuck you*.

“Sleep,” the boy called, between a yawn.

He scoffed. “Maybe if you closed that trash can for a second —“

“Chuuya,” he echoed, and — that had to be a tone developed for him, sewn around edges he hadn't even realized he sported. It ran down his spine like *No Longer Human* did. Dazai burrowed himself further into the cave of his chest, the curve formed by his tense body — the two of them, cursed to a lifetime of surgically modified puzzle pieces; fitting even when left to the dogs and the vultures. *Double Black* until the end of their days.

“Sleep.”

Something was stuck in his throat.

*Alive*, he told himself. Yuan was snoring and Kouyou was sleeping and he was the only one left, still curled around a skeleton that wasn't even real. What did he even care? The bones were his as much as the flesh — Dazai's blood was his to spill and to stitch closed. He'd claimed it at fifteen.

*I memorized the sound of Albatross' steps on my roof, he could have told him. I still know every poem Virgil ever wrote. I saw Yuan laugh the other day, and I realized I'd never seen her do that before.*

A less cowardly route: *you are mine to keep, and I will fail.*

Instead, Chuuya pressed his head on the pillow until he saw stars, and ordered: “Don't tell me what to do.”

The corpse settled his thigh right by his hip. He bled on him all night.

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*All of them.*

*Rimbaud.*

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Chuuya was doing his best to force one of Tanaki's cough-repellent teas down Akutagawa throat, when a group of *Lizards* carrying a bloody bag made its way through the Entrance Hall.

Gin was with them; after an obscure nod to Hirotsu's hurrying frame, he made a beeline for his brother — still awkward, when he sat next to his stupefied frame, but decisive. "What was it this time?" Chuuya questioned, eyes on the pale hand appearing from an unsealed corner of the bag.

"Assassination attempt," Akutagawa said, after studying his sibling's hand motions. "They stopped him in the elevator."

*Is this going to last forever?*, Gin asked. He didn't flinch when his brother fixed a loose strand of hair from his ponytail; subtly, invisible to eyes that did not know — he settled his foot next to the boy's. *What are they even hoping to accomplish?*

"Causing Executive Dazai troubles," his brother huffed. It turned into a coughing fit.

"When is he not to blame," Just before Akutagawa could protest, Chuuya ruffled both of the kids' hair. "Stay here. Let's see if Tanaki knows something more. And drink your damn tea before I shove it down your throat."

A dirty glance. "I don't like you."

"I'm your superior," Chuuya noted.

"I still don't like you."

Gin hit his arm. Chuuya pulled his ear.

Thanks to the hushed whispers Tanaki had exchanged with Hirotsu before he left, leaning over her messy — as it always was, lately; through the storm of new seals and official matters that arrived at the Mori Corporations' doors — desk, she was able to sigh: "The lad

slipped something in his tea, and then made his way to his office to watch him die with it,” Her expression was politely offended. “How foolish. Everyone knows Boss dislikes tea.”

“But he was drinking it today.”

“I know,” she lamented, peeved. “*I* brought it to him, along with Akutagawa’s — he’s been so worried these last few days. I only wanted to —“

“It’s cool,” Chuuya reassured her, tapping two fingers on the tattooed hand she’d abandoned upon a weapon deal file. She didn’t even act too *weird* about it. “Like hell he’s going to blame you. He’s got bigger fish to worry about.”

“Of course he isn’t,” Tanaki slumped into her seat, massaging the eyebags under her eyes. “Have you *ever* seen him blame someone? Openly, and for slightly less than apocalyptic mistakes? One wonders how he maintains an empire of terror, with that attitude.”

Chuuya shrugged, leaning against the counter — studying the uncharacteristically gentle texture of the whispers Akutagawa offered to his sibling. Some of the mafiosi who had no idea of who Gin was had been talking about them — surprised that *Dazai’s feral mutt* would be open to making friends.

*I don’t think he quite knows how to do that*, was all that Chuuya had offered.

They had all laughed, misunderstanding. He had made sure to order them a three hour long training session.

“Most of the syndicate likes him exactly for that attitude,” he commented. “It’s not like they don’t fear him to Hell, anyway. “

A new voice thundered mockingly between them, as Hamamoto jumped to sit on the counter. “*To be acclaimed and to be cowered upon is a necessary contrast* — and on, and on. Or whatever that guy said,” He offered Chuuya a wink. “What would *you* know about it?”

Chuuya got him in a headlock quicker than the man could yell about. “Some mighty words for the man who’s trying to get you guys paid holidays —“

“Owe you my life. *Ouch, Boss* —“

The sound of wheels slithered out of the elevator; one of the cleaners walked along with the water carrier, and didn’t meet anyone’s eyes before starting to mop the dried red stains on the elevator — possibly, drops from the hand that had been hanging out of the body bag.

A somewhat tenser current overtook the silence. Tanaki cleared her throat, studying some casual documents; Hamamoto extracted himself from his weakened grip, eyes hard.

“How many does that make it this month?” she asked, eventually.

“Six, I think,” Chuuya replied.

Hamamoto *tsk-ed*. “Seven.”

He frowned.

“You missed one of them, remember?”

“Oh,” Tanaki nodded, unaware of the bitter gaze the boy was directing to him. Chuuya stubbornly kept us eyes on the mopping. “That theatrical lady — the one who went to die in front of poor Dazai’s door.”

His subordinate scoffed. “*Poor.*”

“Hamamoto,” he called, without turning.

“I’m just saying that —“

“That’s easy, then,” he insisted, Kouyou’s words in his ears. “Don’t.”

Tanaki’s eyes roamed. “What’s this?”

Waiting for his neck to creak, Chuuya tilted his head from one side to the other. “Hamamoto here is genuinely convinced the shitty bastard is on the verge of a *coup d’etat.*”

The man’s mouth opened; closed again.

“Not like he’s the only one.”

“Tanaki.”

“Not *me*,” the woman tutted, frowning at the marble of her counter. “Not me, Chuuya. But the numbers are high anyway. It makes no sense to ignore it,” She rattled her nails on the surface. “Just yesterday, the Commander had to intervene and stop a suspected secret meeting in *Building Three.*” A wet smack echoed; the cleaner pushed the water-carrier inside the elevator. Before the doors could close entirely — Hamamoto jumped off the desk, hurrying to ask the man a question. “Let’s just say that some generally believe that if Dazai stuck a knife in Boss’ chest — everything might just turn out for the better.”

The perspective was horrifying. Chuuya still didn’t understand. “The Port Mafia has never been more powerful than it is right now. What is *it* that they want?”

Tanaki’s smile was a small thing; he got the feeling of having missed a joke.

“What is it that people want, Chuuya?” she encouraged, leaning her chin on her hand. The *X* of her scars glistened under the chandeliers; two lines of a child’s masterpiece in chalks. “Money. Freedom. Happiness — if you don’t know what you *don’t* have, you’re going to believe it to be the best thing in the world to gain. If you don’t know what it can be — it makes sense to imagine it as something wonderful. Doesn’t it?”

He tried to imagine it. When he wasted a few seconds wondering what a kid’s life had been like, before the tanks and the codes, he imagined it kinder than realism would have asked for.

He thought about Fumiko’s vision.

“Most of them are convinced Dazai’s touch was fundamental in most steps that brought us to this success,” Tanaki added. “So they’re sure that if he were given the freedom to actually rule more...”

He snorted. “As if he already doesn’t?”

“What?”

Chuuya hesitated — only for a moment. He leaned a bit further over the edge of the desk, lowering his tone. “Have you ever noticed just how many of our departments Dazai regulates?”

The woman paused. “Not really.”

“I was curious — I checked the archives. He deals with the defense squad. He came up with the security system. He helps Kouyou with the torture, regulates the executions, directs a branch of the Intelligence — *and* he’s Mori unofficial left hand.” He made a face. “Probably why I’m always doing his fucking reports — adding *Double Black* and Akutagawa’s training to the mix, that means there’s *nothing* in this syndicate that doesn’t pass by his hands. I mean — he should still do his damn reports, but — isn’t that a bit —“

“Too much responsibility?”

Chuuya didn’t like that wording, but he didn’t know how to find a better one. “Sort of.”

Concern? For the good of the organization in that weirdo’s hands, maybe. He still recalled the undeniable dread settling on his shoulders, as he snooped around — Dazai’s signature, everywhere. *Despite what he wants you to believe*, he recalled telling Akutagawa, *he is not the Port Mafia*.

“Maybe it’s jealousy,” Chuuya concluded, at last. “I mean — at least, I get why the fucker’s always taking naps in my office.”

Tanaki chuckled — nostalgic in a way that should haven’t sounded as heartbreaking as it did. “He still does that?”

“He slept in my *vents* the other day,” His eye ticked. “I thought I was getting *haunted* —“

“Surely a reliable person to lay most of the syndicates’ deals on.”

“He has his stupid slimy hands *everywhere*,” Chuuya shuddered. “But that’s only because Boss trusts him, so —“

“You don’t understand where this wave of rebellion is coming from?” she questioned.

“No, I get it,” Dazai had a certain charm to him — a honeycomb dripping a poisonous type of gold, maybe. Chuuya could understand the urge to trust him and his devilish plans; for a *price*. “I just don’t see why any rational being would *want* to be under Dazai’s guidance.”



“If that ever happens,” Hamamoto started, making his way back with a distinctively displeased curve to his mouth, “I’m leaving the Port Mafia. Even if they kill me for it.”

Chuuya rolled his eyes, tilting back to study the Akutagawa siblings’ whispers. “You’d still be under my command, you know.”

“And you’d be under *his*, sir. ”

“As if I’d ever obey the orders of a stinky mackerel with delusions of grandeur —“

“If he’s the Boss,” he insisted, “You’ll have no choice not to.”

“He’s not going to be,” he reminded him, at the very pulsing edge of his patience. “This isn’t happening. It’s all pointless discourse.”

“How do you know that?”

“Hamamoto.”

“Do you know what the last assassin did?” the subordinate hissed. Tanaki’s eyes laid on him, startled. His arm waved towards the elevator. “I asked. He *carved* Dazai’s name on his arm.”

“What a tasteless tattoo,” Chuuya mused, an eye left on Akutagawa’s reluctant tea-drinking.

“Do you really think this is something born out of nowhere?” Revulsion tightened his eyes. “That he’s done *nothing* to increment the desire for something different?”

*The flame to the moths*, Mori had explained. He always seemed to trust Dazai a bit more than Dazai gave back. “That’s not what I said.”

“Then *what* —“

“I’m saying that fanaticism is *easy* to arise,” Chuuya said. He recalled the graffiti on the walls of Suribachi; cartoonish depiction of the prisoner of war who had supposedly evoked Arahaki, and strange symbols narrating *The End*. Once, he had stolen a tourist’s camera, and taken a picture of himself under the scribble of one of the myth’s halos. “You think people have never started cults in the name of martyrs?”

“He’s not dead.”

“And he’s not a *revolutionair*. He’s not some psycho, plotting and rubbing his hands evilly behind Mori’s throne. He’s too *lazy* for that,” He spread his arms, a bit annoyed. “No matter how many assassinations you guys plan for him —“

Tanaki’s head snapped up. Hamamoto took a step back. “We didn’t —“

“*Someone* did,” Chuuya cut him off. “And it’s not going to work, by the way. *I* would know. Do you even have *any* idea of how many times I’ve tried to snap his neck? The jerk has the survival skills of a rat in the sewers — you people are worsening the issue.”

He laughed, disbelieving. “People willing to *die* for our Boss are *worsening the issue*?”

“His supporters feel strengthened by your fear that he might actually do it — it makes it *real*. It makes people perceive him as a real threat —“

Hamamoto’s voice raised — louder than anyone had dared against Chuuya in *years*. “And how do you know he isn’t?”

“He’s *Dazai*, for *fuck’s sake*. ”

He failed to realize just how loud he’d snarled those few words.

Akutagawa’s eyes were on him — stuck to that personalized siren’s call of his. Hamamoto seemed lost.

Chuuya didn’t know how to *explain* — would never willingly do it, and might never find a way to. Hating Dazai was the same as trusting him — inevitable as gravity. There was no despising him without the quiet, unshakeable truth of it — they walked the same lifeline, and Chuuya would be the only one to sever it.

*Now don’t be a child*, he could hear Kouyou tut.

*How*, he thought. Childishness and Dazai were as intertwined as the cables of a bomb; as the *push and pull* of the game stations at the Arcade. *How?*

“And you’ve been bordering insubordination a few times too many, lately, Hamamoto,” Chuuya warned, stepping close enough to fill his visual field. Instinctively, the man straightened. “I’m still your superior, and he’s *still* your Executive. If you’re as loyal to the syndicate as you say, you’re going to watch your tone when you talk about him. For your own good.”

“Sir —“

“For your own,” he spelled out, paying no mind to the way Tanaki had paused every motion, in the background. He needed him to *get it* — needed him to be far away from Kouyou’s rational observations. “*Good*, Hamamoto.”

A muscle in his jaw trembled. “Yes.”

“I didn’t hear that.”

“*Yes*, ” Hamamoto echoed. “Yes, sir.”

Chuuya held his gaze a bit longer. Let go.

Despite not having been touching him, the moment he stepped back, he saw him sag against Tanaki’s desk, knuckles white around its edge. From the couches, Akutagawa was halfway to his feet, Gin’s hand around his wrist. Their eyes met, lit in something *too* similar — Chuuya felt, out of nowhere, an unknown sense of shame.

“Well,” Tanaki cleared her throat. “Which one of you guys wants to do a little commission for me?”

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**Notebook extract — [Page 13]**

*Drowning? Someone.*

*The squad. Shibuwasa’s castle?*

*Kouyou. Blood. Is that supposed to be her — on the floor of the bathroom. Is that relevant?*

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“You —” he started, speechless, “What?”

“I don’t know the details, really,” Kajii shrugged, forcing Chuuya’s open hand to close around the report he’d handed him. The roar of conversations in the ballroom behind them was a rush of indistinct voices — he couldn’t focus on anything but those senseless words. “Executive Kouyou threatened to have my head if I asked too many questions. Said it was your business.”

“But you —” He trailed off. “I don’t get it.”

“What’s there to get? The *Special Division* now has nothing on you,” Kajii tilted his head to the side. “I *tried* to ask *what* they had on you, but Hirotsu sent me this nasty look — that *Guerrilla* squad of yours seemed ready to tear me apart. So I just collaborated quietly. How unfair. Such a noisy group of people coming together and *you* manage to make them subtle.”

There were a few blood stains on the file — a clear sign of a hurried handling. His eyes roamed through information and pictures of *Division* members — specifically, according to Kajii, the ones who had handled his information during his planned capture last year, before the *Dragon Head Conflict*.

All of them dead.

All the information they had on him — vitals and Ability datas and confused notes on the very little they knew about the Arahabaki project — now, in Mori's hands *only*.

“Executive Kouyou believed it unfair that most information on Port Mafia members had long been wiped off their archives, but not yours — especially since it seems to be so needlessly intricate. *Why, dude, anyway?*” Kajii continued. “She organized a mission — though she *did* ask for your *Guerrilla* to help. They were glad to, by the way, but I want to say that *I* did most of the work,” He made a face. “The old man, too. And I guess *Golden Demon* was important, and your squad took care of the left wing for the secret infiltration — whatever! ‘Took a whole week, you know?’”

A pause. “We can't exactly reach *all* the Governmental documents on you, and the *Special Division* is only one part, but isn't it better than — why are you looking at me like that?”

Chuuya was locked in a haze.

Memories pulsed painfully in the back of his skull, this time all but enchanted by an Ability — the Flags offering him a photograph; Albatross ruffling his hair; his ears catching fire. His squad, coming to rescue him from the *Special Division* Headquarters, even if they *knew* he could do it on his own.

Running off. Returning. Losing his chance to —

“You did that,” he insisted, slow. “For me?”

“No, for Elise,” Kajii snorted. A hint of embarrassment pooled on his cheeks. “I mean, I — I do owe you stuff, man. I know I act like — but I don't forget it. Ever. Second thought next to, you know — death, probably. You're always breaking that back of yours for us, so —”

Petrified as he felt, his eyes roamed through the crowd. Mori had invited every mafioso that would fit the room — he had something to say; a celebration of the official new city regime; maybe. The *Guerrilla* was mingling, laughing hard and familiar. Kouyou's eyes were easy to find, rolling amusedly in Hirotsu's face.

She winked at him.

“Dude? Are you listening to me? If you're so upset, I can try to ask them if there's any files left — I could *un-explode* them, maybe. What's even on those things? Is it your parents? *Ugh*. I get the distaste. You know, *my* —”

Chuuya wrapped one arm around Kajii's shoulders, forcibly dragging him into a half hug.

A *squeak* tumbled out of his mouth, as he choked through it. He blinked hard, jaw clenched so tight it hurt — held onto the shoulder of his coat until his knuckles turned white.

“Thank you,” he forced out. He tried to say more — still couldn’t.

Kajii was still blinking when he pushed him back. “*Uh*, I —“ He cleared his throat, scarlet. “No problem. Just a few bombs here and there — you know I like those. No problem at all. No —“

The sound of a spoon clicking a glass echoed — both from the open doors of the ballroom and into the in-ear Chuuya was wearing — along to the *Black Lizards* and the *Guerrilla*; the latest defensive move the assassination attempts had brought. Mori stood behind the head of the table, smile subtle and shoulders straight. “If I could have your attention for a minute?”

Kajii’s eyes widened. “Oh, *God*, I forgot to take my bombs off the banquet table —“

He watched him run off into the crowd with a sigh. Before he could step into the room and offer his whole attention to the Boss’ parting lips, a sight at the end of the hallway caught his attention.

He hesitated.

From the first rows of the audience — turned to offer all their attention to Mori, as if not forced to — he met a bandaged gaze. Dazai, one arm jokingly intertwined with Sakaguchi Ango’s own, turned his head imperceptibly. With one last glance to the ballroom, Chuuya made his way to the only silhouette left in the corridor — not fast enough to catch the one disappearing behind the elevator doors.

“Fumiko,” he called.

The woman flinched — rising from her crunched position; abandoning her half-tied heels to themselves. “*Oh* — hello there, Executive. You look absolutely *slick*, if I may — not as much as I do, though.”

He could concede that. Her kimono was the same shade as her overly long hair, this time tied in *two* braids — formal clothing made her look older than she probably was. More *posed*.

“Did I interrupt you guys?” he asked.

“*Mmh?* No, no — Madame Tanaki and I were just exchanging stories. She’s always such an entertaining person to talk to, isn’t she?”

Chuuya agreed with a nod. “Was you guys’ first meeting fun?”

“I wouldn’t quite say *fun*,” Fumiko replied, sucking on her teeth. “But I *do* always enjoy a love case and a murder intertwined.”

“A *love* case?” He frowned. “You killed her husband. Wasn’t it kind of the opposite?”

“Not if she asked me to do it to marry her next husband,” the woman chuckled. “In that case, it *is* somewhat romantic.”

“There are probably better ways to ask for a divorce.”

“Better than murder?” she insisted. “For a woman? How naive.”

The carefully timeless voice in his in-ear cleared its throat. Speaking with an absent smile that was *tactile*, Mori began his speech.

*“Not all of you know me,”* he said, as the hushed murmurs in the background faded. *“Not by face, at least. It has always been a tradition in the Port Mafia to keep the man on the seat hidden — to make the name of the Boss an incorporeal thing. Something known, but not felt.”*

Fumiko’s hand wrapped around his wrist, colder than he had expected it to be. “Come on,” She nodded towards the stairs. “Let’s take a walk.”

“But —” Chuuya pressed the in-ear closer, glancing towards the now-closed doors. At last, he resolved to miss whatever veiled announcement Mori was offering, and shrugged. “Alright.”

*“I had a mentor before taking the seat,”* he continued. *“Among the many of the lessons he gave me, the most important has always been this — no cleverness can exist to the point of not having trust. And no amount of trust can blind the need for cleverness.”*

“Where are we going?” Chuuya wondered, by the time they had skipped down the last step of the *Building*.

“I’ll tell you when the stage fright passes, if you don’t mind. For now, we’re just taking a walk,” Fumiko answered, twirling in circles in the opposite direction — so she could easily wiggle her eyebrows at him. “You know, Vice-Executive, I’m *very* curious about you.”

He tilted his head. “I’m somewhat curious about how you keep all that hair in place.”

“Takes some time. But it looks nice, doesn’t it?”

He nodded. “Dyed?”

“Bingo,” Fumiko made a face. “It used to be all brown. Didn’t quite like them,” A pause — she let out a humorless, dry chuckle. “Actually, my ex-husband didn’t.”

“You were married?” Chuuya blinked. “You’re very young.”

“And I got married *even* younger,” she confirmed. “Not my best choice. But I did. Things didn’t quite end up well. I believe it’s part of why I was so eager to help Tanaki.”

*“So,”* he said. The ballroom was drowned in attentive silence. *“Consider my appearance here a sign of trust — and a smart move. I’m sure among us there are those who will think of me in good faith — as someone who desires to show that there is change happening, from the dark times this organization went through,”* A paused; an amused tilt to it. *“As I am sure some will not believe it.”*

A lingering suspicion sneaked in. “Fumiko, did you kill him?”

“No need,” She offered him a smile. “His new wife did it for me.”

Confusion had to have shown on his face. Fumiko snorted, jumping over a bench in her way. The early evening crowd directed double glances to her appearance — but if it touched her, she didn’t react. “You know, when we divorced, he told me he had two lovers on the side. He asked me to pick which one I would rather he married — as a result on my good name in the underground scene,” she added, her sarcasm sharp: “You know, people rarely get married and let it be known, in our business. But we were — a duo, of sorts.”

Chuuya stared. “That’s the most asshole move I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“*Right?* But I picked anyway. And I picked right — she was just waiting for a chance to take his title. She did,” Her grin grew somewhat darker. “Then I fucked her, and went on my way.”

“Makes sense.”

“You think so? Thank you.”

Two twins in front of a nearby shop began to cry — un-soothed by their father’s awkward attempts at calming them down, under the crowd’s stares. People’s glances at them were less distracted than they might have been before; Chuuya had heard — from one passing, *tired* News channel to the other — that voices of an Ability User capable of targeting the mind were spreading.

*Unlucky*, Mori had commented, clearly displeased. *That’s what we are here for*. Probably a fluke, he considered, as he watched the man shush his boys. Children cried just to cry.

“Chuuya, I wanted to apologize.”

His steps slowed down. “Apologize?”

“*My question to you,*” Mori said. “*Near the end of these renovating times the Port Mafia has gone through — of our best attempts to stand again from the hunger the previous Boss left us in — is this: while I don’t doubt everyone of you would gladly bleed for this organization — why would you?*”

“Yes,” Fumiko insisted, hands pulling at each other’s fingers. “The other day — it was the Commander, who asked me to use my Ability. I tend to *ask* before subjecting anyone to —“

“Oh,” Chuuya interrupted her. “No, that’s fine. Really. Hirotsu told me. He was,” The pile of reports from Kouyou’s mission pressed against his back, where he’d hidden them. Nothing more than names of men who had dared to know too much about him — perhaps, not something he should have cared for as much as he did. “Convinced to ask you.”

The woman dared: “And did it help?”

Discomfort tightened his shoulders. “I’m not quite convinced there’s something I need help with,” Vivid Ability-induced hallucinations aside. “I’ve been trying to... I don’t know. *Self-reflect* and stuff.”

A snort. “That sounds boring.”

“It’s *so* boring,” He waited a breath — then asked, before he could regret it, “Do you really not see anything from the visions you send?”

“They’re not visions,” Fumiko corrected. The gentle motion of her swaying braids was hypnotic. He wondered if she had picked the red, or if her husband had. “Not quite. I extract things that are already there in your mind. Weave them together into possibilities that have not manifested in real life — but that *might have*.”

He Frowned. “I don’t know if I follow.”

Patiently, she insisted: “You know when you lay awake at night, and you keep thinking — *oh, I could have done this in this situation*. Or — *if the choice came, I would do this*. Saying that I *see* what I offer is not right — but I *am* sort of aware of what kind of choices I’m offering you.”

“For example?”

“I know I offered you the chance to save certain people — which you did. I know I offered you the chance to save yourself — which you never did,” Fumiko twirled once more, fixing the sash of her kimono with a content sigh. “All around, my conclusion is that you’re among the most peculiar, fascinatingly *suicidal* beings I’ve ever attacked. How nice,” She gasped. “An ice cream stand!”

He stared at the empty place she’d left.

*Things* crowded under his eyelids — the roar of his bike tilting and climbing up walls; the slippery ground when Madame Tanaki forgot to tell him they had mopped the floors; the way his fingers had curled when Kouyou had told him, *he kind of looked like you*.

“*Because it is your only home?*” Mori asked. “*Because you’re loyal to the cause? Because you want money; because you’re scared of what might happen if you weren’t; because you care for the people inside it; because you’re scared of them? All of it has some worth. It means all of you are here for a reason. And that all of you will serve this organization in the best way possible — for a reason.*”

Chuuya had to run to catch up with the woman, excitedly jumping up and down in front of an ice cream stand — directing the man in white behind it to build her a seven flavors cone.

“*Hey,*” he said, the moment he caught up, a bit breathless. “No — no. You got me all wrong.”

Fumiko vigorously *bit* her ice cream — cone and all. “*Mmh?* Did I?”

“The suicidal maniac?” he insisted, half in disbelief. “My partner? You might have seen him around. He looks like an escaped mummy, only uglier than even two thousand years in a box could make him.”



“I know Executive Dazai, silly,” the woman replied. “I meant *sir*. Sorry. But I’m talking about *you*. More than one person can be suicidal at the same time, you know?”

“Sure,” he said, “I’m not, though.”

“Alright. I believe it, if you say so.”

Chuuya kept his eyes on her, unconvinced.

*“I will tell you mine, though. The reason I would kneel and have my head cut to make sure this organization lasts even just a day more — is because of this city. And because I believe no one can protect it as well as we can,”* Through the murmurs, the doctor’s voice stayed the same. *“I believe that if it wasn’t for us, chaos would have already stormed in — torn the towers down and destroyed everything Yokohama is.”*

The option had never been there, truly — the Sheep had taken him in, and the least he could have done was deserve it. The Flags had given him a place to be safe and climb his way to his truth — Chuuya had failed them. His squad had entrusted their lives to him.

*They keep giving,* he wanted to say. *They keep giving and giving and giving, and I’m undeserving and overflowing, and I have nothing to give back but my hands.*

*Take my hands,* Q had told him, once, over bloodied fingers, *I don’t want to look at them.*

Fumiko’s smile was indulgent — not patronizing, but somewhat *deeper*. “Introspection is a complicated thing, Chuuya,” she offered, with a sour tone — devouring the last of her ice cream like someone would take it from her. “I think that’s why me and Mishima get along so well. With his truths — we understand that there’s something *inside* that people aren’t always ready to face.”

“Since we have the ability to make them face it, we are often disliked,” Her smile was critical. “The underground was never very friendly with us. They feared us. But Kobo was different — He’s always been so empathetic. The sensibility of his animal flesh, maybe. Animals are better than people, aren’t they? Like dogs. I *love* dog.”

“So do I,” he sighed.

“The Port Mafia doesn’t really allow pets, though, does it?”

Chuuya blinked. “I don’t think they care?”

“No, it would be too crowded,” Fumiko assured, with a skip in her steps. “Considering all the slobbering mutts calling themselves mafiosi.”

“*Soon,*” Mori said, with a tone that he could almost see him exchange a glance with Kouyou before using, *“Very soon, this organization will be granted an Ability Permit. On that day, you will know and you will feel that Yokohama is ours. As it was always meant to be,”* he insisted. “Protectors defend without looking for a gain, *is what a better man might tell you — but I am no better man. And I believe protection earns something — a right, for those of us who would be shamed if they stepped out of the shadows, to call this place ours.*”

He paused.

“Like that pathetic show that’s going on right now, back in the ballroom. Your in-ear is really loud, you know?” Fumiko sang, throwing the tissues left from her ice cream to the ground. She reached for her braids, absently pulling their ends. “Everyone obediently kneeling at the words of a single man promising them greatness.”

“What do you think got to them the most? The passion in his voice? The promise of having *something*?” Her scoff could have been a giggle, from how deeply unstable it sounded. Chuuya kept his eyes forward, gently directing both their steps to a less crowded area of the main street. “I’ll tell you what it is — it’s the promise of *blood*. Only a few weeks in the Mafia, and I’ve already come to the conclusion that it’s the greatest assortment of bloodthirsty people I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

A man appeared from the nearest alley. Chuuya registered a bald head and taped glasses.

He came to a halt.

“And?”

Fumiko shrugged, tilting back until she could stare at the appearing moon, huffing. “Who knows. I just think it’s kind of funny — *the protectors of the city*. The *Special Division* doesn’t believe that at all, you know?”

*“For those of you who wish to share a piece of that protection and of that gain — I will be more than glad to accept your show of loyalty.”*

His lips moved of its own accord. “What does the *Special Division* have to do with it?”

*“For those of you who don’t,”* he added, after a pause. *“Who believe, perhaps,”* The beat of a glance to the side — murmurs of a name Chuuya could have recognized even deaf. *“That someone else might lead you to that target a bit more easily — Well. I certainly believe oaths are to be respected. The Port Mafia is not to be left — if not in a coffin in the bay.”*

*“Whether you wish those ashes to be cried or spat upon — do not fool yourself into believing I’m the one forcing you to make that choice,”* A tactile smile. *“The choice is always yours.”*

“It’s weird,” Fumiko insisted. “Because they’re *just* as bloodthirsty — but they would never call it that. I’m pretty sure they call it, *sense of honor* or something. Look how far they went — all just to make sure *you guys* wouldn’t gain some influence that you gained anyway in the end.”

The sound of a raised glass pinged against his ear. *“To the Port Mafia!”*

A chuckle. “They’re pretty mad about that. Mad enough that they just — forgot a few locks or two in their cells,” The woman let go of her braids — leaned against the nearest bench, moving her hands in circles to make her wrists snap. “And so that nice, old Ability User they picked to get rid of the actress — it became a *little bit* of a problem. So did the others they wanted to use, of course.”

A wave of voices — blank and loyal and terrified. “*To the Port Mafia!*”

A rush of clothes — murmurs raising, and then that name, again and *again*, Demon or Dazai or just *him* — the hush of knees hitting the floor. Gasps and voices, tickling the shell of his ear. Chuuya could see it: an ocean of people waiting to show their loyalty. And Dazai Osamu, first in row, kneeling faster than any of them could move — offering his tattooed nape to Mori’s pleased smile.

The roar of the crowd’s whispers was a white noise in his skull. Chuuya decided he didn’t need to know more — that Dazai’s little spectacle had happened; that Mori was probably grinning so widely it was blinding. He took off the in-ear and crushed it under his shoe.

“You’re with Ueda Akinari,” Chuuya said, calmly. “Aren’t you?”

The man making his way to them paused, twinning his hands at the small of his back. He stared between the two of them like a referee at a sparring match, unhurried. Chuuya smelled grass soaked in blood.

Fumiko held a finger to her mouth. “I believe it’s nicer if you say that *he* is with *me*. I mean, I was picked first by the *Division*. One of the many, many moles they’ve sent to you guys —” She met his eyes, raising her eyebrows. “You sure don’t think I’m the only one? No, I’m just the one who was getting too — slow on the job.”

She leaned onto her knees; waved at Ueda’s quiet silhouette. “You guys just *wouldn’t recruit us* — you’ve been too suspicious of Users presenting themselves to the syndicate willingly. Which is why I had to convince Kobe and Mishima to get in tons of trouble, just to get you guys’ attention. And it worked!”

Chuuya understood. The organization had been in a frenzy to regroup ever since the *Dragon Head Conflict* had cost them too many lives. The *Cleanse* hadn’t helped; in their urge to get Ability Users into check, controls had been minimal — moving under the assumption that if forced to join, the men’s rage could be *redirected*.

And so they had slipped.

Unless —

“But it was taking too much time,” she jeered. “And so they decided they wanted someone else to help out. All to make sure you guys got the message — which you *clearly* didn’t, given most of the *Hall of Fame* of Japanese celebrities is in your hands. Now I get why youngsters make conspiracy theories. Come here, old man!” Fumiko called, then. ““You done staring at us like a creepy fuck? You already know Chuuya, don’t you?””

“Intimately,” Ueda Akinari said. His voice had him sinking his nails in his palm to hold back a flinch — Chuuya pressed his heels into the ground until he wasn’t sinking between corpses any longer. “No better way to know someone than to be in their head.”

He stubbornly kept his eyes on Fumiko. “Is it all three of you?”

She laughed. “God, *no*. Mishima and Kobe think they can jump from one place to the other unschated — I *do* believe they want the Post Mafia to last, though,” Her feet spread, lowering her over the backrest of the bench — as relaxed as she had been on their first meeting; bowing a bit too low. “I’m not that stupid.”

Distantly, cars honked. If he focused — if he let Arahabaki breathe — he thought he could hear the sound of steps; carefully redirected from that circle of pretense-polite conversation.

Something like pity tightened her face. “It’s nothing personal, sir. I really *do* like you. You and your pretty hair. But the *Special Division* promised to clear my records. I’m old, you know — I’m tired of this.”

She rose from the bench. Following, Ueda straightened.

Chuuya stayed leaning against the wall.

“I don’t want to fight for the rest of my life,” she swore, with the first flare of *sincerity* he could recall finding under all her glee. “If all I have to do is kill a bunch of high names in the Mafia — I’m going to do it.”

“Sounds fair,” Chuuya offered.

She smiled, apologetic. “For what’s worth, I really am sorry.”

With no further announcement, Ueda’s eyes rolled to the back of his head. A spot in Chuuya’s back pulsed so violently it began to feel like a limb would tear its way through it — in between the onyx dots in his burning vision, he saw Fumiko walk towards him.

Then, it was quiet.

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*There* —

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*There was —*

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*There was a —*

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*There was a door in front of him.*

*“Don’t open it,” warned the bundle of old clothes and ash-covered hair, cuddled up at the end of the hallway. Chuuya couldn’t see his face — his temples were held between his arms. “Listen to me.”*

*His voice was strangely familiar.*

*But Chuuya knew that door — the doorknob was warm in the way of memorized crinkles next to dearest friends’ eyes; fitting between his lifeline and his thumb like it was meant to. The rust stain at the very left corner was still there — weird, considering they had redone the whole place.*

*Because it was burned to the ground, a whisper said.*

*Don’t be stupid, something thundered, is it not here?*

*“They’re using both of the Abilities,” the boy insisted, voice so steady it was dead. “A Singularity, but not quite — a choice to solve past regrets, and visions of all that torments you the most. All so that —”*

*Laughter echoed from behind the door — crystalline, squeaky and climbing the silence as if in a hurry not to be left behind — sweet and too loud and incessantly annoying, and all that Chuuya had longed for in two oxygen-less years.*

*He knew that voice.*

*“Don’t —”*

*The door was opened so fast he almost tore it off its hinges. “Albatr—”*

*Something creaked under his shoes — it shattered on impact from his too excited steps; too weighted down by the urgency in his disbelieving spine. Chuuya knew it was a bone long before he looked down.*

*The blood was so thick on the floor it might have reached his knees; dragging himself forward was the hardest thing his limbs had ever attempted. There was no gravity to manipulate; no ground to crack — everything was red and was black and was rotten, suffocating in its smell, corpses and alcohol and poisoned words.*

*“Fuck off,” Chuuya murmured, like a prayer, as his eyes searched for something — a body without its face too ruined, eyes wide open and not crimson skin. He knew all of them — he couldn’t recognize any. “Fuck off. I’m done with this!”*

*“Chuuya.”*

*The voice spoke through his foot, still stuck deep into the half shattered rib cage — muffled, because of it; pressing. From the ground, Doc’s eyes almost rolled to the back of his head, as trails of blood left his mouth in coughs.*

*His legs were still missing.*

*Doesn’t matter, it hushed. Doesn’t matter. Here’s your chance, doesn’t matter —*

*“Doc,” He kneeled next to him, untouched by that humming river of blood drowning him all the way to his sleeves — white sleeves, now; patterned like a Hospital vest; too large on his hips and too grandly unimportant the instant he put his hands to his friend’s gaping face.*

*“Doc, what do I have to do?”*

*The question tasted familiar. Hours and hours spent next to the man in some makeshift clinic at the HQs, helping him out with the Mafia’s almost-fallen — because he wanted to and because he’d been asked and because how could he not. He was good at reading medical papers, for reasons he did not know. He was good at sticking too close, and being venomous to the touch.*

*“Chuuya,” he echoed, unfocused. His IV pole was nowhere to be seen — maybe, it was the glinting thing stuck through one of Pianoman’s eyes, all the was inside his skull. “Why did*

*you kill them?”*

*“I didn’t,” His jaw ached — he didn’t realize he was biting his tongue until blood wet his lips. “Doc, I didn’t — mean to —”*

*“We took you in, didn’t we?” His eyes grew darker and darker, as if the blood had managed to seep in even under his eyelids. “Why did you? We took you in, didn’t we?”*

*His hair faded into a familiar gray; his body grew too young and famished under his grasp — Chuuya refused to meet Shirase’s eyes. “We took you in,” he hissed. The voice of an eight years old boy. “How could we ever be so stupid?”*

*He snapped: “This isn’t even realistic —”*

*“How long until they realize it too?”*

*He stumbled to his feet under a roar of coward that he didn’t know where was coming from — cussed and kicked the reaching limbs away, appearing from the shadows with hungry claws, pulling at him like ivy. He walked through corpses and through waves of red and the strange symphony of screams in his head — something like the Under Port, only higher and scratchier and real; every single one of those voices somehow known.*

*“How long?” Shirase called, nowhere and in every corner — so deep in his skull it was his own heartbeat. “How long until you kill them too?”*

*“Change the topic!” he shouted back, fists clenched. “This is getting unoriginal!”*

*His hand grasped the doorknob moments before the thousands of hands could touch him, all the eyes floating inside it set on him — he pulled it open so fast he felt it scratch his palm to raw skin.*

*Chuuya fell to the floor.*

*His breathing sounded harsh even to his ears — the leftovers of Corruption, piercing his lungs and leaving him to cough out parts that kept him alive and that Arahabaki didn’t care for in the slightest. He studied his arm, waiting for spiral marks — all he saw was his spasming fingers.*

*He kicked the ground, frustrated — it didn’t stop any of it; not the trembling nor the gasping. Someone was pulling air out through his gritted teeth; he bit his tongue again and again, eyes on the floor, thinking and cursing. He recalled a time he didn’t know — the cold floor of a lab, him huddled up just like this; the wrinkles floating inside a dark liquid had left on his skin; and the eyes, the eyes staring behind the glass — knocking to scare him, to see if he was still breathing, lest their money got wasted, to ask, how are we feeling today, little —*

*A boy was standing in front of the door.*

*Chuuya sunk his nails on the floor.*

*A strange memory hit him — being in his place. Being in that place, on the floor. Again and again and again — a different carcass under his uncaring feet each time. A different accusation; a different burn under his fingers. Yuan's tears; Koda panicking as the sky blew up. A boy who looked just like him, melting in his arms.*

*How long had he been there?*

*"Don't open it," he warned. "Listen to me."*

*The boy —*

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There was blood under his shoes, and there was a hand plastered on his mouth, leaving finger shaped bruises on his jaw.

Chuuya's limbs stiffened long before he could order them to fight — he realized, a bit distantly, that he had been struggling already. The fog stuck between his eyelids stayed right where it was — the blood on the doorknob and the nails in his arms; the squelching *crack!* of bones under his skin and the vacant terror in the eyes of himself, curled up on the floor; Albatross' last words and the aching pain of Shirase's knife, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing and *sticking*, the arms that were going to tear him apart —

"— stop," someone was snapping. Reality was intermittent — whenever some part of his body crashed against a surface, the impact and the bruise catapulted him back to a world of chaos — of distant sirens and arms around him, as Chuuya struggled as if feral, slamming the flesh holding on him against the sharp corners of a kitchen.

"Stop," the voice insisted, tone unfamiliar. He was in front of the door; he was telling the boy who wore his face not to enter. The arms were going to reach him and they were going to rip him into pieces. "— Stop, Chuuya — you're — *stop!*"

A sound came out of his mouth; drool and bile and blood, curling around a scream he did not decide to make. Shirase's knife, again and again — Verlaine's finger on his forehead — *Corruption*, in a Cemetery, tearing his jaw off his skull so he could never speak again, could never own that skin that was stuck to bones made to be broken. Chuuya slammed his body forward, over a shaking ground and blood he could *feel* leave his body floaty and blurred — he cracked his head against the corner of a table, and *screamed* —

One of the hands grabbed his left arm, and dislocated it out of its socket.



The ache was blinding — the white blur to explode in his vision was brighter than any bar and any doorknob and any falling Yokohama; the white noises that carved the space between his ears had his limbs turn into jelly, knees landing painfully on the ground. Somewhere over that haze, he felt the roof fall, and the entire building shake.

“— breathe,” the voice swore. Chuuya was dragged across the floor like a corpse; his back was pressed against a rapidly breathing chest, and the hand returned, clenching around his mouth — so he would inhale through his nose instead. “— you just — over the — of course you can. You’d be unconscious if you couldn’t — *breathe, Chuuya.*”

Everything was buzzing. It began to fade by the corners — so ploddingly it was numbing, the rattled reality bloomed across his overstimulated eyes.

“Just breathe,” Lips on the shell of his ear; then pressed *harder*, barely exhaling the sound — so low it should have been inaudible over the chaos of what Chuuya could now *see* was a falling apart building around them. The hand stayed on his mouth through his gaping; the other arm clenched across his clavicles, squeezing him against a chest he couldn’t recall *why* was familiar. Legs bracketed him; the fire in his dislocated arm slowly rocked itself into a faraway, insistent hum. “Just breathe. *This* is real. Breathe.”

His heart was beating out of his chest. His eyes were blurred; he saw what was left of some apartment he had to have flown through, barely a circular interior balcony from what had once been a kitchen — and a crater, in the middle of it, wider than Albatross’ bathroom, tunneling all the way to several floors down.

Slower and slower breaths pulled his chest up and down — his limbs dropped like a doll’s, all the tensed muscles liquifying. The hand dropped from his sweat-matted jaw; Chuuya unclenched it, and tasted blood all over his cheeks and tongue.

“Alright?” Dazai asked.

Faraway police sirens; faraway screams — rumbling buildings, falling to an earthquake. Dazai had fallen on the floor, back digging the counter — he tried to recall the correct breathing rhythm; tried to steal it from the chest plastered to his back, heartbeat and all. The hand across his clavicles fell; it landed where his heart was, and it *dug* nails in — through the fabric and the skin.

Chuuya’s breath was cut short.

His hair was soaked with sweat; he closed his eyes, lighting-quick, gulping in the last ounce of air and soaking up the slight tremble in Dazai’s frame — he sat up, blood trailing down the wound the table corner had left on his forehead.

“Alright,” he concluded, curtly, standing.

There was no time to focus on any of it — he stumbled on his legs, and barely blinked at Dazai’s utterly blank face, body sprawled on the floor as he looked up at him. His skull was an empty hall, haunted by echoes — he realized, a bit hazed, that it hadn’t been that quiet in eons.

Chuuya studied the crater two steps from him — saw Fumiko and Ueda’s spines merge with the concrete of the ground floor, chins pushing pointlessly to keep their shrieking heads high.

He jumped down.

*Drown*, Chuuya thought. A doorknob and a wave of blood, again and again — he walked towards them, debris still falling from the hole on the roof, hands clenched in his pockets; kicked the ground with one foot only, somehow *hearing* the sound of their wrists and calves *snapping* —

“You thought some mind tricks could stop me?” he panted, meeting their bloodshot eyes. He was bent over the pulsing weight of the dislocated arm; over an exhaustion that had his lips curling in hysterical laughter. “*Me?* You thought I wouldn’t *tear you apart* for it?”

Chuuya couldn’t recall all of it — Dazai’s hand, appearing out of nowhere near that old ice cream stand; the images in his mind, blurring over whatever decision he’d made to activate *Tainted* and sink his nails in their throats, tearing hole after hole in the nearest apartment complex.

The familiar *click* of safeties being switched off surrounded the crater. A small crowd of mafiosi — a mixture of the *Guerrilla* squad and the *Secret Unit* gathered around the opening, across more and more floors, covered in debris from the only now-over earthquake — pointing their rifles at the threats being digested into the ground.

Seemingly unbothered, Dazai dived in, landing on the other side of the Ability Users.

“Look at that,” Chuuya heard him sigh, somewhere through the haze — through the gaze he couldn’t tear away from Fumiko’s crawling form, and Ueda’s pain-lined face. Still not enough, still not *cursed* — still lacking the ghosts that had been following him like footsteps. “Ma’am, sir — Does it hurt?”

The genuine curiosity in his tone registered as taunting. Chuuya felt the urge to laugh; instead, he crushed their ribs too.

“Well,” Dazai said, crouching next to their heads, “That’s enough.”

He touched their foreheads.

He’d missed the nullification when the boy had done it to snap him out of it, so that he could attack them — now that he was awake, Chuuya felt their Abilities slip off him like mud under the rain; pooling at his feet with the startled, nearly choked-up breath to leave his mouth.

And then it hit him like shards of glass — a strangling sensation of nothing at all.

“Excellent!” Dazai clasped his hands together, then waved cheerfully at their guards. He kept his eyes on Chuuya with rapturous insistence. “What are you waiting for, people? Come down here and get these friends of ours to the dungeons. My, do we have tons to study about that fancy trick you just did —”

A shadow jumped into the hole, showing off surprising agility. Hands materialized on his arms — familiar eyes studied him, concerned.

“Chuuya,” Tanaki called, out of breath from catching up. “Are you alright?”

“Of course he is,” Dazai called, from where he was boringly directing his men to the extraction of the bodies. “This was *his* plan, after all.”

Fancy wording — Chuuya would have been stupid not to make the connection, with the way her Ability had targeted the same spots Ueda had learned. It had been suspicious, mostly — when the woman had pulled him away from the ceremony, he’d known. Since that was how it went — so had Dazai.

“Explains why I’m all covered in dirt — given that *I* have the decency to plan ahead for these consequences —”

Sheer irritation crowded on tired limbs. “Last time we were on a mission, you dropped us into a can of *sewer-remains* —”

“How?”

A beat of silence.

It took Dazai a moment to turn towards the rough, exhaustion-lined voice — Chuuya’s eyes found Fumiko’s limp frame immediately, in the arms of two suited men. Blood and hair braids mixed and confused; the gaze she washed over him was just as careless as before.

“How,” Fumiko repeated. Ueda’s head lolled near her abandoned arm. “His Ability — *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* targeted you more than anyone else. The files at the *Division* — they assured you wouldn’t be able to —”

“To withstand it?”

She didn’t answer. The men murmured.

He stepped forward, a silent signal to the squads to pause the extraction. Fumiko didn’t flinch when he got closer. Chuuya ignored the eyes, and said, very quietly: “You’re a fool if you think I don’t know what everyone I care for will look like when they die.”

She exhaled.

“I’m like you,” he added, straightening. “I’ve been doing this a long time. I’ve got no need for you to show me what I’m capable of.”

“Anything,” she concluded, somewhat dazed — almost smiling. “Except put an end to the source of all your pain.”

“I can still crush you two, if you want me to.”

“I’m talking about yourself.”

Chuuya scoffed.

“That’s enough,” Dazai intervened — seemingly no longer entertained. A bit distractedly, he searched for dust on his pants. He nodded in the men’s direction. “Hurry up with these. The damages will cause a commotion, and we can’t be found here. Tanaki, if you don’t mind helping our wall-crusher here to walk —”

“I *can* walk, dumbass,” he snapped. There was a sweat stain on his shoulder; Chuuya knew it came from his own skull. “I’m fine.”

He let his sole eye run across his face until it seemed annoyed enough with the results. Stepping close, he lifted one finger — pressed it against the bloodied wound on Chuuya’s forehead.

“You know, I could have just looked at you to signal I was ditching,” he informed him.

“Maybe,” Dazai admitted, dropping his hand. “But you’re too interested in flattering Mori and his empty seats to miss the chance.”

Chuuya climbed out of the debris. “Says the one who was kneeling ten minutes ago.”

“Ah, yes,” he echoed, carelessly. He wondered how long it would take him to grow curious, this time — a new round of, *what did Dante’s Ability show you?* He studied the blood dripping from Chuuya’s fingers. “Flame to the moths, right?”

He scoffed.

They climbed out, Tanaki still hanging onto him as he easily floated them over the edge. The distant sound of car alarms and sirens hurried the mafiosi to the black vans they had arrived with; Chuuya noted the damaged buildings before the warehouse and sighed. “Kouyou will ground me.”

“Not if she doesn’t have to deal with that Ability any longer,” Tanaki encouraged. Dazai was rattling off orders to the squad; Hamamoto looked as if he had swallowed a lemon. Still, he nodded in his direction. “It was easier than I assumed it would be — though, with you two involved, things always go like that.”

“I’ll tell you when they add this to the *Double Black Bedtime Stories*, don’t worry.”

“Perhaps having an Ability that relies on the mind makes people foolish. Our limbs tend to know instinct more than reasoning,” the woman said, as she watched Fumiko disappear inside one of the vans. He couldn’t understand the grip on his arm fully; the blown out concern in her pupils, erasing most traces of the distant, long suppressed gloom she’d worn since the wedding. “She was a sweet girl. Only cocky.”

“Sir,” one of the *Guerrilla* called. He was pushing Ueda’s passed out body on the seats — the blood was getting everywhere. “Could you float him? It’s better if we don’t leave traces.”

Tanaki squeezed his arm one last time; he watched as she let him go, uncertain.

Chuuya reached the car; tapped his foot on the old man's calf, lighting him up in red amongst the wheezing breaths out of his lungs. The plan was to keep them alive and chained — he'd have to inform them all of the apparent army of moles the *Division* had sent. They still had no clues on what the tattoos meant. But Ueda looked fragile and pale; he didn't know if he'd survive the impact.

*Good*, he heard himself think. Kouyou's voice; maybe Arahaki.

It was still echoing — when Ueda's eyes snapped open, and he grabbed his wrist.

He couldn't recall what happened after — could vaguely remember Dazai's voice; the men who had called him around the corpse cowering under his barks. Extracted guns, seconds after the boy wrapped fingers around Ueda's arm, widening his eye when he saw whatever unchanging face was stuck on Chuuya's features. Fumiko laughing, somewhere — Tanaki's fingers; the lulling rhythm of a shootout *Tainted* automatically responded to.

*One last one*, Ueda mouthed, with blood-chapped lips, meeting his eyes. Chuuya knew he was watching him breathe his last breath — still, he didn't move.

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya: i am dealing with the manmade horrors

dazai, got showered with, cuddled with, and dealt with a panic attack in the course of like a week: of course you are king.

fun fact! fumiko's story about her ex husband and being asked to choose between two women comes from one of her irl's counterpart works.

other fun fact, my toe's pseudo cast got removed! cheer to not getting injured again, as i'm in the middle of exam season. posting shouldn't get affected, but if you see a chapter getting posted a day after the usual know what's to blame. thank you so much for all the support and the love and the kudos and the comments, seriously — i can't thank you enough. i hope you'll like this chapter and what's next just as much!!

stay warm and see you soon!!



# SEEMS

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end!! also, just to warn you again: chapters might get posted on different days, moving forward, as the exam session is entering its worst period and work is just. Works you know. i'll try to keep it two chapters a week, but should that not work, it'll just be one a week for a while!!

in any case, i promise to post. have a good read <333

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xxx.*

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*Case number: 88665671*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were tasked with [...]*

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**Excerpt from Chapter XVI:** *“The Rise & Dawn of the Post Great War Yokohama: The Tripartite Plan.”*

**Diary XII.**

**Natsume Soseki.**

**Special Division for Unusual Powers — *Archive.***

Recovered & Analyzed by: *Ango Sakaguchi.*

*[...] hardly cease to surprise me, in the following years, just how wide of a grasp Mori Ougai and his Port Mafia managed to sink in the deepest organs of our city in so little time. Three years of reign are hardly a remarkable chapter in any history book; despite this, they were just enough for the doctor’s grip on Yokohama to be called irredeemable — a root no man would manage to weed out. Not after it had flourished so proficiently under the moonlight.*

*The lack of an Ability Permit was an obstacle.*

*It lingered over their heads like a Damocles’ sword. The Special Division’s eyes grew more and more numerous, often walking right on the verge of sabotaging some rather important deal for the enterprising, stubborn syndicate. And yet, it wasn’t enough to stop them.*

*They grew tall and proud, like their towers — they filled the city with blood, but protected its civilians from any blade that wasn’t their own. They built their seats in high places — be it rich entertainers, be it CEOs, be it the men that kept the city afloat.*

*Control over the bay and its affairs was established with a tight enough grip, that not a force in the city could even dare to think about trading without dealing with the Mafia. Their presence in the Cabinet and the City Hall grew — if not entirely suffocating — pressing enough for their night affairs to be dealt with under the sun. The Black Market of the Kanto region belonged to them; the underground of Yokohama and the nearby cities responded to them first, then to themselves.*

*And as far as their superiority on the battlefield was concerned, of course, we cannot fail to mention their beloved weapon: Double Black. As they —*

[keep reading] [?]



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April ventured in with a gentler breeze.

“You guys came early this year,” Muramoto Kei commented, as he opened the door of his manor. He didn’t blink at the corpses they were dragging behind them, staining his porch with wet substances and coagulating blood. “So the mess I heard about from the city was true?”

“No,” Dazai replied, yawning. “Didn’t you know? The radio belongs to extremists.”

“No,” The man’s eyes ranked up and down his frame. “Must have missed it.”

His clothes were soaked in so much blood it was dripping — in spite of their hurried efforts to squeeze it out, when inside the trash bin they had hidden in. Chuuya was in no better state; at the very least, the other boy had simply pushed the bin around until they’d both gotten more bruised than helped — he’d only *witnessed* the massacre, instead of causing it.

*I shot some guys*, he had protested, amusing himself with rolling the trash can down the nearest slope.

Removing pieces of old food from his hair, he’d replied, very honestly: *you should have shot yourself*.

Dazai had nodded. *In time*.

“Well?” Chuuya raised his eyebrow. “Can we come in or not?”

Muramoto studied them a bit longer. With a sigh, he moved away from the doorframe.

They left the three bodies in the middle of his living room, and Chuuya made sure to flop one of them a bit *too* close onto a seemingly new couch. The men’s faces were stuck in a surprised terror — he hadn’t bothered with playing around with prey; but that had resulted in a swifter kill than their sleeping selves had ever expected to come.

Less prey than usual, too.

When he offered that observation to the farmer, he scoffed. “This year’s harvest has been shit. Nothing tempting enough to force the nasty cockroaches out to steal my business,” A long gaze was sent in Dazai’s direction, as the man watched him move his body back and forth along to the Swiss clock on the wall. “Good for you kids, *ah?*”

“Don’t call us that,” Chuuya ordered, a bit distracted, counting the money handed to him. “This is a bit less than last year.”

“Your syndicate has sent double the freight vehicles over my border. Balance is balance.”

“It isn’t *your* border,” he reminded him. “You’re a measly farmer bartering bloodthirst.”

“And you’re the most powerful syndicate in the Kanto region,” he considered, “And you *need* this *measly farmer* to free up your way.”

Chuuya quit counting the money.

Dazai kept dangling back and forth.

*Do you think, Kajii had once commented, drunk and philosophical, that everyone recognizes you two because of the hat and the bandages? It’s not like they all know your faces. Maybe it’s the height difference? Or is it that you’re so noisy and youthful and bloodthirsty?*

*I think, Chuuya had replied, half distracted, that it’s probably because we’re the ones to kill them.*

“What’s left on our to-do list?” he asked, as they made their way to the car — closing the door on Muramoto’s passed out, bloodied body. His knuckles ached; he decided not to voice it, lest Dazai went on a tirade about how, *torture is better with tools, I keep telling you.*

“We need to go into town,” the boy answered, intricately — *unnecessarily* — climbing into the passenger seat from the car window. “Some of the border’s workers have been late on their payments. Maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll get to slice some more people in a half.”

“I didn’t *slice them*,” Chuuya said, backing the car out of the manor’s garden, running over as many plant pots as possible. “I put sharp things through their bodies.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“Technicality.”

The smell of the corpses lingered on the car’s leather — he briefly thanked the foresight to bring one of the less fancy vehicles he owned; not the *only-five-in-the-world* kind. He gave himself a blink to watch Dazai roam through radio stations.

He paused some more.

The worlds tumbled out of his mouth: “I still think he fucks the corpses.”

“Oh, my *God*, Chuuya —“

“*One hundred percent*, he fucks the corpses. You cannot change my mind, you bastard — he fucks the corpses.”

Dazai's glance called him stupid in all of the *many* languages he knew. "Hatrack. He doesn't fuck the corpses."

"He *fucks* the *corpses*."

"Chuuya."

"I bet he's fucking the corpses right now."

"*Why* would he be fucking the corpses —"

"Don't act all *princess-y* right now."

"*What?*"

"Some freaks are into it," Chuuya insisted, swerving down the barely paved road, framed by stalks of sunflowers. "Which is — *hell*. Poor assholes don't even get a say in it. God. If they had left it in their will or something —"

"You think *anyone*," Dazai cut through, staring at him as if genuinely concerned, "Would leave, *fuck my corpse raw*, in their *will* —"

"Tell me he doesn't look like a freak."

"He looks like whatever would come out if one of Kajii's lemon bombs and George Kingstain decided to procreate."

"That's exactly what I mean!" He frowned. "*George Kingstain?* I haven't thought about that man in years."

Dazai shrugged. "He had a creepy face."

"Well, *yeah*, but —"

"Maybe it's this whole *pseudo-mind-control Ability* business we dealt with," the boy continued, finally settling on a radio station that satisfied him — German folk music. Sprawling lower and lower into his seat, the belt half choking him, he added: "Brings back memories."

Sourness crowded the corner of Chuuya's mouth. In the distance, the scarlet roofs of the small town appeared in their line of vision.

It had been almost two months.

"Not quite the same," he commented, at last, eyes pointedly on the road. "Dante's *Limbo* was like being — stuck, I guess. One memory, one scenario. Ueda's *Tales* was more of a blockbuster parody of your life — only the director found out about his divorce by text ten minutes ago, and he *strongly* believes in method acting."

"Method acting," Dazai echoed.

“Lippman hated that shit,” Chuuya said. “Unless it helped to fuck with Albatross. Once he came to work in a bear suit. Come on. We would have been at the *villa* hours ago if *you* hadn’t —”

“Pot,” the boy yawned. “Kettle.”

He didn’t wait for him to leave the car, after he parked it in front of the only bar in town — and he made sure not to slam the door, pretending *that* spot on his back didn’t itch a bit more whenever the now-dead Ueda Akinari was mentioned.

*We’re to assume you’ll be struck by another attack, at some point or another,* Mori had said, tracing the pulsing, vividly red lines of the half moon tattoo in his makeshift clinic. *These marks must have played a bigger part in the effects of that Ability than we believed. You’ll need to be careful.*

Chuuya cared very little.

He hadn’t seen worms crawl out of his interloquutor’s eyes in a week — it was the longest he had gone without. His notebook had been hidden under his bed; his visits at the cemetery had been peaceful. *Brace*, the whispers kept insisting. Arahabaki was a voiceless storm, though. *Brace for impact.*

Gravity had stuck to him like a stray since the beginning. Chuuya had never quite figured out how to fall.

*I will*, he promised.

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“Did you arrive late yesterday?” Kouyou asked, nudging his floating body, legs dangling over the freezing lake. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

*An occasion to celebrate our latest, arduous accomplishments,* the woman had said, when she’d managed to corner him to tell him about the gathering. The guest list had widened significantly since last year — Chuuya had taken it as a great occasion to understand just *who* Kouyou trusted through the mess of the new Mafia’s hierarchy.

“We had to drag the corpses to the grinding rolls at the warehouse,” he explained, through the rush of the lake in his ears. The sun was blinding — somewhere to his right, he could hear Kajii talk Madame Tanaki’s ear off. “Boss wanted us to leave a — visual warning.”

She hummed. “As long as you didn’t stain my carpets.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “As if you’ve never redecorated with blood?”

“Do you *want* Golden Demon to skewer you?”

“As if,” he scoffed. “Scraped my knees with her one time too many for that to happen.”

A small commotion waited by the endless free space right outside the *villa*, half sprawled in the grass and half crowding the small wooden dock on the gently calm lake. Mori, skimming through medical records, was attempting to convince Elise not to drag him into the water; in a horrifying pair of swimsuits, Hirotsu was teaching a flower-dress and untied-hair sporting Gin how to weave a sailor knot with some old rope. All the way to the porch, Akutagawa was hiding his pale skin from the sun, wearing a pair of sunglasses he could have *sworn* he had seen in Dazai’s office at least once.

Kajii swan dove from the dock — Tanaki clapped, politely unimpressed. Some of Kouyou’s subordinates sunbathed, spreading conversation to gather their Executive gossip.

Chuuya breathed in so deeply it burned.

“Is Dazai still in his room?”

“If he crawled back there after climbing from the window,” He shrugged. The water was all-encompassing; he had viciously fought the instinct to fear it — and even more viciously the one to be lulled by it. “He wanted to set the ivy on the walls on fire.”

The woman’s face grew sour. “I should go check on him —“

“He’s probably admiring the beams on the roof and chanting about, *how great it’d be to hang himself from there*,” Chuuya interrupted. “Leave it. I’ll get this User from the *Guerrilla* to grow you more ivy. Didn’t you tell me you had someone you wanted me to meet?”

She studied him for a moment more.

“Come on,” she concluded, hooking the heart-shaped sunglasses Elise had forced on her to the clip of her bikini. “They’re just by the stables.”

The man and the woman fit like peculiarly painted puzzle pieces — there was something eerie about their frames, but inevitably matched. Under ink-tinged hair, they wore traditional clothing in cerulean shades that matched the lake mirror Kajii kept crashing. When they raised their heads from the horse they were grooming — he got the weird, familiar feeling of being watched by more eyes than first announced.

“Chuuya,” Kouyou started, as they bowed, “Allow me to introduce you to our newest recruits, the Kyoukas.”

“*Possible* recruits, my lady,” the woman pointed out — not unkindly. The merciless line of both hers and her husband’s spine was reminiscent of bodies Chuuya had crushed — assassins. “We are still considering your offer.”

“A lifetime as a freelancer is hard to give up on,” her husband agreed. He offered Chuuya a vacant smile. “May I assume this is the ward you wished to introduce to us?”

“My most successful,” Kouyou confirmed — a soft sound; a finger tapping under his chin. Her hands sneaked on his shoulders; Chuuya wondered if it was *meant* to feel so different from Mori’s brand of ownership. “You told me you know every bloodied name the Mafia has allowed to slither through the underground.”

“We do.”

“Can you guess his?”

Both their gazes lingered on him — their symbiosis somewhat distressing. Chuuya raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. Lady Kyouka’s eyes landed on his gloves.

Her unconcerned smile froze.

“Ah,” she said. No look was exchanged with her husband; nonetheless, when she bowed again, the man followed. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Chuuya studied the top of their heads; bowed only his head. “Likewise. Assuming we will be colleagues soon.”

“I have high hopes,” Kouyou assured. Over the doors of the stables, he caught Mackerel’s eyes, as he boredly neighed over some hay. “And you might just be the one to thank for it, little god.”

He frowned. “Me?”

“You captured Ueda Akinari,” Lord Kyouka explained, eyes squinting at him carefully. A sour taste sneaked through his teeth. “He was a detested name in our business. Unlikely alliances were formed in an attempt to get rid of him — many friends were lost.”

“If you dare to call anyone in our business a friend,” his wife piped in.

“It wasn’t just me,” Chuuya interrupted them — felt Kouyou’s eye twitch. On the small of his back, the unfading moon tattoo — that had been nothing but *humming* in the last weeks — seemed to pulse. “My shitty partner helped. Ability aside, he’s just a man. I’m good at breaking men.”

“Godly so, if the voices are to be trusted.” Something in her gaze seemed hungry. She had an Ability — Chuuya could bet on it.

“I don’t know if gods trust voices,” he said.

“We shall hope they don’t.”

“No,” he concurred. “But we can discuss that more when you get inked in our name.”

The couple exchanged a fondly exasperated glance. “He’s as stubborn as you are, my lady.”

Kouyou preened.

“Business matters aside — we certainly owe much to both of you, Gravity Manipulator,” lord Kyouka insisted. “We almost lost our lives to that crafty man. Our daughter could have been made an orphan.”

He tilted his head. “You have a daughter?”

“Almost ten,” His wife smiled — *sincerely* warm, for the first time. Something unreachable and unbloodied; enough to have Kouyou’s fingers twitch strangely at her side. “A clever girl. She is part of the reason why we wish to join.”

“The Port Mafia grants protection to all of its members’ relatives,” Kouyou tutted, with a tone that made it clear it wasn’t the first time. “And the pay is good — *Great*, for raising a child. You would *love* her, Chuuya. She’s a little flower.”

“I’ve got some idea of how curious brats can be at that age,” Chuuya considered, only somewhat surprised by the greed in the woman’s tone. “How long until she starts questioning your work trips?”

Slug and Mackerel neighed in harmony.

“Alright, alright,” Lady Kyouka chuckled. “You mafiosi are an insistent lot. You might wish to be careful — eagerness often signals weakness.”

“Defeating Ueda Akinari didn’t come without betrayal,” he replied, undeterred. “We’re past the need to pretend power isn’t in numbers. Anyway — most unregistered Ability Users need our protection more than we need their blades.”

Something passed by her eyes. Without a word, her husband let his shoulders fall an inch.

Kouyou cleared her throat. “Well —“

“*Chuuya!*”

Hanging off Hirotsu like a monkey in a pink swimsuit, Elise waved her arms madly. Once she managed to catch his attention, she screeched: “You haven’t played with me *once!* You promised you’d teach me how to swim. I’ll make Rintarou whip you!”

Chuuya sighed. “If you’ll forgive me.”

Despite feeling the trio’s gazes on him all the way to the dew-wet grass on the other side of the *villa* — he shrugged thoughts off his shoulder, arms automatically ready to catch Elise when she flung herself off the old man.

“These days, Dazai’s always in the stupid dungeons with those stupid prisoners of yours,” she lamented, hair brushing the ground. Chuuya secured his grip and spun them around, turning her voice in a half muffled twirl. “Q is in the stupid cell. And you’re always on missions. Who is a girl meant to play with?”

“Lise, we have *jobs*. ”

“*I’m* a job,” she insisted. “The prettiest one! Now let me draw on you.”

He was forced on his stomach and robbed of his shirt before he could protest. Hirotzu and Gin only allowed him near their well tied ropes after he had dried himself — Elise wasted no time extracting colors from the back of her swimsuit, and beginning to connect lines between the scars on his back.

“Thank you,” Hirotzu added nothing to that — apart from the endlessly *tired* gaze he sent in the child’s direction. Sitting close to him, Gin hid a giggle.

Leaning on his elbows to watch some of Kouyou’s subordinates splash in the lake, Chuuya asked: “So, how’s your search going?”

The two exchanged a glance.

It was somewhat comical — Gin looked younger than her age; the Spring sun had burned Hirotzu’s face to the point of adding wrinkles to his collection. They reminded him of some satirical drawing at the end of a newspaper; like there ought to be speech-bubbles about generational change and economic crises over their heads.

The man *liked* Gin — he knew. And the kid had a tendency to huddle by the Commander’s side on car journeys. *Handler*; Chuuya considered, a bit nostalgic, *until the end of his days*.

“Are you asking as an Executive, sir?” the old man questioned, eventually.

Chuuya rolled his eyes. “I’m asking because there’s a waiting line for lunch, and I might as well pass the time.”

“None of them are impressive,” Gin said. Her voice took him by surprise — while it fit with the lilac flowers sewn in her dress, it was at stark odds with the spiky parts of her fighting gear. He wondered if she didn’t talk out of knowledge her voice *wouldn’t* be taken for a man’s; or if she kept quiet for any other reason. “Good *Lizards*, but not good *commanders*. ”

“Mind your words,” Hirotzu warned. He moved her thin fingers away from a badly made knot, very gently — showed her the correct twists in slow motion. “You’re no Commander either.”

“I will be,” she retorted, unconcerned.

The gelid tip of one of Elise’s crayons dug in his clavicle. It wasn’t as cold as her own hands, though — a touch he was used to. Most of the syndicate felt permanently unsettled by her glass gaze — Chuuya had no true issues with her eyes. Sometimes, still, he got stuck studying the perfect segments of her palms — feeling the skin under his gloves itch.

Something blindingly *pale* caught his gaze. “Have you considered him?”

Hirotzu turned to follow his line of vision. Gin didn’t.



“*Akutagawa?*” the man echoed.

His tone fell familiarly on the grass. Most of the syndicate shared their attitude for the older brother of the youngest new arrivals. A general mistrust, arisen from the bodies he effortlessly left on both training grounds and moonlit streets — an harmless contempt of sorts, softened by the habitual sight of his silhouette, always hovering in the corners. Dazai spoke grandly of his potential; it was clear to most he *did not* do the same to him.

Chuuya watched him run his fingers through a shard of *Rashomon*, wrapped over his head like an umbrella. He was leaning against the shut doors of the *villa* — he couldn’t shake off the feeling of watching a guard dog.

The *one* shut window on the first floor only heightened the vision.

“He wouldn’t accept,” his sister answered, immediately, wrapping the rope around the bruises on her candid knuckles. “He’s not aiming for any consolation prize.”

He blinked: “The *Black Lizards* are the second biggest squadron in the syndicate.”

“Yours’ the biggest.”

Both Chuuya and Hirotsu paused.

“He wants the *Guerrilla?*” the Commander asked.

Through the unmerciful attacks Elise delivered on his spine, dot after dot, he scoffed — only briefly disbelieving. “You ought to shake some sense in that brooding head of his, Gin. Saying this to my face would be treason.”

“He’s certainly ambitious.”

“That’s *my* squad,” he reminded Hirotsu. He tried to imagine Hamamoto bowing in front of the black and white squirt; X’s towering frame over him. “He can’t have my squad.”

Unhesitantly, Gin met his eyes — a merit, certainly. “Executive Dazai promised it to him, if he performs well.”

A body landed in the water. The ricochet of cobalt drops made no sound; Chuuya set his jaw over it, instead. He shrugged off wet grass from his clenched fist — sitting up so quickly Elise rolled off his back with a yelp. “I’m gonna murder him.”

“Sir —“

“Who the fuck does he think he is —“

“Maybe you ought to be rational,” Hirotsu insisted, habitually hopeless. “You could ask —“

“Talk to you later, Grandpa,” he muttered, stalking towards the porch. “After I sicc Q on that bandaged piece of —“

“Who’s Q?” he heard Gin ask, a bit lower the further he marched. Both Hirotsu and Elise opened their mouths to answer, on very different pitches — Chuuya kept his eyes on Akutagawa’s form, swaying awkwardly in his seat, feet kicking. His eyes were on the bundle of papers in his lap.

The kid watched him approach, evidently startled. “Sir —“

“I don’t care what delusions that bastard is filling your head with,” Chuuya informed him, dropping his hip on the porch banister. “But if the *Black Lizards* offer you a spot, *accept it*. Executive or not Executive, that vagabond has *no authority* to sell out other people’s squads —“

Something distinctively *childish* set his jaw. “He said he will give it to me if I managed to satisfy him —“

“I genuinely don’t care.”

“— so he thinks I *can* satisfy him.”

“That’s what you’re focusing on?” Chuuya stared at him, disbelieving. He snapped his fingers in his face. “Kid, are you listening? You can’t *have* the *Guerrilla*. What the — I already have it.”

Akutagawa blinked, perplexed. “You won’t have it forever.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“That’s what Executive Dazai said,” the boy insisted, curling up on his seat a bit more — too gloomy to be a whine, but *almost*. “*Don’t be dense. No way that lasts much longer, with how he’s been doing.* Word for word.”

Chuuya felt his knuckles crack.

Hesitantly Akutagawa attempted: “Isn’t it promising that he said —“

“I have no time or strength of will to stand your hero worship, Akutagawa,” Chuuya cut him off, teeth clenched. “I would tell you to take that to someone who cares, but I doubt you’d find it.”

His expression darkened — behind it, the openness he’d dared to display fell abruptly fast.

A rattling feeling went through his bones. A discomforting familiarity was stuck in it — the tears-sticky cheeks of the kids in Suribachi City; haunted by ghosts and strays and bullets. Adam’s logically disapproving gaze, between it all.

*Not his fault*, Chuuya reminded himself. *Or do you want to be like the bastard?* ”

He sighed, squeezing his eyes to rub the space between them. Studying the flowers twinned with the beams the roof of the porch, he offered: “Sorry, kid. Didn’t mean that.”

Akutagawa's eyes snapped up to him, wide as moons.

Unhesitatingly, Chuuya flopped down on a wooden box abandoned by the swinging couch — and pretended not to see him move as far from him as possible. Stealing seconds of Tanaki's laughter to stabilize his heartbeat — he added: "You've got no place in the machinations of Dazai's contempt towards me."

A pause. "I know that."

"I don't think he was mocking you," he insisted, and saw something in the boy's shoulders relax because of it. "If he told you he believes you could get to the point of commanding a squadron — then he does. The bastard doesn't spew bullshit unless it's entertaining."

*He's a bit of a distrusting cat*, Tanaki had once said, about the Akutagawa eldest. Chuuya had disliked the oversimplifying description — the mental image of his slippery black frame roaming through the corners of the Headquarters, eyes on a long-since found target; only walking on the spots Dazai's feet had already touched. He disliked picturing Dazai's bandaged fingers holding him by the nape — dangling him over the edge between an honorable Mafia survival, and an appealing cruelty he believed effective.

"It took me a while to be given a squad," Chuuya offered, uncertain of the reason. "After the *Dragon Head Conflict*. Partly 'cause I kept refusing one."

Akutagawa glanced at him. His spine was bent like a shrimp's; Kouyou had beaten that same posture out of him in the first two months in the Mafia. There was a tilt to his head that said he was constantly prepared to turn away — but not quite *disinterest*, still. "Why?"

A bitter spasm went through his fingers. It had been weeks since he had watched *Corruption* scars bloom in the corner of his gaze. Ueda had promised one last meeting; Chuuya had told him to fuck off.

Distantly — a memory that belonged to his limbs, but not himself — he recalled the sound of concrete cracking under his feet. A man burning diamonds; six corpses under the debris — all of it destroyed by his own hunger for something already decaying.

"Didn't think I'd be fit to keep it alive," he concluded, shrugging.

Akutagawa flinched. Chuuya snorted.

"If you don't mind —" He knocked his knuckles against the wall. Over at the dock, Elise pulled Mori's scarf to drag him into the water. The man maintained his composure, and his too-large hand between her shoulder blades. "Before we consider any role switches, I would enjoy knowing you'll keep *any* squad on its feet for something more than Dazai's approval."

Akutagawa seethed. "Do you *always* have to —"

"Mind your tone."

"I'm striving for strenght, *sir*," he snapped. "Not for Executive Dazai's headpats."

“You’re saying you wouldn’t enjoy one?”

He moved to stand.

Chuuya grabbed his coat belt, pulling him back into his seat — successfully making him stumble, vanishing his makeshift *Rashomon* cape. At last, some sun touched his skin. “Now don’t go and be dramatic,” he tutted. “Just playing around. It’d do you good. Say, have you made any friends at all since you joined?”

“What does that have to do with —“

As he spluttered, Chuuya removed his hat, plopping it on his head. “You can’t expect to last much in the Port Mafia without alliances. Why are you holed up working in a corner during a good opportunity?”

“Executive Kouyou invited us for a work gathering —“

“There’s tactic in all and every breath out of the Executives’ mouths, Akutagawa,” Chuuya offered him his blankest smile. “Forgive me for overstepping — this is a lesson, whether you’ll accept it from me or not. Every person Ane-san has invited, every room she gave, every conversation she’s forcing between them — all of it has a reason. And *you* are here for a reason.”

He curled an eyebrow. “I’m just saying — you should take advantage. Not go over reports.”

“It’s not a report,” Akutagawa muttered. His eyes roamed over the crowd behind the railing with different intensity, though. “We’ve been sent patrolling near the edge of the settlement, these last few nights — it’s swarming with citizens all hours of the day. I asked the Intelligence to figure out what that was about.”

Chuuya frowned. “And?”

“Just the protesters,” The boy shrugged. “The activists are still looking for sponsors to restart the reconstruction in Suribachi City — but the project was abandoned years ago. At most they’ll get funds. According to the Archivists, it’ll all be over in two weeks — at most.”

An awfully vivid pounding took over the side of his cranium — an idea refusing to unsettle. The same obduracy Shirase had hated; as he called his name from the top of some crater-way Chuuya had decided to explore, no mind for bruises and dangers. *What would we do if you —*

“You’re from there too, aren’t you?”

Akutagawa’s eyebrows — the little left of it — curled into a frown. It made him look younger; the careful way he pulled the corners of the papers settled weirdly in Chuuya’s chest. “We were at the outskirts,” he admitted, gawky to the bone marrow of his stiff spine. “Sometimes people from Suribachi tried to rob us, though.”

He blinked. “Did I ever do that?”

“No,” he answered, with a nasty glance he probably ought to discipline. “But some of the other kids had heard the Sheep welcomed all children in need, so they wanted to try and explore the crater — look for you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Over the edge of the chain of his hat, his jaw grew into a hard line. “I could protect them myself. There was no need.”

*Ah*, Chuuya thought.

The neck handkerchief Akutagawa always wore was never stained with blood when he happened to glance at it. He wondered how often he changed it — if he dared to remove something Dazai had given him. If he knew enough about his rattled lungs to understand death.

“That’s what I thought, too.”

A look. “And?”

“And look how we both ended up.”

The boy’s lips parted. He snapped them shut again less than a moment later — turned his head away from him, studying Gin’s profile. His eyes fell on the papers again. Chuuya thought about the men in the bar downtown — the words from the News; the dossiers in the Senator’s room.

An idea hummed along to the wind.

“There you are. How come you boys aren’t taking advantage of the warm water?”

Akutagawa jumped to his feet, bending into a bow faster than Chuuya could keep up with. From the lowest step of the wooden stairs, Mori — in his unusually casual clothes, and the surgical blade he *knew* he was hiding in his shoe — seemed almost impressed.

“I’m plotting for the smartest way to drop our Akutagawa in when he least expects it, Boss,” Chuuya offered, along with a head bow. “All that time locked in the training grounds is ruining his complexion.”

The doctor sighed. “It’s certainly ruining mine. I can hardly afford to get sunburned. Elise will slap me for mere amusement.”

“I’m sure she won’t,” he lied. He stood up, forcing Akutagawa to stand by the back of his coat. “As you said, sir — a great time for a bath. Come on, *hop-hop* —”

“Let go of me,” Akutagawa snapped, as he curled away from his grasp like a flower following the sun — protesting in that same monotone way of his, when Chuuya managed to get him in a headlock, pulling him down the porch.

“It’ll do you good,” he assured, dragging him through the grass as his heels dug the earth. For someone who had grown up in the streets, he didn’t seem particularly adept at raw play fighting. “The slums may have given you an enviable immune system, apart from that attitude — but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t experience the wonders of the upper world.”

“I have witnessed *tons* of —“

“Remember that thing I told you about the *ouija board*? Showing you how it works and all? Somebody needs to intervene before *you* become the ghost. We do need to get you out of that coat for it.”

“You will *not* —“

“Wait, is water bad for your lungs?” He paused, arm flexing around his flagging limbs. “That’d be sad. Have you been drinking Tanaki’s tea? Should I go get you one of those breathing *thingies*? Or do you—“

“*Let go of me!*”

Chuuya saw *Rashomon* arrive from miles — laughing, he jumped away before the relatively small talon could draw a bloodied line down his chest, and watched Akutagawa *sprint* towards his sister, muttering. It didn’t take long for Mori to reach him, hands behind his back and a glint in his eyes that was distantly interested.

He watched the Akutagawa siblings hush among themselves, and offered: “A spirited young man, don’t you think?”

“Woefully stubborn brat,” Chuuya scoffed, lips curled. “But his heart is in the right place.”

“Certainly. It will be a shame to watch him die.”

His smile vanished.

The *villa* had never been silent — not a day Chuuya had spent there. It didn’t fall quiet that time either — it stayed framed by chuckles and protests and words, through the splashes of the lake and the sound of the dock creaking under overexcited feet. Mori kept smiling.

“So it *is* that bad,” he commented, at last.

“Did you think Dazai was kidding?”

Not quite. Perhaps he had assumed cruelty was a necessary badge on his tongue in any letter following Akutagawa’s name; perhaps he’d hoped for him to be lying.

“It’s part of why I was rather skeptical, when Dazai had him join us,” the Boss continued, unconcernedly. “While undoubtedly powerful, he’s an investment that will have to be squeezed to its maximum potential in the little time it has left. Great power — but short-lived. Dazai swears it will be more than worth it, though.”

The ivy from the side of the *villa* circled his lungs, affectionate like a purring cat. Chuuya tried to remember all the strays he had watched starve as a child; all the children he had heard breathe for the last time. He'd learned unfairness long ago.

The lesson never got old. "He's a kid."

"I know," Mori glanced at him. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't quite understand if there was any sort of human displeasure under the first layer of his skin. He didn't want Akutagawa dead; Chuuya couldn't decide if he cared about *why* he didn't. "Dazai has a tendency to drag wounded birds on the porch, though." He tilted his head. "I do wonder if he does it out of connection — or curiosity for the unknown."

He didn't answer.

Gin was frowning at something Hirotsu was explaining. She studied Elise with pensive eyes; then, for some reason — she studied Chuuya.

"Any progress on the tattoo matter?" he asked, once the silence got too heavy. It sounded better in his head than — *is this a lesson too?*

The man sighed. "Fumiko Enchi is one strong, stubborn woman. She would have been an ace to add to our lines — unfortunately, she's still convinced the *Division* will get her out."

"Through the moles?"

"Moles," Mori echoed. A bit taunting. "If there's one thing I have learned, it's that three people making a deal will each betray one another, once the deal gets boring," He offered him a smile — composed, but slightly unstable. "I have no care for strangers' eyes in our hallways, Chuuya. We will find them, as we always have. We'll crush them."

*Dazai will*, he didn't say. He had read the archives — had taken part in the executions. The searching techniques were his; the punishments were his. Infestation might have been inevitable — but it was Dazai who had piled up rat traps in every corner of the *Haunted Floors*.

He thought about the man's voice in his in-ear. The ballroom bowing at his feet.

"Sir, have you read them?"

Mori blinked at him.

"The files," he explained. "My files. Have you read them?"

The man's eyes roamed through his face. Chuuya held his gaze, unflinching.

He'd dug through his desk, when the man had been locked in the Hospital — grave robber and terrible student as he was, despite all of Kouyou's spilled sweat. He knew Mori was still gathering his blurred out traces; he also knew he had *something*.

*You don't care*, Chuuya had been reminding himself daily. *You never have. So why do you care?*

"I have," Mori answered. Nothing more — because the rules had long since been set. Chuuya knew just how long his chains were — knew it to the dot and the collateral. He had hammered them in place himself.

He wouldn't have unshackled them either, given the chance — so he took the hit quietly, as he always did. *The need to know where you come from is proof of what I already know*, Verlaine's diaries had warned him. *I believe humans tend to take things for granted.*

"Chuuya."

"Sir."

"Why were you mad at Akutagawa?"

He scrunched up his nose. "I wasn't — he didn't do anything. I lost my composure. Dazai has been spouting bullshit to him again — he's not to blame."

"Dazai," the Boss repeated. He glanced over to the one closed window upstairs; Chuuya felt an unexplainable urge to tear his eyes away from it. "What was it this time?"

"Bastard's going around promising the *Guerrilla* to his pupil," Chuuya rolled his eyes. "It's whatever. I'll let him throw a temper tantrum when he realizes he's delusional. It might even be mildly entertaining."

Mori kept quiet for long seconds. From the edge of the docks, Kajii jumped in the water again, laughing loud enough to startle every nesting bird in the woods framing the *villa*. Eventually — the man smiled again.

"Yes," he concluded. "I believe it will be."

Through the quiet between them — that stubborn shard of an idea settled.

"Boss," Chuuya started, slowly, pulling his spine upright. "About the search for enterprising wards Ace mentioned —"

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By the time the mixture of chronic ache and the burn of genuine fun began straining his limbs, the sun had set.

Chuuya dragged himself out of the water through breathless laughter, watching Akutagawa direct *Rashomon*'s talons to an approaching Kajii, both of them soaked from the gravity-push he had given them. The feat had brought Gin to tears — Hirotsu, locked in a serious convo with Kouyou and the Kyoukas, had *almost* lost his composure.

Wins and losses taken — namingly, the thirty seconds Tanaki had managed to keep him underwater for — he shrugged water off, wetting Kajii some more. Then, he made his way into the *villa*.

Dazai was where he'd expected him to be.

"Kouyou *will* change the binds in your room, if you hate the way it's lit *so much*," Chuuya let the bundle under his bedsheets know, shutting the door behind him. "She's too obsessed with her guests' stellar reviews. You know she'll do it."

Not an answer came.

He hadn't really expected it.

The room was drowned in a warm golden tinge — it turned the shut curtains yellow and carved squares of light over the furniture, guiding his naked feet on the cold floor. Chuuya changed out of his soaked clothes. He swore he could *feel* eyes on his back — but when he turned, only the pile of blankets from the wardrobe stared back.

"Aren't you suffocating under there?" he called, drying his hair with a loose shirt. "Kajii got a sunburn shaped like Kouyou's umbrella — he fell asleep with the thing on his back. And it's *red*. Like, *shitty* red."

He bent to search under the desk, pulling the cold surface of the laptop close. Hands twirling through cables, he added, like a second thought: "I told them you were too bored to join, not sick."

"I'm not sick."

"That's what makes you talk," Chuuya threw the laptop on the bed — then followed, swaying along to the rattled mattress; digging until he was cooconed under the warmth of the blanket. "I meant *literally* sick, bastard. You've spent a week sniffing like the crackheads hunters from *Building Three*. Bet you've been leaving your nasty snot all over my sheets."

A twitch.

With his gaze set on the cobalt liquid light of the computer, Dazai was into nothing more than a stain in the corner of his vision — distant enough to fit a corpse between them. He didn't speak again.

"This is my bed," Chuuya let him know. "I have stuff to research. If you've got a problem with that, go sleep in your room."

This time, when he turned, he met his less than impressed eyes.

*Eye* — and he wasn't sure he wanted to tackle the mythical beast; if whatever had fiddled with Dazai's mood had done it so *badly*, he had felt the need to stay covered up in a room Chuuya had needed to lock-pick his way inside.

He sort of hated that ingrained knowledge.

Chuuya hated in shades, though — in the way his shoulders did not tense and his feet moved accordingly to make space, when he felt Dazai scur minimally closer. Enough to get a taste of body warmth into that *slimy* skin of his, he assumed — enough to hook two fingers in a hole of his shirt, his cheek deep in the pillow until it disappeared.

Dazai had been lock-picking his way inside all of Chuuya's homes for years now. The mattress kept dipping, and Chuuya kept letting it.

Eyes on the screen, he said: "Got no stories to tell me?"

The cranky alarm on the nightstand ticked along to his breath. The walls were too sturdy — he couldn't hear a peep from the chaos outside.

"Perhaps on imperiously giving away other people's squads?"

*No*, the finger on his hip traced. And — *you tell a story instead*.

It should have been harder, knowing what Dazai was thinking when his face was hidden between sheets and — *knots*, he grimaced; recalling hours spent almost *balding* the other boy with a hairbrush from Kouyou's purse, after a mission had dropped them in the sewers. *My hair is part of my charm*, Dazai had protested, with that tone that said he only cared for the sake of doing *something*. He'd had pulled harder; had bitten down one or two comments on, *if you stopped treating your body like a dumpster* —

*So much from the guy who refused to buy shampoo*, he'd have said, though. So Chuuya had kept quiet. Damage control. He forced one hand off the keyboard, abandoning it in the boy's hair, and pretended not to feel him curve towards the familiar hum out of his mouth.

"Here's a story," he offered — as grainy pictures some photograph had taken of the alleys where Chuuya had learned to run lit up the screen. "Two weeks after I watched Koda hold his brother's corpse in his arms, Noguchi told me an Executive should save people."

Undeniable quietness had gone through Dazai's bones at the first touch of his fingers — his body plummeted through the mattress. He didn't stiffen. Chuuya drew circles behind his ear, shaped like the ripples in the lake downstairs — with his nails, because it *ought* to hurt.

"Felt kinda weird," he admitted. "I hadn't touched the kid, but I had my shoes in his blood. And you were upstairs — swearing the Orphanage couldn't have been saved. Neither of us was an Executive. I was glad for it. But Pianoman used to say that shrugging off responsibility is the, *earliest sign of free will people will enact*." He scoffed. "Pianoman loved talking bullshit."

A soundless video on the top of an article about the protests started playing on the screen. The cameras all roamed too close to untrusting children's faces — they followed the tired steps of women and men who lived behind plastic sheets and storm-ruined wood.

Blindingly white subtitles read — *WHO, IF NOT YOU?*

“Ueda’s Ability wasn’t about responsibility. It was about nonexistent ghosts,” Chuuya added. “But I’ve spent a month looking to make amends anyway. Isn’t that weird?”

Dazai moved a bit — just enough to settle at least a corner of his gaze to the screen. He was a blank canva; his press of two knuckles on Chuuya’s waist was sickly and cold. He wanted to protest — wanted to ask, *why are my stories always mine and yours belong to a stranger?*

Two children skipped on the screen. They were both crying; the camera followed, stubborn. Pressed against his overheated skin, the silver ring around Dazai’s forefinger was colder than ice.

“You know, it’s kind of fun downstairs,” Chuuya said.

Very quietly — very indulgently; though he did not know to which one of them — Dazai foot nudged his own, only once.

Chuuya felt like he’d somehow offered a disgustingly desperate sight — muffled behind a bloodied picture. One of lingering bandages and a lingering eye, rounder than the moon, in the middle of Chuuya’s most loved ones. Dazai fit nowhere but in the Mafia’s golden picture frames. Dazai didn’t fit at all.

*Why do you want him to?*

*I don’t*, he scoffed.

The camera razed the deepest depths of the crater. Chuuya recalled makeshift funerals; the warmth of Shirase’s palm — shaking his hand on the port deck to London, with no envy and no rage and no *nothing*. They were the same age. They had never been, before.

*One last one*, Ueda whispered.

Chuuya pulled his hand away, pretending not to feel blood under his nails.

“Try not to snore like a haunted tractor,” he concluded, turning on his side, offering him his shoulders. “I have shit to do.”

He jolted awake instants before Tanaki's hand could shake his shoulder.

"Hey," she whispered as he adjusted to his surroundings. The ajar door painted a golden line all the way to his face, forcing him to blink against the darkness of the room. Chuuya's neck hurt; his arm was asleep under the still-on laptop. "Sorry to wake you. They're asking if you can drag the piano outside. There's a bonfire."

Chuuya squeezed his eyes shut, attempting to wring the slumber out of himself. His body would hate him for that unideal sleeping position.

Madame Tanaki's words registered a bit late.

"The *piano*?"

"Kajii wants to sing us some Opera," In the dim light, the woman's excitement was brighter than it'd been in a while. "The Kyoukas know how to play, so. I tried to knock on Dazai's room, but he didn't answer. Should we —"

"He's out," Chuuya interrupted, crawling to his feet, shutting the computer. He pushed the blankets as subtly as possible — built their bundle over the other sleeping boy. "To chase fireflies and hanging ropes. No need to bother with him."

She seemed unsure. "Won't he be sad to miss the fun of the whole weekend?"

"*Sad*," Chuuya closed his fingers around her wrist, pulling her out of the room before her gaze could linger. "Shitty Dazai's never sad."

His appearance — under the star-filled sky garden of the *villa*, framed by the moon-reflected lake and the mafiosi sprawled on onyx grass — was welcomed with a roar of exasperation and Kajii's enthusiastic arm movements, as he was directed to the play-room where Kouyou's old piano laid. Tanaki did her best to guide him and his floating baggage; her carefulness came to an abrupt pause when she tapped the small of his back, and dared to whisper: "Any news from the cursed front?"

Chuuya didn't drop the piano on Hirotsu's head. Nonetheless, he landed it too harshly next to the Akutagawas' murmuring frames, startlingly *Rashomon* out of its slumber.

"Sorry," he called, tapping the instrument.

"Apologize to *us*, not the piano —"

As Kajii dragged a clearly confused lady Kyouka to the small bench, and Mori attempted to convince Elise to dance with him, he turned to Tanaki. "*The cursed front?*"

"I'm simply concerned," the woman replied — and oddly, he believed her.

Statics had electrified the air between them ever since her wedding. Despite the distant warmth she had never truly stopped displaying — it was the first time she looked him in the eyes in months.

“I heard Ueda’s last words,” Tanaki said. “And the torturers always talk — Fumiko has been endlessly taunting about that promised last curse. *Her revenge on that redhead of yours*, she calls it —“

He huffed. “Did she give any intel on how a dead man’s Ability could still act on the living?”

“She swears it has to do with the tattoos. But she doesn’t know anything about the User the Division paired with Ueda, so —“

Disappointment failed to show — Kouyou had kept him well informed on the investigation process on their latest prisoner, and her spiteful refusal to do more than lose bodily liquids on their grounds. Chuuya had survived worse than a ticking clock with nowhere to go — a part of him was convinced that the whole thing could simply be an ordeal to drive him to insanity.

*Waiting.*

“It’s fine,” he reassured her. Kajii was warming up his voice. Sitting on a regal throne of sorts someone had dragged outside, Kouyou hid an unprofessional snort behind her fan. “It’ll come. We have no way of knowing if there’s a trigger or a time limit — no point in worrying about it. I dealt with the visions for weeks. I can deal with this.”

“But —“ Tanaki attempted.

“It’s *fine*,” Lady Kyouka played a note, setting the tone. He intertwined his arm with the woman, overjoyed when she didn’t flinch. “I’ve dealt with worse. You know it,” He smiled. “Want to see if dancing under Kajii’s gargles is possible?”

The stars were too many to count — he attempted, though, pretending the lemon bomb maker’s *long* notes fit with the elegant way Tanaki moved around his hands.

It didn’t take long for the crowd to join in — Lady Kyouka did her best to play loud enough to suffocate Kajii’s strong attempts, with a rhythm feet could dance to. Kouyou dragged a blushing Hirotsu to the grass; the very moment Gin met his eyes from the other end of the circle, she pulled her brother up, uncaring about his splutters. By the third song, Elise demanded a duet — delighted, Mori clapped along, directing cold glances to Kajii whenever he seemed to wince against her screeches.

Chuuya whistled, as unsubtle as subtleness allowed — the moment his back bumped against Gin’s own, he switched their dancing partners.

“*Oh, for God’s* —“ Akutagawa snapped, the moment Chuuya clenched his hands around his wrists, trapping him in his breathing-space.

“Now move those feet!” he encouraged, kicking his petrified calves — every part of him seemingly frozen in that embrace’s awkwardness, and his face too sickly pale to grow red.

“Is forcing me into insubordination your aim?” the boy hissed, through creaking teeth. “Is this sabotage?”

“My *aim* is to rattle that stupid skeleton of yours. You’re very welcome. Fighting — that thing you love — is much like a dance, you know? *Right, Ane-san?*”

“The most graceful of them all,” she sang, eyes almost shut from the wrinkles of her grin — as she tried her best to force Hirotsu to *casqué* her — or the other way around.

“Should I kill you now, then? Will it count as battlefield loss?” Akutagawa insisted, eyes on the ground. “*Some* insubordinations can be forgiven, certainly.”

Chuuya stared.

He laughed so hard it cracked his ribs.

Kajii knew too many songs — Kyouka not nearly the same amount, so her husband took her place. Chuuya watched her bring an old phone to her ear and walk to the dock, smiling teasingly as she passed the stumbling couples of subordinates — half drunk on the same wine Chuuya had been chugging.

Much to Akutagawa’s relief, he offered him a bow and pushed him to sit down before he could begin to cough — and slithered away towards the lake.

Fireflies swarmed through the grass; he got distracted by the sight of a couple of them resting on his boots — he slowed down his steps, making sure he wouldn’t step on them when they decided to leave. By the time he reached the dock, Kyouka’s call was almost over.

She studied her reflection on the sapphire lake; then smiled gently, as she offered: “— back soon, my snowflake. I promise you.”

Once the last firefly had escaped his shoes, Chuuya said: “That’s a nice phone charm.”

The woman blinked. Nodding towards the little bunny toy hanging from her phone, Chuuya extracted his own, dangling it in front of her amazed eyes by a dozen of his own charms.

Lady Kyouka laughed. “You win this.”

“I had some friends with a *particular* sense of humor,” he replied, pocketing it again. “Some of the charms broke eons ago. I stitched them up. Might be why the phone keeps dropping around.”

“My daughter gave me mine,” By the *villa*, her husband played another song — someone, at last, dragged Kajii into a ball, leaving Elise’s high pitched tone alone. “She has a thing for bunnies. Most things in our house are bunny-themed.”

“But you call her *snowflake*.”

A glint appeared in her eyes. “That comes from a dear friend of mine,” She threw a glance to the people around the bonfire. “One your superior is very much interested in, I believe.”

Chuuya had no time to frown. Eyes set on the lake, he saw the familiar glow of a human-like silhouette appear right over Kyouka’s shoulders — long strands of cerulean hair floating over candid veils of light; and soulless eyes staring right back at him, as the woman’s *Demon* held onto her blade with a god’s ease.

A crystallized snowflake — one with a cruel gaze, but guiltless hands. “You’re the User she has been telling me about,” he gaped. “The one who’s like her.”

Kyouka smiled, bowing her head. “We have been looking for a connection in our family trees — we’ve been unsuccessful, though. At the end of the day, I suppose Abilities are more of a mystery than a strength. Fate is not to be forgotten.”

He laid his gaze on the Ability — the *Demon* regarded him with royal carelessness. None of the familiarity he could sometimes *swear* he saw in *Golden Demon*; only a similar coldness around it. “You’ll have time to understand this possible link. Once you join.”

While amused, her laughter was mostly. “The Port Mafia has a penchant for indoctrinating its members, I’m assuming?”

“It’s not indoctrination,” Chuuya pointed out. “It’s efficiency. Time is more than a resource. We have none of it to waste with people who don’t see the role we fill in the underground.”

“And what kind of role is that?”

“A safe house,” He watched Kouyou pick Elise up; twirl her around so fast that her outlines seemed to fade — vanishing among the fireflies and the stars. “A front line.”

The woman hooked a finger on the bunny charm; dangled her phone right over the lake, fearlessly quiet. “A good place to raise a child?”

“I’m seventeen,” Chuuya shrugged. “No judgement, but I’m too young to be given a brat.”

“Not too old to be one.”

He paused.

Kyouka cleared her voice. “I apologize,” she said. “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

He studied the ripples in the water — the way they broke *Demon Snow*’s veils into moonlit shards. “Whatever,” he reassured. “You’re not the first to think so. For what’s worth — I’m happy here. The job is a job. It’s not about that. You and your husband should know all about it.”

He felt her stare on the side of his face. “Are you? Happy?”

Gin tripped over her feet. Hirotsu laughed — it was a boisterous sound, somewhat rare in its relentlessness. Chuuya longed to be part of the crust of the earth itself — to *spread* his bones

until they embraced that entire city, with its towers and its rivers and its blood; until his ribs could cage it where the sky and the stars could still be seen, but rain could not enter.

*A golden birdcage*, Verlaine had written in one of his diaries. He never referred to Chuuya by name; he got lost in endless descriptions of the life he wanted for him, still. *Does realness matter more than safety? Than existence?*

“I’m more content than I have ever been,” Chuuya said, meeting her eyes, unhesitant. “I have everything. I will bleed until my last breath to keep it.”

Lady Kyouka studied him.

When her gaze found the mirror of the lake again, she was biting down whatever words had first come to mind. “Nothing better to hope for one’s child, I suppose,” she concluded, instead.

He didn’t say anything.

Understanding crowded her face again; she laughed, a bit helplessly.

“Again,” the woman said, “I apologize.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

“Perhaps. But I didn’t mean to bring back bad memories.”

Chuuya snorted.

“Something funny?” Kyouka blinked.

“Memories aren’t —“ *something I have*, he thought about telling. He decided against it — lingering on pretentious tribulations was tasteless enough without cause. “I have no care for them. There are realer things to linger on.”

She frowned — right on the edge of *polite*. “Not what I would have guessed from looking at you.”

He stared. “What is that supposed to —“

*“There you are!”*

Kouyou’s sandals knocked rhythmically against the wooden dock as she skipped to them — her smile only a tad brighter than the rows of stars. She settled her palm between his shoulder blades; it felt familiarly warm against his outlines.

“I was looking for you,” she said, accepting the nod Kyouka offered to her with a gracious tilt of her chin. “You better hope my mood is less sour than the lemonade Kajii offered this morning. How *dare* you not offer me a single dance?”

Chuuya huffed. “That’s ‘cause you keep wanting to be the lead.”



“Perhaps I’m just better at it.”

“You’re *not*. Ma’am.”

“I was the lead when you were fifteen,” she tutted, tapping his under-chin. “I shall be the lead until we’re in a grave, little god.”

“Peculiar nickname,” Kyouka intervened, caressing the ears of her bunny phone charm. When she caught Chuuya’s gaze, she blinked in the name of an inside joke.

“Related to an enemy of mine,” he offered.

Her eyebrow curled imperceptibly. “Might want to work on that, then,” She bowed. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m sure my daughter would like to wish her father goodnight as well.”

Kouyou smiled. “Let’s go dancing, then.”

For the sake of her pleased hums — her roughly lined rose-tone, singing along to the notes of the piano; as a surprisingly adept Tanaki sang a chorus in a sweet sounding language — Chuuya waited until they were swaying among the dancing pairs, to ask: “So, what game are you playing at?”

The Executive settled her arm on his waist, clearly satisfied with the forced position. Fireflies lit up around the pearls of her *kanzashi*. “Game?”

“You know,” Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “Bringing two Governmental assassins into your home, I mean.”

Kouyou didn’t pause.

Prosperous assumption that she would, of course — the *Lady of the Port* didn’t *pause*. Taking her by surprise was a feat; he had been attempting since the one and *only* time he had put a street frog in her purse, and she hadn’t even blinked.

“How long did it take you?” she asked.

“Thirteen seconds, more or less.”

“Of course.”

“No underground assassin would mention a child,” Chuuya added — he knew she reveled in the process. “If someone’s a ghost, a disappointed client won’t be able to look for anything to take from them — as countermeasure, *or* revenge. And both of them walk just like every goody two shoes jerk from the *Division*.”

Her nod wasn’t particularly impressed — but she twirled them around with the lightness of a good job on her desk. “They came to me hoping to fool our desperate recruiters,” Kouyou’s smile was a blink. “They failed.”

The music grew more cheerful.

Kajii dragged a rather blank-faced Gin into a vault of sorts, too close to the bonfire — almost burning the hem of her white dress. “How come *Golden Demon* hasn’t slaughtered them yet?”

“I want the Lady’s Ability,” Kouyou said, flippantly, with the tone Elise sported in front of toy shops. Hunger was always too vicious to lay on her features — instead, there was bloodthirst. “Her *Demon Snow* is extremely similar to my *Golden*. It will make its training absurdly easy — and we are in *severe* need of attack-oriented Abilities.”

Perplexed, he questioned: “You think you can convince her to betray the Government?”

“Something subtler,” she corrected him. “I have a theory. Your friend Iceman helped me shape it.”

Chuuya’s eyes snapped up. “*Iceman*?”

Their feet danced through uncut grass; over the almost audible texture of Mori’s gaze on them — always too knowing; *frustratingly* so, if Chuuya hesitated on it — Kouyou explained: “He used to help out the Archivists, in his free time. You must know. His proficiency had brought him to many corners of the world, and his gift allowed us to update our Users lists with remarkable swiftness.”

“His gift,” Chuuya echoed. “You mean how he was always aware of the presence of an Ability around him?”

“Precisely. A mission of sorts — only a few weeks before he was first sent to kill you, I believe — brought him to the Kyoukas,” She waved a firefly away from her nose. “That’s how I came to know about the existence of an Ability so similar to mine. His notes were somewhat confusing. He *insisted* to have sensed an Ability in the Kyoukas’ home — but at the time, only their daughter was present.”

He squinted. “You think the brat might have not developed her Ability yet?”

“Oh, no,” Kouyou replied. “I believe she will inherit her mother’s.”

Chuuya stared.

Her smile stayed pleasant. She wrapped his arm around her waist — settling her chin on his shoulder, to keep her eyes on the piano. Lips on his ear, she whispered: “The child has no Ability. If she did, the *Division*’s Archives would have been informed — unless some of their most faithful assassins had taken the decision to keep it a secret.”

“And you don’t believe that’s possible?” he insisted. “She certainly seems very protective of the kid.”

“I know how these Government fools work,” the woman replied, shaking her head. “It’s in their best interest to let the *Division* know about their Ability User child. It would make for great protection, should anything happen to them — and in their line of work, it’s certainly possible.”

“Iceman’s gift is never wrong,” Chuuya resonated, to himself. Paused. “Was.”

Her chin hovered over his shoulder, for a breath — laid down again; this time, gentler. “No, it wasn’t. Which is why we might have something of a rarity on our hands — a situation not unlike Tsuchiya Mi’s one.”

“The doctor,” he recalled. It seemed like such a long time ago. “Tsuchiya said her sister’s Ability was passed down by the man who took the two of them in.”

“Rare,” Kouyou echoed. “But definitely possible. And if the parents’ loyalty to the lighter side is as firm as it seems — we shall simply take the easier route and get their daughter.”

Chuuya hesitated. “Meaning?”

Her cheek brushed his dress shirt; she looked up at him from that sideways cradle, eyes wide like a child’s. With no hesitation, she said: “Nothing is easier to morph than youth.”

It wasn’t exactly what he had meant. “So your intention was to lure them here, and figure out a way to get the woman’s Ability out of her?”

“That’s the second part of it,” Kouyou confirmed. “First and foremost — I meant to give them an open field for their attempt to assassinate Mori.”

His eyes glanced in the pair’s direction — sharing the piano bench; mumbling gently in the space between their noses. “During the trip?”

“Probably not. They’re only here to assess defense measures, I’m assuming. They might not even be the ones to do it, when the time comes.”

“But you want to kill them here?”

“I don’t want them dead. We cannot risk *Snow Demon* leaving with Lady Kyouka’s last breath,” She twirled him by the wrists. “I only want them scared.”

“Of us?”

Kouyou’s grin sharpened. “*Terrified.*”

He could see the logic behind it. Were the Kyoukas to attack, and were they to be left alive after it — against any and all Mafia procedures — with no knowledge of the Executive’s plans for *Snow Demon* — it would keep them on anxious, *waiting* toes. Make them careless — easier to study, away from the *Division’s* eyes.

“Does Boss know?”

“It depends,” The music slowed down to an end; they bowed. Kouyou winked. “Let’s see just how many comments he makes about Elise’s bathing suit this weekend, yes?”

Stolen, laying between their secretive bodies in the Executive’s palm — Chuuya wasn’t sure of *when* she’d done it; wasn’t sure of *why*, either, if he was foolish about it — the bunny on

Kyouka's phone dangled softly, one ear slightly chipped.

"You'll be my best project," Kyouka said, a bit distantly, gentle as the fireflies' wings. "And she'll be just mine."

Her grin ran over the phone charm with something utterly devastating in it. He didn't quite manage to smile back.

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The days flew by under a scorching sun.

Chuuya and Gin agreed on an unspoken alliance to get Akutagawa out of his coat, at least *once* — with a variety of results, and some bleeding gashes on all their knees. The sight of his soaked hair and clenched fists mostly made up for it; when his cough seemed to get worse in the afternoon, though, Chuuya manipulated his way into sticking the two of them in Kouyou's collection gallery.

"You like paintings?" he asked, by the time half an hour had passed, and Akutagawa had yet to move from a particular canva.

"No," Akutagawa said.

He didn't move, still.

It was midday when he and Tanaki stopped by the lake to let their horses drink — there, as he softly muttered insults into Mackerel's mane, the woman offered tales of her more adult children's recent accomplishments.

"They're never around much," she said. "I can't fault them for that. I had plenty of occasions to spend time with them in their childhood, and I hardly ever took them. I get their resentment. The world must be much more tempting."

"Because of the syndicate?" he guessed.

"It's a difficult line of work," she commented, eventually — once they had climbed on their horses again, and he no longer expected an answer. "I always knew. I joined out of necessity — hunger and thirst. There have been times when I have *attempted* to regret my choice, but — I find it impossible. People want to survive."

He thought of cockroaches and children in plastic bags. “That’s natural.”

“Nature is amongst the cruelest beings,” Tanaki didn’t falter. “I was watching men drag corpses in my Hall while my daughter had her first recital. Now she’s all grown,” The woman caressed her horse — pale, graffitied skin against light mane. He wondered if she would ever tell him how she’d gotten those scars on her face. “There are times,” she admitted, “When I wonder what else I will one day miss.”

Chuuya leaned forward, hanging off the horse’s neck. “Can’t say I understand.”

“Of course,” She half-smiled. “You’ve never been one to linger on the long lost.”

“You all say that,” he murmured.

“Isn’t it true?”

He didn’t know. His hands felt horribly sticky, at times — pulling spider webs from abandoned apartments; bleeding themselves to raw skin in an effort not to let go.

“Tanaki,” he asked, gruff. The sun looked nice where it rose against the lake — *poetry was a thing*, he assumed; *because it lingered*. “Where we came from, or whatever that is — do you think it matters?”

“I don’t think *matter* is the issue here,” she offered, after a pause. Her eyes were far past him; her hands were tracing her tattoos. “I think most of us care, and there’s nothing to do about it.”

The horses neighed, distraught.

Mori and Kouyou dragged him to a corner of the lake to discuss recent endeavors — and the long-solved issue of Lippman’s sister. They had found her substitute rather quickly; Chuuya still had no idea of where she had been buried.

*Keep it like that*, he could hear Lippman’s grave tut, sometimes. Chuuya thought it was a bit too mean for his voice.

“If we truly wish to make the Executives meetings more scarce, we will need to reorganize countless inspection methods,” Mori sighed, watching Elise soak his scarf through the floating lemon bombs Kajii was testing in the lake. “But I still believe it to be the better option.”

“Most organizations do limitate the reach the lower ranks have over the Heads,” Kouyou agreed. “The speech you gave last month certainly gathered some appreciation for you, Boss — but I do believe the old system had some fault.”

“*Know the name, not the face?*” Chuuya recited, studying old reports — documentation from the first years of the syndicate. “It’s not a bad idea. The underground does fear the ones of us they know the least about more significantly.”

“*The shadows of the Port Mafia,*” Mori smiled.

His eyes stayed on the yellowish papers — a purposeful choice; the best one not to glance over the only shut window of the *villa*.

As far as the guests knew, the Demon Prodigy was off on some mission. Or studying the supporting beams; or trying to convince the horses to walk all over him — or any sensible excuse Chuuya had painstakingly come up with. In truth, he had yet to speak a word — and Chuuya had yet to sleep in some place other than the edge of his sweaty, sick-lined bed.

“We were having such a nice conversation, Boss,” he scoffed. “Why mention him?”

Kouyou snorted. She was quick to clear her throat — offering Mori a new file. “How about this: we push some more paperwork on that lazy fool of the Secret Executive.”

His ears unwillingly perked up.

The Boss either didn’t notice or didn’t care — the Executive, on the other hand, made sure to subtly splash some water from over the dock in his face. “He will not accept,” the man replied, too distracted by the reports in his hands. “You know it, Ozaki. We cannot go back on the conditions he set.”

“If he wasn’t *so* dedicated to his *primadonna* act, perhaps,” she muttered. “How long can one man pretend the world stops along to his whims?”

Chuuya frowned, indecisive. Despite the pointed gaze he could feel the woman direct him, at last, he dared: “Conditions?”

Mori raised his eyes.

The hint of poison in them didn’t quite fit with the peaceful scenery around him — with the neon floatie Elise had abandoned on his lap, and the water at his back, reflecting a bloodless sky. But he could imagine him silencing some stuttering subordinate from the height of his desk, inevitable and quiet — so he did, and straightened.

“It took some effort,” the man offered, when the air around them grew easier to breathe. Chuuya didn’t know *what* he had found in his search; he contented himself with it having been satisfactory. “The Secret Executive had no desire to gain his position. He relented, eventually, but he brought some conditions to the table.” Mori got another look at his face; he laughed. “The idea seems to surprise you.”

“Quite,” Chuuya squinted at the words in his laps. “The Mafia doesn’t really negotiate.”

Most of the Mafia would have killed with no mind or morals to get even a single step closer to an Executive seat. To think someone could be *begged* to accept it certainly raised questions on their character — and their priceless worth.

“We don’t,” Mori agreed. “But his requests were of no real weight. He demanded anonymity. He demanded to be assigned to teach the aspiring assassins. And he demanded to be left alone.”

He blinked. “*Verbatim?*”

*“Verbatim.”*

“The problem stands,” Kouyou insisted — just the amount of ruffled that told him she would have some *words* for him, later. “There’s only so much space one can give one of the heads of the syndicate. If we are to regroup, he shall be plagued by the reminder that he is, at the end of the day — *one of us*.”

*Unfortunately*, she didn’t conclude.

Chuuya heard it strangely clear.

Confirmation about the suspicious steps of the Kyoukas made it frustratingly hard not to keep a too evident eye on them. They went out of their way to ask about *the Demon Prodigy’s absence, are his duties holding him up?*, and to ask questions on missions that were only *rumored* to have been solved by Chuuya. They shared stories about their little girl, Izumi — and Chuuya watched Kouyou’s eyes lit up a bit more with each word.

*She’s always wanted a girl*, Dazai tapped on the sharp bone of his wrist, one night.

He didn’t question how he had come to know about the matters of a *soirée* he wasn’t taking part in. “I would know,” he rumbled, tossing in his bed — in an effort to find a less suffocatingly *warm* corner of it. He could have slept in Dazai’s room, certainly — except that was *his* room, and Chuuya wasn’t going to let himself be *thrown out*. “I’m the miserable bastard she kept trying to put in *women’s* kimonos.”

*Jealous?*, he traced.

“Go back to dying under the pillows.”

When he got up, that night — Gin found him in the kitchen, forcing his way through a cold bowl of instant noodles, under the sole light of the moon.

“Hey, kid,” he greeted, very quietly. The rush of the lake and the songs of crickets were the only sounds around. “You eaten?”

She nodded. Her nightgown was a pale shade of blue — she was a stray ray of moonlight, climbing to the too tall stool on her tiptoes. If he searched, he could see the scars *Rashomon* had left on her back. Despite her confirmation, he threw the rest of the noodles in a new bowl. She eyed it for a moment — then, with a glint Chuuya knew all too well, she set to devouring the food.

*Faster than anyone could steal*, he thought.

“Executive,” she began.

“We’re doing 3:00 A.M. snacks,” he interrupted. “Chuuya is fine. And you can sign, if you want. I don’t mind.”

Gin blinked owlishly, cheeks reddening a bit. She fiddled with her chopsticks — then laid them on the table, and signed: *what do you know about Y-U-M-E-N-O?*

He stared. “Q? What about Q?”

She gulped, fingers bending. Chuuya had dirt under his nails — he’d gone to check on a nearby contact of theirs; had buried his corpse in the garden of his wife’s side of the house, so that she would stumble on it first thing in the morning. The burying was always *persistent* behind his eyelids — more than any final blow.

*There is some responsibility in being the last face someone will see*, Hirotsu had said, once.

“The Commander told me about them,” Gin said, after a bit. *I don’t really understand*, she added. *Why are they imprisoned?*

Chuuya leaned back onto his seat. He drew mindless shapes on the noodle contained, the tips of the chopsticks dragging along — stopped, once they started looking too much like bars.

“Q’s always been particularly bloodthirsty,” he answered, at last. “Accidents I’m not entirely privy to. They’ve killed a great deal of mafiosi,” He shrugged. “Dazai was tasked with finding them a place to stay when they weren’t needed — where they couldn’t put us all at risk.”

Some owl flew over the lake, shattering the silence. He watched Gin study it. The lack of a face made her face too open — too effortless to read.

*She’ll learn*, he considered. All of them had. The Port Mafia didn’t allow fall-backs.

“Aren’t we all?”

He curled an eyebrow. “*All* what?”

“A risk,” Gin insisted. “Aren’t we all a risk? Why are they the only one caged?”

He sighed. “Where’s this coming from?”

“I just — I knew a kid like them. Someone too powerful and too irrational — young. And —” She clenched her fingers until her knuckles were white; conflicted, she sighed — *don’t you think their resentment might grow, if they’re caged away? Used only when necessary?*

He observed her frame — a line of pearly white against a ceramic countertop. Her hair reminded him of Yuan, for some reason; the weeks when the air dye faded away, and the attacks were too close and vicious for him to sneak out and buy her some more.

“Gin,” he offered. “No one will cage your brother.”

“I know they won’t,” she replied. She bore the expression he had sometimes seen peek by the door of her vacancy — when her brother brought his handkerchief to his mouth. *Inevitably*

“Then what’s the issue?”



“I don’t know,” It wasn’t quite a snap or a snarl. “I don’t — thinking about it makes me sad. Not very ruthless of me, I suppose.”

Chuuya shrugged. “Ruthlessness has no point to it without something to lose. You’re not at fault for wishing there was a better solution for their situation — a kinder one,” He thought about Q’s screeches; the sound of their nails against the cell door, as he watched the guards shut it without looking back. “But Q caused their fate. Good men died because of them. They’re lucky they weren’t executed.”

*Can’t they atone?*, she pressed.

“Maybe,” he conceded. “If they complete enough missions — if they show their bloodthirst has an *aim*, and not an uncertain embrace for the entire world.”

“They sound like someone who has never known anything but the shadows,” Gin laid her chin on crossed arms, eyes lost somewhere Chuuya couldn’t see. The show of trust surprised him — lowered guard and naked shoulders. “How are we meant to blame them for hating the world?”

“We aren’t. That doesn’t change the fact that there *is* a light,” He tapped one finger in the middle of her forehead, watching her nose scrunch up. “And for the sake of our people, they should remember it’s not us.”

“Do you think that’s what they want?” Gin asked. *To be brought to the light?*

He stilled.

He dropped his shoulders before it could be seen — cleared both his throat and the image stuck under his eyelids. “I think they don’t want to be in pain any longer, and don’t know how to go about it,” he offered. “But if they believe the light has no suffering, they’re delusional.”

Hesitation slowed her words. “You think so?”

“As far as Ane-san puts it,” he mused. “The shadows are less of a hypocrite.” He smiled — a small, brusque thing, just enough to uncrease the lines in the girl’s forehead. Ruffling her hair, he stood. “Want to know one of the first things she ever told me? *Existence is a wound. It is foolish to think otherwise.*”

After a blink, Gin dared: “Sort of morbid.”

“Depressing as *shit*. But then she explained — there are those who will pretend time or hope can heal any and all gashes,” Chuuya tilted his head to the side. “And there are those who understand that if *living* is being wounded — there will never be any time to scar.”

The girl’s eyes softened.

“Still depressing as shit. But realistic, at least,” he concluded, taking both of their dishes and leaving them in the sink. He would need to wake up earlier tomorrow — fix his mess.

“Despite what Q might think, at the end of the day — isn’t it easier to learn to live with the blood?”

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On the second to last night they spent in Kouyou’s *villa*, Chuuya found Mori leaning on the doorframe of his room’s bathroom.

“Oh,” the man blinked. “Chuuya, what are you doing here?”

A bundle of papers was in his hands, a bit wet by the corners — possibly, the nonsensical messes written in an unknown alphabet he’d been finding around the room the entire week. They had all looked like drafts — but despite the various languages Chuuya and Dazai had developed in the years, he had yet to understand a word of it.

“There we go. Chuuya’s back to pestering me!”

His head snapped up.

Aimlessly kicking water, Dazai sat in the almost overflowing bathtub, attempting to wet the papers with rhythmic, dramatic waves of his hands. His only visible eye was bright and awake — and the obnoxiousness on his features was a familiarly irritating sight. The water was tinged red, and his chest was bruised — he had to have taken care of a mission, at some point, during Chuuya’s absence.

“I *told you* I wasn’t lying,” he continued, loud and whiny, ink-colored soaked hair hanging over drenched bandages. “He keeps breaking into my room! He probably wants to bite the soles off all my shoes like the undomesticated mutt he is.”

He looked — alive. Chuuya registered what he’d said a moment too late: “What do you mean *your* —“

Eyes still blinking, Mori met his gaze.

The curtains in the main room were still pulled — shut tight, just how he had left them that morning, stumbling with Hirotsu after pinching the unsleeping boy’s forehead. The room stood unchanged. But — the bedsheets had been tied up; the clothes on the floor had been stepped on; the bandages around Dazai’s eye were lacking a layer.

Chuuya stepped inside the bathroom, and dropped on the shut toilet.

“If I wanted to play a prank on you, I’d wait until you’re not in the room, and put a bomb in those pathetic flip flops you own,” he declared. “I want my console back. Where did you hide it?”

“Always so classy,” Dazai sighed. He blew bubbles of soap, his body mostly hidden from that opaque bundle; stared at him a blink too intensely, only for a breath.

Mori’s sigh was pure exasperation. “You boys have been doing so well this whole trip. If you could refrain from demolishing poor Ozaki’s *villa* for the next two days, I’d be incredibly grateful.”

“Of course! I’d never inconvenience you in any way, Mori,” Dazai grinned so widely the veins on his neck bulged out. As if he felt it, he started rubbing them viciously with a hot pink sponge.

Chuuya raised his eyebrows, leaning back on the toilet to escape the *allegedly* accidental splashes. “Boss, did something happen?”

“Nothing at all,” The man stood, leaving the bundle of papers inside the empty faucet. His smile was tight — despite the utter silence he had been welcomed in, Chuuya got the feeling of having interrupted a conversation. “I only came to check on Dazai. God knows he has been working too much, hasn’t he? Not a minute of rest. He and Akutagawa just came back.”

“You can pay me another vacation,” Dazai replied, submerged all the way to his nose — and, consequently, choking on the water. “A funnier one. What makes you think I would *choose* to spend my rest rooming anywhere close to my dog’s self-sufficient snoring contests?”

The toilet lid was jolted alongside his wince. “You’re a stinky, disgusting, *lying* son of a *bitch* —“

“And you’re a tiny fairy in denial —“

“And you’re a diarrhea-birtherd maggot —“

“Alright,” Mori interrupted. “I will take my leave. It’s rather late for my old bones.”

“You’re not old,” they chorused. Chuuya tasted irony somewhere — but couldn’t pinpoint to what voice it belonged.

His smile grew slightly more sincere. He patted Dazai’s head, despite the water; then, patted Chuuya’s too. “And you boys aren’t young enough to get away with jokes anymore.”

*Our boys*, he recalled. The flash of a camera — a hand on his shoulder. He wondered if they would be asked to take a picture once they turned eighteen, too; if it meant something, or if cracked frames were the least of his problems. *My boys*.

Mori peeked from behind the room’s door, tilting his head just enough to dig his gaze into the bathroom. He watched Dazai, a second too long. Buried between the candles in the corridor,

he could have been one of Chuuya's hallucinations. Minus the blood, perhaps. "Good night, then."

"Good night, Boss."

"*Go-oo-od* night," Dazai grinned, with the type of sharp teeth that promised a heart attack. It was dead skin on a fake corpse — a good enough rendition of what a person might have *been*, if dying. His fingers were wrinkled — the water had to be cold; he had to have been there for eons.

The doors closed.

He didn't watch Dazai's face deconstruct itself into hollowness — heard it with the *thump!* against one side of the tub, and the rough texture of the breath escaping between his teeth.

*Is it a Mori thing?*, Chuuya had wanted to ask, a few times. He never had. He knew what he would have said.

Wordlessly, he reached forward to switch the mixer faucet on to the hottest water possible. It hit the surface with a pointed *hiss*; Dazai watched it fall with uninterested eyes, even after it bloomed a pond of warmth around his curved body.

"Don't drown," he warned. "I'll kill you."

"That makes no sense," Dazai informed.

"Make it make sense, then."

Chuuya stepped into the room again — shut the curtain tighter, so only the soft emergency light over the bathroom's window remained; wore the oldest shirt he owned and the pants he'd stolen from Dazai's mission-trip bag, after the boy had set fire to his own — blue and long past his calves.

Mere seconds before the tub could overflow and ruin Kouyou's floors, Chuuya sat on the edge of the tub and shut the faucet off.

"Why can you never leave it be," Dazai asked, flatly. The fact that he was *asking* at all had him seethe with discomfort.

*Bait*, he mused. "Every moment I spend in your vicinity is one more chance to kill you."

He squirted the bright lilac shampoo from the window seal over the boy's bowed head, bored by his lack of whining laments. The bottle was thrown to a corner; Chuuya huffed, pushing his sleeves up with his chin, and placed his fingers in the knotted mane, scrubbing vigorously.

Head bowed, uncannily obedient under the too-efficient ministrations, Dazai studied the glint of that stupid silver ring, eyelashes fluttering.

Eyes set on some spot of the wall, fingers tangled between suds and hair, Chuuya asked: “Why am I different?”

There was no dragging Dazai into words or actions unsoaked in planning — no smart enough trick to trudge past machinations he had already shaped and turned over more times than the sun would have demanded.

*The trick*, Chuuya thought — *the trick was letting him believe he had planned it all.*

“Mori said you’re working on something,” Dazai offered, ignoring him. “Is Matsuda’s stolen research on us that *something*?”

Perhaps he should have been surprised to figure out that even in such a mood, he’d somehow managed to snoop around Chuuya’s dossiers. He wasn’t. “No,” he said. “That’s purely recreational.”

Police Station paper was always rough under his fingertips. Non-recyclable, maybe. The ink was blue — which annoyed him, for some reason. The blurry shots the department had managed to get of mafiosi were unflattering. It was clearly the result of months and *months* of work — dissertations between the little the Mafia allowed to end up in the officers’ hands, and what Matsuda had managed to take from the *Special Division* — while selling information about Chuuya.

It made for a faded final picture — frayed at the edges, and frustrating to a point he could see it make Matsuda sleepless. But it *made* for a picture.

“He’s a fucking idiot,” he concluded. There was a stubborn knot behind Dazai’s ear; he pulled as quickly as possible, making his shoulders jump — scratching his scalp not to verbalize apologies he didn’t deserve. *He could just fucking brush them once in a while*, he accused. It worked instantly; goosebumps appeared on his neck, rendering his head heavy and gooey in his hands. “I’d admire his stubbornness, if it wasn’t so inconvenient.”

Vacant eyes peeked behind wet strands — behind the bandages, loosened from the shampoo, only short of hanging from his face like a peculiar earring. “Don’t pretend you don’t know how this ends.”

Chuuya set his jaw.

Ripples bloomed in the water; the boy only leaned forward enough to lay his chin on the edge of the bathtub. Buds trails chased each other down the sides of his nose. He cleaned them off with his thumb, tracing the dark puffiness of his permanent eye bags — *they’ll carve his skin*, Kouyou had once tutted, studying him — and refusing to focus on how Dazai’s eyelids doozily fluttered at the contact.

“You must have seen a bug survive being stepped on, at least once,” the Executive yawned. A lulling shush — a perfect fit to the *devoid* he’d been hiding under his sheets for days. “How it writhes, how it fights — all too close to some food. Eventually, queasy people get hungry — and what happens?”

Chuuya's hands dripped soap between his legs. *What are you even doing here?*, he questioned. "Speaking from experience?"

"No," Dazai said. "I don't get stepped on."

His nose was too red. He played human like he was sure someone would call him out on it being a pretense. Peeking from the wall of bubbles and water, the edge of his shoulders was pale and sharp; vaguely, Chuuya wondered if he had looked quite so *tired* all the time — before.

*Before what?*

Out of nowhere, Dazai stood.

"Dude," Chuuya protested, raising his eyes to the ceiling. Water drops landed on him with an aim that *had* to have been planned. "Come on."

"Come on," the boy echoed, in another tone. He stepped out of the tub, wet feet squeaking on Kouyou's good floors — he called: "Get the leash. I'm taking you on a walk."

Miraculously, he dodged the wet shampoo bottle Chuuya threw at his head.

The valley surrounding the *villa* looked somewhat different under the full moon. Not quite menacing, but less friendly — an ajar door hiding a screaming match. The trees at the edge of his vision were invitingly lined in silver moonlight. Cold air whipped against his face — he felt it seep in through every hole of his old shirt, tickling scar tissue and mosquito bites.

"I saw my mom," Chuuya offered, at some undefined point, as they stumbled through the too tall grass — reaching their waists the closer they got to the further edge of the lake.

Sporting new bandages and only his coat over his unbuttoned dress shirt, Dazai's head rose very, *very* slowly. "Are you high?"

He slapped his nape.

"*Ouch*," he whined, waving a frantic hand towards the mess on his torso — a ring of bruises as wide as a bottle, with another circular spot of purplish gray in the middle; the result of getting hit from too close while wearing a bulletproof vest. "I'm *wounded*, in case you didn't notice!"

"And whose fault is that?" he accused. "Why did you even do this? Bullets fucking *hurt*. That's not rocket science."

"I read about a man who was hit so hard with a bullet, the vest caused immediate death *via* heart attack," he recounted, dreamily. There was still an uncanny note in his voice; a recorded cry in the background, giving his every word an almost *questioning* edge. "Immediate death means painless death, right?"

"Who did you even convince to shoot you? *When?*" Chuuya insisted. "I only helped Hirotsu fix Tanaki's car for two hours at most. And your men are too scared of Boss to dare."

“Akutagawa,” Dazai did a big jump over the stalks, staggering on the landing. “He did a terrible job, unsurprisingly — but someone needs to start actually putting a gun in those anemic fingers of his, don’t you agree? All that potential...”

His voice sounded venomous even to his own ears, when he spoke: “I know what you’re doing with him.”

The boy only turned to curl an eyebrow at him. The stars were cursed to be more visible when one left Yokohama — the reflection of them in his eye was always hard to find, though. Suicidal men fared better off in the city. “Do you?”

“Yes,” Chuuya huffed, as he pulled the too large pants up his hips with one hand. “And like most of your plans, it has other options.”

“Sure,” Dazai agreed, easily. “But you know I want the best one.”

They reached one of the lake banks, just far away enough from the *villa* to make it seem like the skeleton of an idea. Dazai wasted no time leaving his coat in the grass, walking secure steps through the lower waters — humming along to some song about double suicide Chuuya wished Hirose had never put out, sweaty skin glistening.

Bandages and scars; the first a choice, the second an imposition. *Mori believes in the value of perpetual remembrance*, he had told him. *If he stitches me up, he has a right to make it ineffaceable.*

*Is that how it works?*, he hadn’t asked.

“I’m assuming you mean because of Ueda.”

He blinked — caught as he sat down on the wet ground, crossing his legs. “What?”

“The hallucinations from his Ability,” Dazai clarified, when the water reached the bullet wound halo between his ribs. The sides of his shirt floated around him. If he was cold, he didn’t show it — Chuuya didn’t linger on *why* that had been the first day he’d been able to get out of the room. “They showed you your parents?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Fumiko Enchi’s Ability,” he explained.

It was quiet.

Nights in Yokohama were never so silent — Chuuya had long assimilated irate car horns, never sleeping transport services, and laughing drunks. Suribachi had been louder at night than during any other hour; a splendid way to keep his nerves alert. *Light sleeper, bad dreamer*, Adam had written to him, once. He didn’t know which cable of his new systems had given him an understanding of *ways of saying*; as far as Chuuya knew, he’d just made it up.

He curled grass blades between his fingers, head tilted back. Ueda's tattoo didn't even burn; it was all so peaceful it felt unfair.

"What's that saying?" he questioned, out loud. "*There's a gift in a horse's mouth?*"

Bent to search for fish under the onyx and silver lake surface, Dazai came to halt. "What did you just say?"

"You know," Chuuya insisted. "The saying. Since we have stables here — I know there's one. *Don't look for a horse as a gift?*"

The silence lasted a moment longer. "Yes," Dazai nodded, extremely serious. "My dear, *dear* Chuuya — that is *exactly* how the saying goes."

He retched. "Don't be disgusting —"

"So, then," the boy questioned, too loudly, "What does *Mama Chu* look like?"

"What?"

"Your mom," he echoed, lowering himself in the water all in one go. A strange word out of his mouth. "What did she look like?"

Chuuya thought about it. The grass was still grass under his nails — no bloodied sand and no gaping wounds; no unfocused eyes trapping him in an embrace he might manage not to escape. He'd always wondered, privately, if *he* had been the one to get lost on the cruel road — if he'd fallen in Professor N's arms all on his own.

"Like me," he dared, after a bit — quieter than intended. "She looked like me."

Dazai made a face — floating like a corpse, arms wide. "I hardly believe any woman on earth could be that hideous."

"My mom's not ugly," Chuuya snapped, threateningly raising his arm — it got one of the pebbles to graze the old blackened dot scars on his wrist, leaving a faint burn. "And *you* look like a toad with its skin inside out."

"If she sports that mop of fried shrimp you call hair, I'm obliged to believe —"

"Maybe *your* mother looked like a mackerel shit puddle, but *mine* —"

"False information," the boy cut through, splashing water all the way to him. There was some kind of amusement in his tone; a smile drawn with drying blood on the concrete. "I'm rather sure of it. I look like my father, anyway."

Chuuya's bones creaked.

*You're not curious*, he reminded himself. It was a lowly, unsatisfactory feeling; it would only let the boy know he sometimes wondered if bandages had been stuck to his skin since he'd



first crawled — if his parents were dead; if he'd killed them. If he felt the same aching longing Chuuya sometimes did — not for *something*, but for the certainty of having lost it.

When he raised his eyes from the pebbles he'd been floating in his hands, spinning them like planets and satellites — ripples shattered the lake, and Dazai was nowhere to be seen.

Kouyou had told him a story about a lake, once, he recalled — or a mountain, maybe. The moon studied herself on the pristine veil of liquid cold, and he squinted. *Something about a woman's beloved being taken*, he thought. She'd been told to empty out an entire lake, or to move a mountain even two inches — and she'd get her lover back.

*How stupid of her to try*, the Executive had mused. There was a specific tinge of her pupils that Chuuya had long dubbed after Beatrice. *But again — of course. Of course she did.*

“Don't get seaweed in your skull,” Chuuya called, distractedly, attempting to plasm one of the pebbles into a convincing Saturn. “Last thing you need is more salt in you.”

There was no answer.

Chuuya frowned at the lake. ““You there?””

Somewhere through the silence, he thought of the way Mori's scarf had looked — brushing the tiles of the bathroom. Somewhere through it, he recalled the shower at the Headquarters — Ueda's well-crafted, gentle painting of Dazai's body, bent over the filled bathtub, eyes lifeless.

He sprung up so fast he got vertigo from it.

“*Oi!*” Chuuya snapped, hems of his pants catching between his toes as he stumbled over the lake bank. The shock of freezing water soaking the fabric had his spine jolt, as if electrified. “*Fuck that* — you piece of fucking — *Dazai!* I'll kill you myself! ” The rush of rustled waters was the loudest sound in the valley — even his voice echoed, startling owls out of the tree branches. He dug through the lake with his hands, eyes frantic. ““You tryna die where I'll be blamed for it? *Fuck that!* Get the fuck out! *Right now!*””

He staggered to where the lake was deep enough to go underwater — inhaled and sunk, arms cutting the water as he turned and turned. No specks of Dazai's pale skin; not a glint of white bandages. Ueda's tattoo didn't even *burn* —

Emerging with his breath short, chattering teeth and drenched bones, he snapped: “*Where the fuck are* — “

A ghostly thin back floated in his peripheral vision.

Chuuya's heart skipped a beat. *Anger*; he let himself believe, fighting the heavy waves to get to his target — *Tainted* never worked in water, and the fucker *knew it*, and he *swore* — “You piece of bastard,” he snarled, nonsensically, as he dragged his spluttering, panting body straight. “I ought to drag you by the *fucking spine* — you *spineless*, revolting *bother*, you sanctimonious *bastard* — “

“Can you let me die?” Dazai snapped, more annoyed than dead.

His voice was rough with the spat water he was slobbering through — he was trembling head to foot, bandages unlooping down his limbs like melting snow. When he pushed himself out of his grip, he fell — breathing whistley, horrifying pants.

“Fuck *you*, ” Chuuya shouted, pushing him by the shoulders. The water only reached their waist; blinded by ire and the soaked strands stuck to his face, he watched him almost land on his ass. “Do this shit where I’m *not* — “

“Have you been having fun?” Dazai asked, with a tone so dead it didn’t fit the pure *dare* in the words. “Being pampered?”

Through the too deafening splashes of their push and pull, he demanded: “*What?*”

“You know,” He wrangled himself out of his grasp. It was a wonder how they never woke up touching, he mused, through struggles — what with that forced bed stealing. It was a wonder Chuuya had never opened his door to bleeding sheets. “Oh — *how* they hoped this victory-*soirée* would mend your bones. Everyone was just *so* concerned after Ueda got you — “

“What the *hell* are you talking — “

“You haven’t noticed, have you?”

*Why are you trying to drown him*, Chuuya thought, distantly, over his yanking and the water blooming around them, *didn’t you just save him from* — “Noticed *what?*”

“That they aren’t your Sheep.”

He stared, chest heaving.

Surging, hot flames crawled up his arms — they sharpened his nails, crooking his fingers into talons; he grasped Dazai’s shirt, yanking him close with white knuckles. “Watch your mouth.”

Dazai dangled like a doll, face close and eyes unfocused; hands roaming through the water as if longing to go back underneath. “They don’t need your protection,” he said, like it made sense — like the world could ever exist and not be fragile. Loseable. Protector and destroyer — all of the sake of having *something*. “And they certainly don’t need you to die for them. To be completely sincere with you — it’s much more probable they will be the ones to die for you.”

“That’s enough,” he swore, shaking water from his hair as he rattled him; feeling the drops land on his clenched jaw.

The cobbles underwater were slick; they slipped. The moon spun in the boy’s pupils, drunk. “I bet it pisses you off.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do,” Chuuya snapped. “And I *really* don’t fucking care. But cut it out. I’ve got no time for your shit.”

“Too busy waiting for your mind to make you crash your head against a wall?” Dazai said, dripping in fake understanding. His chattering teeth didn’t even break his words. “I heard that’s what that actress did. Just crashed and crashed and *crashed* — until her skull cracked on impact,” His lips curled up; he was covered in goosebumps, and drenched to the soul. “Not even *I* had considered that method. Sounds just senselessly painful.”

“Maybe that’s your problem, then,” Chuuya scorned. The water was over their waist — his legs were going numb. “Maybe you should give up on that painless quest of yours, and get splattered on the concrete once and for all.”

His whine sounded more dangerous than childish. Hauntingly, he had water drops stuck on his eyelashes. “I don’t think I would like that.”

“I don’t think I *care*.”

“Liar.”

“*Liar?*”

“Liar,” Dazai echoed. “The *Division* knew what would get to you. Brute strength wouldn’t have fazed you. It’s being the only one left that you couldn’t stand,” He tilted his head to the side — stood so still, not even ripples surrounded them. “But Chuuya needs someone he can give his life for at all times, does he not?”

He stared.

*Oh*, he realized. Utterly calm; so furious he could feel every inch of him *shaking*. The certainty of watching a scam come into life. The silence of a shut coffin.

“I’m not Akutagawa,” he spelled out. He let go of his shirt; watched him land several steps away, where the water was deeper — tickling his shoulders. “And I’m not going to shoot you on command.”

The boy stared up at him, quiet.

Water settled down slowly, erasing ripples and murmuring rushes. They heaved — only that sharp, exhausted sound of inhaling and exhaling filling the valley. Chuuya turned around and climbed towards the lake bank, fists tight — ears stuffed with the white noises of his heart; of his pants getting more and more drenched.

When he touched the grass, he paused.

“Fuck that,” he heard himself say. Then, a bit louder: “No, *fuck* that —“

Dazai didn’t look startled when he turned again — he watched Chuuya stumble through the beeline he was making for him; only the chaos of disturbed waters and the curses out of his mouth shattering the quiet. He stayed floating in that deeper current, and when Chuuya slipped and reached him, he asked: “What are you doing?”

“Killing myself,” Chuuya replied, wafting — only his head and his drenched hair out of the water. “This shit is so fucking *cold* — not so funny when *I’m* the one doing it, *ah, Ueda?*” he scolded the valley. “*Not so —*”

“This isn’t Ueda’s Ability,” Dazai informed him. “You *want* me dead. Remember? Did water get in your —”

The lake was too material under his hands for it to be; Dazai’s puffs of breath too warm on his face — but Chuuya didn’t *know*. He had touched his mother; he had sat next to Verlaine.

“I do,” he breathed out. His hands reached out — cupped his cheeks, clammy and cold, held so close he could watch his own frantic expression in his blown out pupils. “You absolute bastard. But you’d never die with me. So if you die now, I’ll have to assume this is Ueda’s work,” A half snort left his lips; relief and desperation. “So it’s fake. All of it is fucking *fake*, get it?”

Obnoxiously helpful, Dazai informed him: “You already knew that.”

“I did,” he panted. Insisted: “Did I?”

Dazai’s eyes roamed through his face. They landed on the water drops Chuuya could *feel* stuck to his lips — close as he was, that touch felt heavier than his nose’s one against his own.

“I lost it,” he admitted, very quietly.

If it was a hallucination, it didn’t matter — if it wasn’t, he’d kill Dazai anyway. At some point. Somehow. Looking him in the eyes. “What?”

“Get water out your ears. I *lost it*. ”

“Lost *what*, jackass?”

“The ring,” Dazai’s frown didn’t shake his hands off his face — his body reached out like a sunflower, fighting the embrace of water under his neck, pooling like melted flesh between Chuuya’s fingers. “It was so ugly. It deserved to witness many more beauties it could tearfully compare itself to.”

It was almost disbelievingly surreal. He felt drunk with it — aimless ire and goosebumps.

“I’ll steal you another,” Chuuya offered, a bit lost. His voice sounded a thousand miles away. The thing in his veins had to be contempt; it was the same shade of rotten autumn as Dazai’s irises, and it beat along with the pulsing blood in his jaw. “Even your moronic ass can’t lose all of them.”

The boy’s lips parted on an exhale that did not come out. They’d been soft upon the side of his mouth, at the *Division’s* ball, and his eyes were piercingly indulgent — calling him hopeless in all but words. “But I will.”

“You won’t.”

“Don’t be stubborn.”

“Don’t piss me off.”

“Chuuya,” he whispered, helpless, like a command, thumbs reaching up to rub his arms as if to *rattle him*, and Chuuya *hated* him, partner and all — he’d loathe him until he couldn’t, and it would be mercilessly human, at least. “My stupid Chuuya.”

His nails sank in his cheeks. Chuuya left his claws in all he’d hoarded — he forced his hands to unclench, and listened to nothing but the water.

“Don’t drown,” he insisted. He prayed he got to weed out whatever part of him had decided *Dazai’s*, of all, would be the grave not filled. *Of course*, Kouyou had said, *of course she did*. “I’ll kill you.”

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Eleven days before he turned eighteen, they returned to the city.

After spending two days planning, he rode his motorcycle to the Headquarters — unable to shake off the feeling that an emergency *had* to have been waiting for them to come back.

“I believe things will partially slow down,” Mori reassured him, on the sidewalk of *Building One*. “Although — gaining that *Ability Permit* will cause us a bother or two.”

Chuuya smiled, tight and at blame. “That’s great to know, Boss.”

“It is, isn’t it?” the man hummed. “Before I forget — I have been reading over that potential project you asked me to consider.”

He perched up. “And?”

Mori had put on his coat and scarf the instant they had crossed the Headquarters doors — most men who had met his gaze had bowed deeper than Chuuya had gotten used to seeing. He wasn’t foolish enough not to believe most of it wasn’t fear — once his speech in the ballroom had been over, accommodations had been made for, *hopefully*, the last executions of the season.

Some of it — he supposed — had to be helplessness. Their bandaged, demonic flag had bowed. They had no choice but to do the same.

“It’s convincing,” Mori admitted, once he had decided his dramatic pause had lasted enough. “Kouyou certainly taught you to have a way with words. You know just how to make someone feel an absolute *fool* for not accepting your proposal.”

“I wasn’t trying to —“

“Don’t lie to me,” The Boss smiled. “It’s not an inconvenient quality to have. Strenuous to trust, perhaps — but loyalty can override those details,” He curled an eyebrow. “Founding the restoration of Suribachi City would undoubtedly be a dent on our vaults.”

He nodded. “I offered my money, sir.”

“*Ah*, but that would mean the astonishing amount of introits that will come from this hopeless quest would all land in your pockets,” Mori blinked. “I’m no Ace, but even *I* know not to waste a good hand of cards. Suribachi might just be an unlikely goldmine.”

“And the protesters mostly have no other support in the whole region,” he pointed out. “By the time they realize financing the slums might actually be convenient, we’ll already have gained monopolization over the project —“

“Yes, Chuuya,” the man agreed, amused. “I *have* read your proposal.”

His ears caught fire. He cleared his throat, clenching and unclenching his hands around the clutches of the bike. “Of course, Boss.”

Mori studied him. Elise was nowhere to be seen — he could never shake off the feeling that the man was never as menacing as he was when she wasn’t around. A weird stance to take — Elise *was* his Ability. *A weird stance to take, dude*, Shirase would have said. *You could crush him like a can.*

Chuuya paused.

A weird thought.

“Just tell me this,” Mori offered. “Before I invest a good quarter of our funds into these street protesters — how much of it is sentimentalism?”

He tapped on the leather of the clutches, scratching it. He thought of a shoebox hidden in his wardrobe — an old bracelet; a knife stained in blood.

*It’s a smart move*, he could have sworn. it was — it was all written in the report he had spent two sleepless nights typing. *It will bring us more money and influence than you can imagine. No one is as grateful as the desperate.*

Chuuya dropped his shoulders.

“I miss it,” he said. *It* — because it was all. He raised his head to meet the man’s eyes — found no other way to swear honesty than by *challenging* Mori to call him a liar. “And I don’t want it back. Not everyone is as lucky. ‘Kinda feels like I have to do something to atone for it.”

The doctor's lips parted.

Chuuya held his gaze.

A smile. "Alright, then."

He thought about those simple words for the entire ride he took to the Cemetery. At some point — using *Tainted* to skip too high through the cobblestoned road — he felt himself breathe.

A familiar silhouette, carrying a bouquet of yellow flowers, screeched him to a halt.

"Old man," Chuuya exclaimed, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "What are you doing here?"

"Paying a visit to some victims of mine," Hirotsu replied, utterly simply, waving a bouquet. He had a half finished cigarette in his mouth — he didn't even blink when Chuuya stole one from the pack in his pocket. "That's my lighter," he noted, as he watched him fish it out of his pants.

"Is it," Chuuya agreed, around a mouthful of smoke. It didn't really taste all that good — it never had. He couldn't stop anyway. "I've never seen you around. What brought this on?"

Hirotsu shrugged. He had a fresh scar on his temple — the clean raze of a bullet. "There are some who have fallen to my hands that did not quite deserve it," he offered. "Sometimes it feels like we haven't stopped filling Yokohama's graves a day, since the *Dragon Head Conflict*."

"And filling the ocean," Chuuya pointed out. "Our graves are empty."

The man sketched a smile. "That is true."

"Why do we do that, anyway? Is it really that whole spiel on, *join the Mafia, never leave it?*"

"It might as well be," Hirotsu replied, after a moment of thought. "It's what everyone believes. Are you here for your friends?"

Chuuya pulled on the loose threads inside his pockets. He nodded.

"You know, I can't remember if I ever told you —" the Commander mused, "But Doc once tried out for the *Black Lizards*."

He made a face. "*Doc?* Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"*My Doc?*"

"He reached the final trials, and decided the group wasn't for him," Hirotsu promised. "He told me he believed becoming a *Lizard* might just bring him to enough bodies to reach that

goal of his,” A pause. “A very *peculiar* goal.”

“It was, wasn’t it,” Chuuya grinned, on his tiptoes. “He was out of his goddamn mind. Very entertaining. Less so when he had a syringe in his hands. One time, he chased Iceman through all of Yamashita Park, waving this big ass needle around, and —“

“They sound like fun people,” the man said. “I wish I could have known them more.”

“Yeah,” He shrugged. “Same here.”

They watched the crowd pass by, dried tears on their cheeks. The children they were pulling along were a tad too excited — unable to see past pretty statues and blooming flowers on the grass. When one of them tried to hang off the marble bust of a woman, he bit his lip so as not to laugh.

“They mostly kept to themselves, though — the Flags,” Hirotsu started again. “Apart from Pianoman.”

“Executive seats can’t be reached by self isolation,” he confirmed. “He was always a smooth talker. Turned you around like a plaything — I couldn’t even get mad when he told me he’d been playing spy on me for a good half year,” He clicked his tongue. “*That*, and also been risking the Boss’ ire just to give me some peace.”

Hirotsu huffed, amused. “Sounds like a good friend to have.”

His cheeks ached. “All of them were.”

Talking about them was clumsy on his tongue. Perhaps it was a muscle to train.

“I’m sorry,” the Commander said, just a bit awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to cause any sadness.”

“No, it’s —“ Chuuya cleared his throat. “They’re my friends. They don’t make me sad.”

It took him a moment to realize he meant it.

Hirotsu studied him.

He wondered *how* he visited graves — if he sat in silence, or told stories, or bought a different bouquet for each of the stones. *There is much to be learned from how a man grieves*, Verlaine’s diaries had said. *I cannot say I know the feeling*.

“How do they make you feel, then?”

Chuuya blinked.

Perhaps it was the intersection of thoughts — the unplanned assortment of Verlaine’s elegant handwriting and the innocent question matching the thoughts always lingering in his skull. *You can’t just wash the dirt away*, Hirotsu had once told him. *It will suffocate you. It will blind you to the point of slowing you down*.



“Ah,” Chuuya backed away. Determination settled like a rock in his throat — his heart raced. “Gramps, I think you might just be a genius.”

If he had had more time to observe him — he could have *sworn* he had seen red bloom on Hirotsu’s cheeks. “Am — Am I?”

“A fucking *mastermind* — “

“Sir, where — Chuuya? Where are you —“

“I’ll see you later, old man!” he shouted, — *Tainted* sizzling in the air as he jumped to the Cemetery entrance. “I might get executed for this, so do buy another bouquet for me!”

“*What?*”

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Fumiko Enchi had been chained at the end of the deepest hallway of the dungeons.

She eyed his steps without surprise — the endless strands of her hair were one with the blood on her arms, like spider webs some street artist spray paint across to the wall. Her clothes were a mess — her face had lost enough weight to make her unrecognizable.

“Look who it is!” she exclaimed, her voice a frail shard of glass littered in glee. “My hair buddy. Still alive — I’m somewhat surprised.”

Chuuya would have recognized Kouyou’s handiwork anywhere — the slices on the chests; the attention always given to the face; the telltale chasms caused by her sandals. As thus, he waved the guards who had led him down there off.

“Vice-Executive —“ one of them tried.

“Her legs are broken,” he cut her off. “And Executive Kouyou knows better than to leave a caged man held back by chains only.”

Fumiko’s grin grew. She was missing a few teeth; a cut on her lower lip showed off the sliced off tip of her tongue. “She sure does. You won’t find me complaining. I love my women *dirty*.”

He curled an eyebrow. “You can go. I’ll take care of this.”

With one last bow, the guards disappeared. The chains were rattled only so — Fumiko blew a strand of hair off her forehead.

“So, then,” Despite the clear fractures, she attempted to wiggle her eyebrows — then laughed a bit harder when pain bloomed. “Before I ask you what you’re willing to offer me in the name of your negotiations — how are my Kobo and Mishima?”

“Begging to be granted a visit,” Chuuya crouched down. The ground was slippery with bodily fluids — he did not offer her the satisfaction of using *Tainted*. “So they can put a spear through your nose for putting their reputation at risk.”

She grinned. “Liar. Kobo goes around as a little rat just to steal food off children’s plates — that man wouldn’t know a good reputation if it fucked him.”

“How would you feel about seeing them again?”

“Very nicely. I miss them.”

“And about joining the Port Mafia?”

Fumiko spat on the ground. The bundle of blood and spit landed right on the edge of his left shoe. He hummed: “Joining an organization will make it easier to escape it than being locked in its dungeons.”

“It’s the Port Mafia,” The animosity in her eyes could have shattered ice; it was the brightest thing alive under the led lights of the dungeons. “Nobody leaves the *Port Mafia*.”

Chuuya clicked his tongue.

“I *am*, though, very curious on what might make one of its top dogs suggest it as a reward,” she attempted to lean forward, tauntingly — the chains around her wrists pulled arms until she couldn’t. “A reward for doing *what*, exactly?”

According to Kouyou, she had been one of the toughest victims up to date. While she had been *happily* spewing information about the *Special Division*, she refused to go into detail about their most pressing issue — the moles. *She finds it entertaining*, the woman had spat. *That we would let ourselves get infiltrated*. She’d smiled prettily. *That fox-faced cunt*.

“Most of the high floors believe you could still be a great addition to our lines,” Chuuya said. “My Boss included. He’s not one to express hope over something he doesn’t believe it’s already his.”

“He isn’t,” Fumiko echoed, amused. “And what about our Tanaki?”

He squinted. “What about her?”

“Is she mad about my betrayal?”

“Disappointed.”

She groaned. “That’s *so* much worse.”

“Fumiko, listen to me.”

Obnoxiously, she attempted to bring her hand to her forehead in a salute.

Chuuya watched, unimpressed. “You will do what I’m about to ask you,” he said. “You will give up on whatever *Witness Protection* fantasy the *Division* has deluded you into believing. You will accept my deal — you will be *damn glad* the Port Mafia is magnanimous enough to welcome back an attempted traitor —“

“Attempted? I think I did pretty great.”

He tapped two fingers on the ground — didn’t blink as the walls around them shook just *so*, raining *Tainted* dust over their heads. “Until I shattered your spine, you mean?”

Her smile weakened.

Whatever harsher stone resided behind that cheerfulness blinked between bloody eyelashes. “Why would I do any of that?”

Chuuya shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

“Don’t I?”

“No.”

“And what happens when I don’t?”

“I’ll drag Kobo and Mishima down here by the hole I’ll tear in their throats,” he explained, swiftly. “And once they manage to gather enough scar tissue to *beg you* to do as I say — I’ll rip their vocal cords out, and let you dangle here,” He tilted his head to show the darkness of the dungeons — haunted and heavy and *suffocating*, “With only those little memorabilia rotting at your feet, while you wonder what a god might do to two corpses he doesn’t *need*.”

Fumiko’s upper lip twitched.

The shift in her frame was imperceptible; despite the careless pose she maintained — every inch of it radiated a *sourer* kind of caution. “Men have been struck by lightning for crimes much less eternal than calling themselves gods.”

“Then said men should have been more careful about what they whispered behind my back,” Chuuya offered.

Her mouth breathed suffocating air in. “You’re overestimating my care for those fools.”

“I don’t have time for estimations,” he replied, blankly. “I have time to break your jaw into pieces and burn you alive, until you use your Ability whether you want it or not. But isn’t my first offer much more *courteous*? Tempting, even?”

She clenched her teeth.

“Or I could let Kobo and Mishima know what you think of my proposal,” Chuuya added. “Bet they would be relieved to have an excuse not to beg for your release any longer.”

“You and that partner of yours are certainly similar.”

He didn’t move.

She caught the irked shift in his gaze all the same — she huffed a pained chuckle. “He’s been down there too, you know? Whenever that beauty of your Executive starts to slow down. He sure hits like a motherfucker where you’re concerned.”

Chuuya dragged his tongue along his teeth, burying fury where it wouldn’t be used. “*Where I’m concerned,*” he echoed, his smile a mock. “You people’s continuous efforts to humanize him will never cease to amaze me.”

“And your own won’t?” she wondered.

“No,” He shrugged, settling on the ground. “I don’t search for what’s already there. That’s a thing people like you obsess over.”

Fumiko’s grin was spiteful.

“The Port Mafia will rejoice in having such a stubborn card back in its ranks,” Chuuya said.

“I’m not doing this.”

“You are.”

“*Chuuya,*” The abrupt, stark desperation in her tone couldn’t keep his gaze from snapping to her. “They haven’t done *anything*. I can’t do this.”

“You’ve been here a long time,” he said, eyes over her shoulder. “You know better than to ask for fairness. They want you back with us — they *will* get you back.”

“And you?” Fumiko’s swollen eyes ran up and down his face, *intent*. “What do *you* want?”

The words stumbled down his tongue before he could consider their shape — their tone; their rabid *need*. “I want you to let me talk to him again.”

She fell quiet.

Chuuya pushed: “You said you somewhat feel what’s going on in your visions. You *must* have — you know who I mean.”

“All of this,” she echoed. “All of this — for a dead man?”

“For the Port Mafia,” he corrected. “*Always* for the Port Mafia. For me, too.”

Something gathered around the shattered corners of her face. He hated the sight of it before he managed to place it — bitter, echoing pity. “I can’t bring anyone back to life, Chuuya.”

A deaf pounding slithered from his nape — all the way to the lowest corner of his skull. “I only need you to let me bury him.”

“*Need*,” she scoffed. “*Need* is the poison of the strong-willed, you child.”

“Sure,” Chuuya agreed. “And you *need* to keep Kobo and Mishima alive, don’t you? Because they’re your insurance with the *Special Division*.”

Abruptly, her face emptied out.

“And if something happens to them — if they are harmed, and can no longer prove to the *Division* that if you were to fail, they would still have *two* Ability Users to count on,” he continued, easily, “The *Division* will give up on attempting to get you out of our grasp. And you’ll die here — useless to every faction you had, and *hated* by the only two people you care for.” Chuuya tilted his head. “Curious how you’re trying to accuse me of cruelty, when *you* used your friends as bargaining chips for a freedom they won’t receive — and they don’t even know. I’m many things, you piece of shit — but I’m *not*, and I’ll *never* be a *traitor*.”

Fumiko stared at the floor.

Curling one eyebrow, he waited for a round of screams from a nearby corner to begin — then he asked: “What colors should I arrange for your *welcome back party*? Don’t worry. I don’t have a budget.”

Her torn shoes rubbed dried blood off the ground. Clenched around her chains, her fingers paled to a ghostly white.

He leaned back, and waited.

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He looked into her eyes until her pupils spread; further and further and *further*; darker and *wider*. Some old thread — knotted and trapped through the crests of his brain — was yanked.

Chuuya fell.

A house in the countryside.

He'd never been there before. There was something familiar about it, though — the echo of rooms he would have found, had he explored the world behind the wooden porch. The sky

was crowded by clouds, threatening to drown the field of flowers he was standing knee-deep in.

On the porch, dangling along to the wind on a carved hanging couch, was a child.

He walked up the two steps of the porch, and sat next to him. It rattled the couch — they waited for its rhythm to return gentle, listening to the creaking screws muffle the distant thunder.

“You’re not exactly who I meant,” Chuuya started, turning to observe the storm.

Small bones and freckled skin — the kid couldn’t be older than six. Blue veins peeked from his thin wrists, disappearing under the hems of a Hospital vest that was too big on him — it had to be pulled over his shoulder every few seconds. His eyes — set on the storm with wondrous curiosity — were both as blue as a clearer sky.

The weight in his throat was an immovable lump long before the child spoke. The texture of his voice clenched his fingers around nothing at all.

“I’m *you*,” the kid huffed. His tone tickled some forgotten corner — a cradle; sand between his toes. He sprawled on his side of the couch like he owned it. “‘S not like I asked to come here.”

“Mind the attitude.”

“Mind your ugly face.”

He snorted.

Chuuya knew him. It was surreal and *there*, as obvious as the clouds. He could have traced his bones with his eyes closed. “How was it before?”

The kid squinted.

“Before the men in the lab coats.”

“Oh,” the kid said. He kicked his legs as he mused; his feet didn’t even reach the wooden tiles. He was tall for his age, still — Chuuya bet he went around declaring it proudly, too. “Nice.”

He took the answer like a bullet.

“Warm,” the kid added.

*Unsurprising*, he mused. The dark liquid in the tank had been freezing.

*It wasn’t meant to be you*, he thought. *Or it wasn’t meant to be me. Or it just wasn’t meant to be.*

*But it was*, something whispered. *It is. What are you going to do about it?*

Chuuya slipped down the cushions until the wooden frame shook — he pressed his nape against the backrest, watching lightning break the sky in two. “I don’t know if you’re me,” he said. It escaped like a secret long kept — a possibility he had refused to voice. “I don’t know if I should apologize to you.”

The kid studied him from head to toe — absurdly judgemental.

“You’re alive,” He shrugged. “That’s good.” A pause; a kick of feet. Then: “Are you happy?”

Chuuya blinked. “Happy?”

“I’m a kid, you know,” he informed him, snotty. Chuuya could *see him* pick fights on the playground; it filled his chest with uncanny pride. “Are you happy?”

Hands in his pockets, Chuuya inhaled.

“I think I am,” he offered, quietly. That vest seemed like would have too large on him, too. He recalled what it had been like to have it ripped off — Shirase’s hand offering a green jacket; Yuan laughing at his jeans. He huffed. ““Don’t know if it’s in a way your Mom would approve of.”

His laughter was unbridled — a ugly noise, unrestrained and squeaky. “I don’t know. I don’t really remember her either.”

*You’re not here*, Chuuya mused. Was he even allowed to grieve the closest thing to himself his mind could conjure up? *How could you?*

“I can approve of it, if you want,” the kid offered. “If it’ll make you less sad.”

It took an infinity for his lips to part.

“That’s surprisingly nice.”

“I *am* nice,” he spat, offended. “I help the grannies with their groceries all the time.”

He ached. He begged: “I took your life.”

A shrug. “Maybe. Maybe not. You’ll never know who did what, will you?” The kid filled his cheeks; blew a raspberry, bored. He knew nothing of what he talked about; he would drown in a tank the moment his eyes opened again. “If you’re alive, why waste time thinking about it?”

Chuuya didn’t know how to explain.

*There’s a house*, somewhere, he could have said. *There’s a house, somewhere, right by the sea, and I don’t remember a thing of it. There’s a kid with kinder eyes and no scars on his skin. There’s someone with no Singularities in his veins, and no friends bound to die for it. There’s someone who is as cursed as I am, and yet didn’t —*



“Because I have to make up for it,” he said.

“It?”

Chuuya burned — cheeks red, like a guilty child. Shame, maybe — inevitability. “For the fact that it might be me and not you.”

The kid blinked again, very slowly. “Just make up for it some other way, idiot.”

He stared.

He tried to memorize the sight — the soft curve of his cheeks; the mole on his temple that was much more faded on his skin. His chipped tooth and defiant eyes; how small he had looked in a vest that was no protection against the cold. *The future is warm too*, he thought about saying. *Who cares if you deserve it or not?*

Something itched under his eyelids — wet and unwanted. Chuuya snorted, instead, ruffling the child’s hair. “I bet you were the most kickass kid in the entire town.”

His smile could have lit up Yokohama, and have some to spare. “*I am!*”

Chuuya tried to smile back. It was a strange feat — he stood straight like Kouyou had taught him, and he burned, he burned, *he burned* —

“I didn’t think you’d return.”

The *Old World* had always prided itself in peerlessly clean tables and an always present staff. It turned the layer of dust all over the counter and the silence embracing the walls into an ephemeral sight — an hallucination from the get to go. Bent over one of the pool tables, Verlaine twirled one of the sticks, and scored.

Chuuya did not breathe. He tore that place to shreds in the quiet of his mind.

“Me neither,” he offered.

The man glanced his way. “The floor is a bit wet,” he informed. “Be careful where you step.”

There was an awareness that hadn’t been there, on the porch — a materiality that had his fingers twitch. Verlaine looked heart-wrenchingly real. He had told him to fasten his seatbelt, just in case he ended up biting his tongue — he had kept Lippman’s corpse in that car.

Not one of the balls landed, when he struck — Chuuya made his way to the table, and asked himself how childish it would be to grin. If it made sense to believe in ghosts and haunted bars. If it was Fumiko’s Ability or his own body that kept him from yanking his brother’s spine out.

Verlaine fixed his braid. He leaned on the pool stuck in a painfully familiar way, stolen from the depths of his mind, and asked: “Are you mad at me?”

He stared. Laughter squeezed his lungs in a single, horrible sound — he choked it out once. There had been no senseless drowning and no body bleeding out in the sand, this time. Chuuya felt atrociously tired all the same. “I hate you.”

The man tilted his head.

Chuuya climbed on the table, legs crossed. He studied the backwards sign of the *Old World*, facing an eerily empty street, and added: “I was so sure I did, at least.”

Scientific curiosity tilted his head further. “Do you not despise me anymore?”

He squinted, helpless. “I don’t know.”

The bell on the door chimed. No one came in.

“I just know,” he continued, “That they’re already dead, and that you’re gone. And it always felt so fucking stupid to hang onto things that —” His naked heels touched the wood of pool table; he watched *Corruption* scars gleam under the oil light. “That just aren’t there anymore.”

Verlaine hummed.

His voice, he noted, had a rusty note — a golden thread dirtied in mood. Something meant for sweeter words, and wasted on revenge over a missing grudge. “So you despise yourself, instead?”

He scoffed. “The hell I do.”

“Well,” he insisted, reasonably. “You’re the only one left. True loneliness — as I told you your comet would experience without me. Who else are you meant to hate?”

“I’m not stupid —“

“But you blame yourself,” Verlaine was still studying him — his tone more politely confused than arrogant, as it had been. An accented attempt at understanding. “Do you not?”

Chuuya didn’t want to talk. Graves weren’t meant to answer — graves weren’t meant to point fingers. For a sharp, indescribable moment, he looked at the man’s lips, and almost expected him to start humming that tune Chuuya’s veins knew to sleep under.

He didn’t.

“There’s no one else to punish,” he spelled out, slowly — testing the words. “If I’m to blame, at least I know — I *can’t* make myself pay. But if it’s something else — if it’s you, who should have died more unfairly than you did —“ He shrugged, jaw aching. “What am I meant to do?”

Verlaine didn’t seem impressed.

Restlessness choked his voice. He stared at the floor, hard, like blood would appear — a body to save and a doctor too far gone. Somebody to scream at, that he hadn’t called there himself.

“You,” he said, brusque. “Did you dream?”

“I —“ He seemed perplexed. “I’m afraid I never concerned myself with the question.”

Chuuya chuckled, humorless. “Of course. You’re not even here right now. You’re not real.”

“I’m as real as every thought that haunts you, brother,” Verlaine pointed out. His hands were pale and slender; bloodless in a way that had him trembling with ire. “You know that as well. Or you wouldn’t have asked to talk to me.”

“Don’t make this into the shitty picnic it isn’t. I just wanted —“ He trailed off. Eventually, frowning, he added: “I think you understand.”

Genuine surprise colored his features. It made him look wrong, somehow — less statuary; more a man his age, with clothes so formal it was a bit silly. Chuuya wondered how old he had been when he had died. “I do?”

“It pisses me off endlessly,” he confirmed. “They keep swearing this isn’t on me at all. That I’m just like them. I wish it —“ Shrugging again, bones rattled and unsettled, he tried: “It’s not real. Human or not — it’s still not real. *People know nothing of true loneliness*. You told me that. It’s — you weren’t right,” he insisted. “But you weren’t all wrong either, I guess.”

Hazel eyes roamed through his face — the same attention Chuuya had offered his mirror in a vest. He couldn’t recall a moment Verlaine hadn’t looked at him with greed. The last he’d

seen of him had been pure destruction.

*How were you greedy back then, too?,* he didn't ask. *What could a dead man want?*

"So you came here because you wanted to be told you're right?" Verlaine questioned.

He grinned. "Childish, isn't it?"

Sometimes he recalled the man's hand — scarred and welcoming. Chuuya's fingers had still spasmed from the electricity. They had walked side to side for less than seven minutes. Chuuya had felt like a child, even as his mind swarmed with plans of betrayal — hanging on; fearing getting lost.

Oddly vacant, Verlaine swore: "I really did want a better life for you, Chuuya."

"No."

The immediate response stunned him. "No?"

"*Nah,*" Chuuya clicked his tongue, kicking forward. "You're just like me. You wanted someone who understood. That's why you went on and on about comets and I don't know what," His knuckles paled around the edge of the table. He seemed deeply displeased. "You're as childish as I am," he recited. "And look where it got you."

A flash of fury.

He grinned, again. Speaking with the familiarly detested was much easier. "I'm not going to be like you," he let him know.

"So what is it that you are going to be?" Verlaine commented, revolted. "A pathetic bundle of guilt and uncertainties? A fake who doesn't even know how to live his life without the lingering, abrasive terror that someone will point a finger at him and call him —"

Chuuya counted the tiles. "Don't."

"— inhuman?"

He'd read that word all over his diaries — the man had never referred to him as anything but. It was strange to hear it out loud. "That's not what I'm doing."

"It is."

Irritation gritted his teeth. "It isn't —"

"Then," Verlaine dared, uninterested, "Get your hands out your pockets."

*Reclaim your life, Chuuya,* he recalled him ordering. *It belongs to you.*

He stared.

He thought he had misheard, for a moment — until the man's eyes fell on his hidden fingers; studying them with the vicious revulsion he had seen him direct at Professor N's analytic smile.

"What?" he managed.

"It would do you good to get angry."

The table shook from his full body flinch. "Don't you use his words," he snapped, pointlessly — he was a piece of his mind, and *Doc* was too, and how *dare he* — "Don't you dare."

"I'm not sorry for what I did to them."

"I know you're not *sorry*," Disbelief had his lips trembling to curl up. "You're a piece of shit."

"I might be a — *piece of shit*," Verlaine echoed — in another life, a thousand years away, he could see himself snort at the way he said those words. A bloodless fault for a man who was meant to be his brother. "But I'm not a coward."

"I am no coward."

Verlaine stood.

He hated himself for the surge of rage to his fingers — the urge to stand and do *something*. He was done shooting corpses. He had never wanted to be a hypocrite.

"Despite it all, you *are* my brother," the man informed him. "That hat of yours is mine. We are one of a kind, and you carry my legacy with all the scars our power inflicts you. Human or not — you will never be like anyone but me."

Chuuya considered shredding him.

A mock was stuck on his tongue. Perhaps it was brotherly; perhaps it was lined in hatred. *You don't know shit about me*, he wanted to laugh. *You don't know shit about what my hands can do*.

It fell from his lips so abruptly it could have been a prayer — and Chuuya had never needed anyone's approval; needed no one's reassurance; no one's promise that if he just climbed through the debris a bit *longer*, his nails would dig him out of a devastation he had caused; and he'd see the sky — and Chuuya needed *no one* to tell him he was —

"What if I'm nothing but this?"

The man didn't hesitate: "Then you live with it."

Chuuya gasped for air. He wondered if he could touch him, in that form — if he would have dared.

“You are as cursed as I have always been,” Verlaine insisted — almost gentle, dripping blood all over his hands. “But you are much more of a fool. I had the good grace of not caring for anyone — not when deities last longer than existence.”

*You’re not a god*, Chuuya wanted to tell him. *You’re as human as I* —

“You cared about him,” he accused.

Verlaine wasn’t real — the earth shattering longing he saw in his eyes was something Chuuya had picked up himself — through lines Rimbaud would never read. “I did not know I did.”

It landed like a death sentence.

He sighed. “What the fuck would you have me do, then?”

“Be clever, Chuuya,” Verlaine snarled. He had never heard that tone from him — it parted his lips. “What are you even doing here?”

*You’re not real*. The desperation that thought brought choked him. *You’re not real; you’d never ask me not to let myself be haunted*.

*It would do you good*, Doc insisted.

“I’m not him,” Verlaine promised, easily — piece of his mind. “I’m not any of them. I’m just the man who killed them.”

When he blinked again, his hands were too tight around his brother’s throat — *clenched*; all of him trembling; the man’s braid splattered against the wall like pale blood. His eyes — still untouched by all the hunger Chuuya had put in every hit he had landed on him.

“Don’t talk about them,” he hissed, hands merciless. “You don’t get to. You never will.”

“What will you have me do?” he echoed.

Chuuya’s thumbs should have already shattered his windpipe by then. His nails traced his skin. No sweat and no pulse; a corpse he was rattling like a child toy.

“Sometimes I wish you weren’t dead.”

Every inch of Verlaine seemed to quieten down — hushed like a candle by the wind. Staring.

His chest was torn open. Chuuya had never dabbled in the art of overflowing, not without guilt — and yet he bled and he *bled*, and he could not stop bleeding — could not close the gates, not now that his shame had an excuse to look at him and *snarl*; not now that he had said it out loud.

*Sorry*, he thought. Five stolen graves and his hands and a lifetime of blame he would never pay off. *Forgive me for it. Forgive me for it*.

With a voice quieter than it had been, fresh from the Suribachi ruins — when he'd *known*, immediately, before any other feeling, how *lonely* all of it was, he said: "I wish you hadn't deserved to die."

Verlaine didn't move.

"I would sell you to the devil if it got me even just one of them back," he swore. He couldn't feel his hands anymore. "I would kill you again. I would drag you to their graves and make you apologize, even if it won't do shit, and I would *force you* to say it's your fault they're gone — not mine. I would tear it out of you and of me until I *believe it*."

"Chuuya."

"I wish you weren't dead," he vomited out, blood and bile. A secret he hadn't told the graves either — because they never answered. "I wish it all the time."

His hands fell to his sides.

He felt himself stumble back — a step, two. Verlaine stayed where he was — brought a hand to his neck, and looked at him; and Chuuya didn't know how *real* the longing in his eyes was. He was dead, and he would never know.

"I wish we could talk," he heard himself say, "I wish you could tell me if you feel like me. 'Wish I could see that — human or not, it just doesn't *matter*.'"

Over the door, the bell chimed.

Verlaine asked: "Do you want me to absolve you?"

If Chuuya kept his eyes low, there were corpses on the floor. There were always corpses on the floor.

"I don't want shit from you," he offered. Verlaine was freckled and silent — covered in dirt from a grave he didn't have. "I lost them. I'll lose you too."

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Chuuya scrambled to his feet so quickly he bit his tongue to blood.

“Hey,” Fumiko protested, rattling the rusty chains along to every soul in the dungeons, shrieks and sobs and broken bones. “*Hey* —“

He walked away stumbling, mute.



He couldn't have stopped if begged to — he couldn't have had his eyes focus even if his skin began to fall; crowding at his ankles like a costume in bad taste, bleeding him out up the stone stairs. No one was chasing him — Chuuya couldn't see a thing; nothing past the air in his constricted lungs.

“Chuuya?” Hands on his arms, the familiar concern of another pair of eyes he had hurt.

“Sorry,” he head himself say, distractedly. The Entrance Hall was blinding; Tanaki's hand were everywhere. “Sorry, I —“

“*Chuuya?*” she called, even when he pushed past her, stumbling to the closest place that would be safe — *Tainted* hadn't worked against Verlaine, and he couldn't assume — he *couldn't* —

Only when the glass elevator doors closed in front of his eyes, did he realize where he was.

Chuuya could have laughed.

*Fucking ironic*, he gasped. *You bastard.*

It climbed and it climbed, overwhelmed by the too many buttons he had pressed while falling inside. The skyline was a thunder behind the glass walls — no black liquid to drown into, no vest and no matching blue eyes, and no —

His spine ached, and there was a corpse on the floor. It hit him — as inevitable as breathing; forgotten, nonetheless — that Albatross had died smiling.

*One last one*, Ueda had promised.

His bleeding gashes soaked his hair scarlet; the necklace Chuuya had torn off of him — like a grave robber and a pathetic widow and a mindless crow; all to have something with him at all times, a curse and a reminder — still held a glint.

There were always corpses on the floor.

Chuuya dragged his hands out his pockets.

*Better to let it out*, Pianoman had winked. *And better to entrust it to only one person.*

Sunlight hit the glass like a kaleidoscope. It painted squares of golden on Albatross' bloodied shirt — the eyes set to nowhere at all, cheek against the floor.

When he went down on his knees, the glass floor was freezing. He crawled until he could grasp the man's chest, nails getting caught in the wound — cupped his head, forcing his lifeless eyes to look at him, curling around his body like the flames of the Under Port — pressed his forehead against his until it *hurt*, and Chuuya wanted to cry, to bawl like a child, and he *couldn't*. His body wouldn't let him — his eyes were dry and his ribs were growing sharper, piercing what was left of his lungs.

He opened his lips. *Sorry*, he tried — and no sound came out of his lips. *Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*. He couldn't cry and he couldn't speak — pathetically, utterly small, he curled up at Albatross' side like a wounded animal; cuddled his head on the horridly bleeding tear on his stomach. The disgusting wetness of bodily liquids got stuck to his hair, cradled by his cheek.

Chuuya watched floors chase each other behind the glass — huddled close, into a mere dot of *something* — and Albatross did not breathe.

It was the last time he saw him.

## Chapter End Notes

fumiko: its a shame i got imprisoned and cant torment chuuya with his ghosts of past christmas anymore

chuuya, a bit broken in the head: I Have Come.

HAPPY PRIDE MONTH TO ALL PRID-EMO-NTH AND ALL PRI-DEMON-TH et cetera. i hope you guys are having a wonderful time, and i hope you enjoyed this chapter. unfortunately, i do have to run immediately, so i can't do anything more than thank you profusely for all the continued love to this fic (we hit 100 kudos last week!! yay!!!!) and for all the comments <3 i hope you have a wonderful week, day, pride month, and everything!!

stay warm, and see you soon!

# TO

## Chapter Notes

[peeks from behind the wall] i mean i did say exams would slow down the posting process. very sorry though! i'm afraid my predictions will become true, and the one-chapter-a-week will have to become a reality. might post sporadically twice a week though! we will see. sorry for the issues 😊

see you at the end <33

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

## interlude.

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Much to the chagrin of the new waistcoat Kouyou had gifted him for his birthday, Chuuya was captured ten minutes past the Exit Gates of the *Heathrow Airport*, London.

“Seriously,” he huffed. Bored, he slid down the backseats of some stolen cab — there had been a *wall* of them waiting by the private exit of the airport’s VIP section; clearly, the authorized drivers dealt with whatever syndicate had seized both him and the dozens of Mafia freight carriages they’d knocked out some innocent stewards for. “I don’t know how to tell you guys, but you *won’t* be able to sell that stuff. It’s Mori Corps licensed.”

*I’d know*, he didn’t add. *They had me sign that shit paper by paper.*

The woman in the passenger seat — some blondie who couldn’t be older than nineteen, in a blouse and several friendship bracelets — snorted. “Tons of people are willing to buy almost *anything* without asking questions, if you know where to look,” she informed him, with a posh accent.

He wasn’t particularly concerned about the cargo — there were built-in Ability systems that would automatically destroy whatever was inside it, should it end up in hands that the Port Mafia hadn’t planned for. The lost profits wouldn’t even be major — Chuuya had only been sent to verify if the *last* of thirty seven exchanges had been received by their Black Market contact.

The cadence of that saying tickled a corner of Chuuya's brain, though.

All of it was strangely familiar, to be fair — it was why had let himself be captured. He'd heard the sloppy approach of the criminals from the first step out of the private jet — had noted the too interested glares of the low-eyed steward, when she'd grabbed his suitcase. Most of all — the way they had ran for the cargo carriers, the structure of the attack, the *timing* —

Sighing — deeper than the bruise his chest had received, by allowing one of the goons to land one on him, approved of — Chuuya knocked his temple against the window, sullen to the bone.

"Fine," he said. "Where are we going?"

"To our Boss."

"Great. They got food, or something? It was a long flight," He stretched, studying grey skies and lingering raindrops frame London roofs and hurried passersby. The afternoon was infinitely colder than it had been in Yokohama; given that it was meant to be night, Chuuya got himself rocked by the gentle *tip tap* of the rain and the hum of the windscreen wipers. "Though — I'm not very impressed by what I've heard of British *cuisine*."

His stretching stiffened Blondie's shoulders — without a blink from the driver, she reached for the gun she'd thrown on the dashboard, turning between the front seats to point it to his forehead.

"Enough with the humor," she warned. "In case you haven't noticed — *we got you*. I don't want to hear you babbling."

Chuuya stared down the barrel of the gun, before lowering his eyes to his evidently restrained hands. "Just trying to pass the time."

"Not here for tea and biscuits."

"*Dang!*" he called. "First stereotype of the week. Or second, if you count this shit weather."

The woman unclipped the safety.

It was a quiet journey after that.

They probably made for a strange sight — their cab was surrounded by a four-sides barrier of identically dark cars, speeding down the highway to reach the city. Perhaps onlookers assumed him to be some sort of celebrity, or one of those noisy guest politicians Chuuya had watched the Armed Detective Agency escort on television. Blondie was of little use to figuring out their exact goal; when he squinted into the windows of the nearby cabs, he discovered nothing but the surprisingly young age of most of the criminals.

Eventually, bored and tired, he slept.

He was woken up by his door being pulled open, framing the disbelieving, vaguely disgruntled frame of arm-crossed Blondie.

“Are you stupid?” she questioned, though it sounded more like an order.

“Jet-lagged, actually,” Chuuya grunted, as he picked himself off the concrete. “You try it, and then we’ll see how coy you act.”

Blondie’s hands flexed at her side, as if very tempted to strangle him. She wasn’t fast enough — a group of her armed comrades appeared from the other cabs, blindfolding him and dragging him down the rain-slippery street they’d parked next to.

“This is good shit,” a second voice insisted, pawing at his wristwatch, and the silver buckle of his choker. ““You sure we can’t take it?”

“You heard Boss,” another boy replied. “He wants to deal with him *himself*.”

“God,” the first one shivered — genuine, tight horror across his vowels. “I wouldn’t want to be him. Bloody fool’s off his rocker when he sets his eyes on someone.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow.

They walked for a long time — up stone steps that soon morphed into the unmistakable metallic *clank!* of emergency stairs. Chuuya hadn’t caught much of the neighborhood before being blindfolded — north-eastern area, possibly; he had never been to London, but Kouyou had described the more famous Black Market location in length. It was a much poorer area than even the ones she’d talked about, though — the scrap yard-mimicking public housing, the smell, and the road under his feet was too-well reminiscent of the slums.

Before they threw him inside a room that lacked any windows, given the utter quiet, Chuuya heard the unmistakable ring of children’s laughter.

“You wait here, Red,” Blondie warned, as her comrades secured him onto a wooden chair. “You’re in luck — Boss’ already been away for four days, this time around. With some luck, you might even *not* starve before he comes back.”

Chuuya tested the handcuffs. “Can’t wait,” he offered, unenthusiastic. “God bless the Queen.”

With a scoff — one that echoed enough to let him get an idea of just how wide the room was; as such, he came to the conclusion that they had locked him in the middle of a mostly emptied out warehouse — they shut the door in his face.

Given that his curiosity lingered — and that Chuuya had a knack for being proved right — he had no choice but to keep quiet and wait.

*Tainted* informed him that there were guards stationed outside the warehouse at all times — in seemingly casual turns, though, at least two of them would come in and guard the doors from the inside. For the first six hours, they left him alone. He amused himself by counting the time along to the rain falling from a hole in the ceiling; at some horrifying point — as he found himself mumbling along to Dazai's *Ninety Nine Hangman's Knots* — he decided to try to pretend defiance.

“*Oi!*” One of the boys warned, slamming his rifle against the calf Chuuya had been trying to free from the chair's leg rope. “Don't try anything funny, dickhead. We're not playing.”

“And whatever we do to you,” a girl echoed, leaning close enough for him to feel her breath on his face, “Our Boss will make you *wish* for it.”

“Sounds like a scary guy,” he offered.

The boy laughed — a helpful parameter to figure out just how tall the roof was; and enough of a bell to tell Chuuya he'd have to break through a particularly weak beam on the left of it to escape, once he blew that place down like a house of cards. “The most terrifying motherfucker in all of the London underground. ‘Think you've met arseholes in your miserable existence? They've got *nothing* on him.’”

“He once destroyed an entire organization all by himself, in his motherland,” the girl agreed, voice soaked with pride. “Can you imagine that? One fifteen year old against the *Mafia*?”

Chuuya pushed his tongue against his cheek. “That all?”

“*That all?*”

“He defeated an assassin not even Europol had managed to catch!”

“A *French spy*. Do you get that? He defeated a *French spy*! The bloody Queen should have given him a medal, and yet he squats in the mud with us little wankers — “

“They used to call the dickhead the *King of Assassins* — “

“He defeated him all on his own! He even saved the life of a secret agent from Europol!”

“You don't say,” Chuuya echoed, vacantly.

“He abandoned his own organization — the *biggest* in Japan, mind you — just to come to London and teach us how to survive, no matter how his men *begged* him to stay —“

“I heard he was experimented on, when he was a brat —“

“You don’t say.”

“And he’s got no Ability or anything!”

“— some say he even went up against the infamous Demon Prodigy! You know, the one from Yokohama?” The boy sighed. His spine was almost *audible* when it straightened. “Streets say to this day, that twit fears the possibility of hearing Boss’ name. He paid him *millions* just to convince him to stay in London!”

Chuuya could feel a headache coming.

“I think I *have* heard of your Boss,” he said, eventually.

“*See?*”

“Of course you did!”

“Did he have a hand in ending the *Dragon Head Conflict*, perchance?”

The guards gasped. “You *do* know of him!”

“He was merciful enough to concede the victory to a local organization,” the girl huffed. “A good lad, truly. *We’ve got enough money, guys — we shouldn’t take it from those who need it more.*”

Their tales were never ending. Only some of them, particularly from the Boss’ *backstory*, were irrevocably familiar — carved into Chuuya’s skin in scars and creaky joints. But the stories of what the leader had done after arriving in London diverged from anything he’d ever heard about, and they carried more realism on their vowels. Talks of arriving to the city with nothing but a plan and a name; establishing channels of hiring offers for all the abandoned children in the slums of London.

All of the guards he tricked into divulging stories sounded just as starry-eyes as the ones before them. Clearly, their *King* — as most of them eventually slipped into calling him, once they forgot Chuuya was technically a prisoner — had them wrapped around his finger.

“He’s the only reason why me and my sister are still alive,” one of the younger girls told him, by the second day. “He found us wandering under a bridge, starving and alone — if it hadn’t been for him, we would have just let ourselves flow along to the Thames until we drowned.”

“The adults are all scared of him,” one of the boys declared. Chuuya had tricked him into bringing him some sticky bread — after Chuuya had loudly sighed about how, *bad mannered this King of theirs seemed to be*. “Nobody fucks with us.”

“We’re family,” the youngest of the ones he’d met swore. “*Buchi’s* going to make sure we’re family forever.”

Her voice echoed somewhere by his knees — he’d heard the other guard of her pair take the gun off her hands, reassuring that she was helping just as much by sitting on his shoulders.

Chuuya listened to their low convos about dinner time, and muffled a smile they'd take as mocking.

Two and a half days in, the constant void of black and scratchy fabric obscuring his eyes got on his nerves.

“— and a *moron*,” Chuuya said, calmly, over the sound of the fuming subordinates. “He’s a lazy ass as well. And there’s no way he’s actually done everything you guys swear he did — and I bet he snores really, *really* loud —“

“Boss doesn’t *snores* —“

“He’s not a moron!”

Chuuya insisted: “I bet he sleeps with a sheep plush toy.”

The kids gasped — began, very unsubtly, to question possible bugs across their territory.

With some more inciting, he got them to very clumsily attempt to waterboard him. It did nothing but get water in his ears and remind him of Agent Minami’s talent — but, thankfully, it also sucked away the black color from the fabric of his blindfold. Chuuya assumed they’d scarcely tinged it black to give it a more dangerous aura.

Through the thin, ruined layers of the fold, he vaguely caught the outline of the symbol on the back of the guards’ Kevlar jackets: a sharp-lined — much less stylized than Chuuya remembered — sheep skull.

*Something* seized his veins.

Eventually, three days in captivity — one of the guards let it slip that, *their glorious King was back from his business, so enjoy breathing as long as you have the ability to!*, and Chuuya could do nothing but stretch the muscles in his neck.

He waited.

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In a show of horrible, nightmarish timing — the police broke in that same evening.



Through the absolute chaos of the young criminals running around the warehouse, looking for weapons and gathering whatever belongings they had abandoned near their guarding spots — Chuuya finally allowed *Tainted* to bend the metal of his handcuffs and explode the ropes around his body, relaxing on the chair with a groan.

“*Get the kids!*” a Brown kid screamed, as he pointed his rifle to the holes on the ceiling. “*Plan Rogue Sheep Gone Rock! Get to the safehouse!*”

From those tears on the roof, Chuuya saw hell on earth, blurred by what was left of the blindfold he couldn’t bother to remove — an *astonishing* number of police cars surrounded the warehouse, shouldered by black vans he had learned to recognize as *Secret Services* vehicles. The red and blue lights had painted the world so viciously, it was impossible to recognize any color but that. Over the blaring shriek of the sirens, it was utterly clear that there wasn’t a single way out.

When he tilted his head, the sky was filled to the edge of the clouds in helicopters — blinding lights from that army drawing target circles on the floor of the warehouse.

Carved across the side of the closest of the emergency helicopters was: *Europole*.

“Oh,” Chuuya’s eyes widened, right as one of the running kids almost crashed onto him in his haste to leave. “Oh, there’s no way —”

“*Chuuya?*” From behind one of the doors of the interior balcony encircling the warehouse, a familiar voice came shrilling — panic lining every letter, turning his tone into something as high pitched as it had been when he was a brat. “The one you captured is *Nakahara fucking Chuuya?*”

In an unwise survey of his situation — he froze in place, still halfway on his chair.

The well known gasps of the guards joined the chaos across the balcony, as a blurred crowd of Kevlar vests and teenage clothes crouched to hide from the helicopter’s lights. Heavy shoulders hit the enormous doors of the warehouse, attempting to break in from a wider crack than the ones in the walls; one of the girls stuttered: “You — You mean the Gravity Manipulator? *That’s* who he is?”

“He didn’t even use gravity!”

“He stole my lunch!”

“He said you *snore*, which is a *lie* —”

“How did he know about the sheep toy —”

“For bloody *sake*, guys,” the King insisted, in an accent that didn’t fit him at all, “I told you — I needed a few days to get her from the airport and show her around, and *you* capture the Mafia’s —”

“You told us to capture any and all mafiosi we ever came across!” a boy accused.

“You said you’d beat them until they bled, no problem!” another encouraged, clearly trusting. “Remind them why their arses had to go back to Yokohama with their tail between their legs!”

“I said that,” the Boss echoed weakly. The tips of his fingers twitched — Chuuya wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. “I mean — yes, of course I — but *Chuuya*, guys, he’s a bit of —“

“You can break him in a half!”

“Make him eat dirt!”

“Crush him into pieces like you crushed the *King of Assassins*!”

A metallic *thud*! — as if *someone* had hit his head on the railing. “You, *ah* — you didn’t tell him about that. Did you? You didn’t —“

From the sky, an unyielding wave of bullets rumbled louder than thunder, as fire opened from the helicopters. The world seemed to shake; as the air got painted white by the ricochet, the screams, and the inquisitorial lights — a voice, louder than the end of the world, roamed through the sky from the copters’ speakers, commanding: “*UNHAND MASTER CHUUYA RIGHT THIS MOMENT, YOU UNDERAGE FELONIOUS FIENDS!*”

In an unrestrained resignation, Chuuya let his disbelieving body slump back into the wooden chair, temples between his fingers.

“*PROTOCOL 77B81 IS IN PLACE,*” the voice continued, startling the young criminals into a hurried escape down the emergency stairs. “*THIS IS UNIT 67, UNDER THE COMMAND OF ADAM FRANKNESTAIN, AUTONOMOUS HUMANOID SUPERCOMPUTER FROM THE EUROPEAN DETECTIVE POLICE ORGANIZATION. IF YOU REFUSE TO SURRENDER, WE WILL OPEN FIRE, AND YOU WILL BE MERCIFULLY SLAUGHTERED. IF YOU REFUSE TO HAND NAKAHARA CHUUYA OVER WE WILL OPEN FIRE AND YOU WILL BE MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTERED. IF YOU LITTER ON THE STREETS, WE WILL OPEN FIRE AND YOU WILL BE MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTERED.*”

A screeching pause. Chuuya blinked.

“...*FORGET ABOUT THE LAST PART. SITUATIONAL PROTOCOL: REBOOTING,*” Another screech; a sound not unlike that of a page reloading on screen. Then, in the same exact tone as before: “*UNHAND MASTER CHUUYA YOU FELONIOUS —“*

“*Adam!*” Chuuya snapped, as he frantically waved his arms towards the nearest opening on the ceiling. He foregone all his propriety — jumping wildly, he cupped his mouth and shouted: “*Hey! You human shaped tin! I’m here! It’s fine! Let the fuckers go!*”

“*MASTER CHUUYA?*”

Frantically, he almost unscrewed his head from his neck to nod.

A pause.

*“DO KEEP UNHANDING MASTER CHUUYA,”* the android ordered. *“IF YOU STOP, WE WILL OPEN FIRE AND YOU WILL BE MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTERED.”*

“We aren’t even *handing* him,” one of the younger kids protested, bawling.

Anchored wires shoot out of some unclear point in the sky — they hooked themselves on part of the balcony railing, landing a silhouette in a blue business suit mere steps from Chuuya’s seat. The scratchy remains of his blindfold — and Chuuya’s bent, exasperated position — muffled most of the man’s face from sight. His shoes were shiny; and all ten of his fingertips were unscrewed, showing off little needles of sedative where the last digit should have been.

*“YOU HAVE UNHANDED MASTER CHUUYA,”* Adam started, his back offered to him, scolding the remains of the syndicate who hadn’t been fast enough to escape.

Startled by his own volume, the android paused — tapped two fingers on a spot on his neck. Clearing his voice, he added: “That is a wise choice. Which certainly surprises me — human behavior is, after all, rather irrational.”

“You can’t keep saying that whenever you don’t get something,” Chuuya sighed.

“I am a detective, property of Europol,” he continued, undeterred, only barely louder than the roar of sirens, helicopter motors, and nearby cars. “My model number is 98F7819-5. My partner and I were created by Ability User engineer Dr. Wollstonecraft. Code name is Adam Frankenstein. I was alerted by the airport security that Master Chuuya had crossed our borders, and had been detained immediately after. For this crime, and for the other seven thousand and fifty three illegal acts connected to your name — which I discovered with a quick survey of the documents locked in the third drawer of that work desk right there,” Adam pointed a finger towards a destroyed bundle of metal on his right. “You are all under arrest.”

*“What?”* the children chorused.

“Adam,” Chuuya insisted. He reached to grab the hem of the android’s jacket, pulling. “It’s fine. Seriously,” He blinked. “Wait, you got *alerted* when I was at the airport? Why the hell didn’t you just come get me there?”

“Master Chuuya will forgive me,” Adam replied, still in mission mode, “He will certainly remember my hatred of airport metal detectors.”

He dropped his head even lower. “Man.”

“You will immediately comply with our orders,” the detective insisted, in a tone that was eerily vacant. “You will be escorted outside by one of our agents, and led to the nearest police station. There, should any of you refuse to collaborate to the search for your comrades, proper measures will be taken to assure —“

*“Adam,”* he insisted. “It’s Shirase’s group.”

A beat passed. From the bundle of people half hidden by the emergency stairs' railing, one of the taller frames winced so viciously he almost fell.

"Nonetheless," the android insisted. "Any attempt to show favoritism contradicts with the external data gathered for my mission. Given the circumstances, Shirase Buichiro will have to come forward and face responsibility for his crimes."

The absent tone of his voice was deeply unfamiliar — closer to how he had sounded that first day at the *Old World*, emptily demanding the Flags brought him to his mission target. Chuuya flinched, speechless, beginning to stand.

Over the man's frame, the youngest of the kids stared at them with eyes full of tears. He tried: "Adam, don't you —"

The android turned so quickly Chuuya fell back into his chair by pure startlement.

"I have recently been watching a great deal of ruthless spy movies. Humans truly are masters at being soulless, when they want to obtain what they want," Adam whispered, so low he wouldn't have heard him if his nose hadn't been plastered against his own. If the man cared about the lack of personal space, he didn't show it — with a wink, he questioned: "Let me put it into practice."

Chuuya's jaw fell.

The detective turned once again, rumbling: "Shirase Buichiro, you will go outside, and wait for me to bring you to the station."

A vaguely terrified squeak came from the huddled group — accent coming through from the sun-rained roofs of Suribachi City. "The — the hell I will, you talking tin can! You'll get out of our property, or we'll fuck you up!"

The children cheered.

Chuuya gritted his teeth. "Shirase, go outside."

"I said, *the hell I* —"

"*Shirase!*" he snapped, attempting to meet his eyes through the blinding lights and the half shadows. He used his more meaningful tone, and spelled out: "Run outside. *Right now.*"

Another pause.

"Oh," Shirase said, slowly. "*Oo-ooh.*"

"Yeah."

"*Uh* — we'll go," Hissing, he ushered the kids on their feet, bodily pushing them towards the back exit by the emergency stairs. "Going! We will wait outside. Won't book it to the safehouse or — or anything. Going."

Satisfied, Adam pressed two fingers on his neck and, waiting for the group to disappear from view, he screamed: “*THE FELONIOUS FIENDS HAVE SURRENDERED. AS PER PROTOCOL, THEY WILL NOW BE MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTERED,*” The kids let out a whine on their way out. “*ALL MEMBERS OF THE UNIT ARE FREE TO RETURN TO THE STATION. I WILL TAKE CARE OF THE NEXT STEPS MYSELF.*”

In an anticlimactic, shuddering easy way, all the helicopters and all the cars turned around — and left so unbelievably fast, dinner break had to have started sooner.

Abruptly, the neighborhood was quiet.

Adam sighed, scratching the side of his head. Chuuya ripped his blindfold off from where it was hanging over his nose.

“That was certainly an experience,” the android commented, as he turned around — just as emotionless as usual, but with that *something* in his tone that made Chuuya ache with memories. “A rather loud one, too. I will have to check my system for damages to the internal microphone structure. But, as I have always said — everything is an experience, and experience is — *oh!*”

Adam’s flesh was synthetic, and his clothes had nothing metallic about them. When Chuuya flung himself off the seat and wrapped his arms around his chest — apart from a humbling sense of shortness — he felt nothing but soft, human warmth.

“Oh,” Adam repeated, politely. “My system is sensing an expulsion of lacrimal fluid from your glands. Mixed with quickened heart rate and the undeniable tension in your lower muscles, should I assume Master Chuuya is cr—”

“*Shuddup,*” Chuuya muttered, cheeks red from the childish urge to stick as close as possible. His face didn’t even reach the man’s clavicles — shaking more than he would ever admit, he pressed burning eyes onto his tie until he couldn’t inhale, laughing between wet words. “What’s with *Master Chuuya*, anyway? Didn’t you override your old authority command? Dr. Wollstonecraft —”

Adam shook his head.

“Master Chuuya is Master Chuuya,” the android said, resolutely. “No manmade command can override something like that.”

Despite his clenched grip on the back of his jacket — and how awkward it was, in the middle of that mess of ruins — Chuuya felt the mortifying, relentless urge to sob like a child.

“I get it,” Adam added, suddenly. “This is an example of what happens in those spy movies — when the traitorous antagonist embraces his ally only to stab him in the back while he abandons himself to the faith of friendship.”

He chuckled. “Just like that, man.”

“Alright,” With intense determination, the man wrapped his arms around Chuuya, patting his back as if on a mission. “You know — you are a few years older. Should you not have grown?”

He stiffened. “Don’t push it.”

“I do not quite know what that means,” the android hummed. “I will shut up, though.”

The cadence of his tone scratched an itch he hadn’t even realized he carried. He smelled of something akin to car oil and ink, and whatever had been built in place of a human heart beat with a steady, content hum. Chuuya recalled stumbling through a forest, looking for a disconnected arm he could have *sworn* was all he had left of a robot who had turned human enough to die for him — and not finding a thing.

Something sharp tickled his back.

Chuuya jumped ten feet. “*Don’t stab me in the back!*”

“I wasn’t going to!” Adam laughed, waving the finger he had turned into a kitchen knife. “It was an updated android joke.”

Breathless, he laughed again. He felt high with it — he felt years younger and times lighter, closer to a sound the Flags’ had heard than he had been in endless eons. Adam’s face hadn’t changed a bit — he wasn’t subjected to wrinkles or aging, and the programmed friendliness in his eyes was a tad more sincere than it had been at the start.

“You know,” Chuuya replied. “I think it’s more of a human joke. You’re getting better.”

“Am I?” If androids could preen, that was what he did. Turning a tad more serious, though, he nodded towards the emergency exit. “My GPS tells me Shirase and the *Stray Sheep* are halfway to their safehouse. Should we hurry, we would have an 83% chance of catching up.”

Chuuya munched on his lips. “Will they be tailed?”

The detective tilted his head, eyes blurring with interior research. He shook his head. “They will get to the safehouse safely.”

“Then let them go,” He shrugged, a tad too casual. He still remembered the first words out of Shirase’s mouth — *get Yuan from the airport and show her around*. Chuuya could hardly believe the coincidence of having landed there during her first visit to the other boy, but he wouldn’t mess it up. “Yuan’s with him, and they have to regroup and figure out what to do about — it’s better not to. ‘Doubt they’ll want me there.’”

He hadn’t even seen Shirase’s face, anyway. He recalled Yuan’s too well.

He recalled his own funerary conclusion — *maybe they could never be in the same room again*. For the first time, Adam’s placid expression turned into a frown. “The data gathered from my external memory contradict that statement.”

“Well, *I’m* Master Chuuya here,” he said, crossing his arms — only somewhat dying from the awkwardness of it. “And I say — let them go.”

Indecisiveness battled on the android’s face. He waited with held breath, trying to figure out if he would pick his *Follow Your Heart* procedure and simply grab him like a suitcase to play catch up — but, eventually, all he did was nod.

“Alright, then. In that case,” Adam offered him a grin that was all human. “Would you like to meet my partner?”

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The apartment Europole had assigned to its supercomputers seemed somewhat useless, until the android explained that they were meant to pose as a normal pair of humans to the rest of the upper class apartment complex.

As they walked through the hallways of that sleek, expensive place, Adam pointed at the doors and offered: “These are all individuals who have been questioning Europole’s android project very vehemently. Dr. Wollstonecraft has devised a strategy to have them interact with us as normal neighbors for a few months — and then ask them to point out who, amongst all the tenants, is the secret android she planted in the structure.”

Chuuya whistled. “That’s clever.”

“My creator is cunning beyond her years. In every sense,” Adam agreed. “Oh, here we are.”

The luxury apartment was nondescriptively spotless — a perfect mirror to the penthouse he had yet to furnish with something that hadn’t come from Kouyou’s insistence, Hirotsu’s gifts, or the stuff that was sold with it. The counters and the drawers were a modern shade of black, framed by floor-to-ceiling windows and paintings that felt a tad too prestigious to stand by a coffee machine.

Over a leather couch and a counter filled with food, a Black woman was singing along to some old British band he’d heard Gin hum along to — only, vertiginously enough, the sound coming out of her mouth was the singer’s voice itself; as if her throat were a radio of sorts.

“Eve!” Adam greeted, grasping his wrist to drag him to the kitchen. “Look! Master Chuuya! I *told* you the French authorities wouldn’t get him!”

“Golly good,” Eve replied, with the tone of someone who’d learned the expression recently, and couldn’t quite figure out the right moment to drop it. “I feared you might risk self detonation in an attempt to save him from the Versailles’ prisons, should that not have been the case. The *Irritation & Aggravation* program Master Wollstonecraft installed in me might have not sustained the hit.”

“I understand your concern,” Adam said.

“*Irritation & Aggravation?*” Chuuya asked, as the man forced him on one of the stools behind the counter. “Why is that a program?”

“Master Wollstonecraft believed it rather unsuitable — to build a woman who would not be allowed to experience such emotions towards a man she had to interact with daily,” the android was quick to explain, absolutely deadpan. “Despite the fact that I am, according to all standards — a perfect man.”

“That you are,” Eve agreed. She frowned. “Is that helicopter oil I smell on you?”

Androids shouldn’t have been able to sweat — Adam’s smile turned somewhat contrite, still.

“Did you deploy the helicopters?”

“I needed to make an entrance.”

“*Dramatics,*” Eve insisted, “Are *human.*”

“Master Chuuya taught me humanity,” the android insisted, proudly. “Which is why we made you dinner, Master Chuuya. Humanity deserves a good number of mashed potatoes.”

Nodding, his partner set a plate of mashed potatoes in front of him.

The androids stared at him, waiting.

Chuuya dipped his fork in, gulping down a good quantity of mashed potatoes. They watched him munch it with the attention of a predator — when he gulped, exaggeratingly appreciative, they nodded again. After that, side by side, they began to cut more potatoes.

“There’s no need to —“ he attempted.

“Humans like potatoes,” Eve insisted. “And you are my dear, gum-eating Adam’s human. You will get many potatoes.”

She was extraordinarily beautiful — just like Adam’s, her skin bounced off the lights of the kitchen with no wrinkles and no pimpled textures. Her thin, onyx curls framed her head like a halo, only held back by a bright yellow silk band. She wore a tailored *tailleur* of the same shade; behind thick cat-eyes glasses she *had* to be wearing purely for style — though Chuuya wasn’t sure of where an android would get a taste for it — her eyes were clever and enhancing.



She spoke in the same vacant, mechanical tone as Adam — but there was a cunningness to it that the male android lacked. It took Chuuya only an hour — watching them go over reports between the potatoes — to figure out that she probably kept Adam on his cables-built toes daily.

“I have heard countless stories about you,” she informed him, once she’d warmed up enough to offer him a smile and a scarily close rendition of Hirose Fumiko’s latest single.

“Only good things, I hope,” Chuuya joked, directing a warning gaze to the other android.

“Adam’s inevitably objective reports about you depict you as a wonderful young man,” Eve replied — so easily it was flustering. “He speaks of you as a boy worth dying for. I cannot say I fully understand, but I do believe his analysis.”

“You have to,” Adam insisted. “You know I cannot lie.”

“You lied to me just fine,” Chuuya replied.

“No, I didn’t.”

He curled an eyebrow. “*Sacrificing yourself against Verlaine* reminds you of something?”

“That was no lie,” the android rebutted. “I told you all the facts. It is not on me that you did not consider my self destruction as the most viable option to stop Paul Verlaine. Humans are so —“

“Irrational?”

He lit up. “Exactly!”

They exchanged stories until the moon was high behind the curtain of rain. Yokohama caused Adam no nostalgia, but Eve seemed curious about the tribulations of the *Dragon Head Conflict* — which she had had to write a prediction report on.

“He wanted me to bet on you,” she added, tapping Adam’s shoulders with an awkwardness that told him she had learned it purely for their tenants’ fooling. “He was rather insistent about it. I carried him to Master Wollstonecraft to check on his objectiveness parameters — that is how dire it was.”

“I was right, in the end,” Adam replied. A bit slower: “Not that we would ever rejoice in it. In fact, all my calculations assure me we should arrest you right this moment.”

Eve tilted her head to the side, considering.

Chewing his potatoes, Chuuya questioned: “Do I have to fear waking up in the underground secret quarters at Buckingham Palace, or —?”

“Don’t be silly,” Adam said, calmly. “That is not where the secret quarters are located.”

The androids had slowly begun making a name for themselves, ever since their Creator had officially declared Eve fit to work. Chuuya had half worried about the leak of information they seemed so careless with, but it ended up not mattering — their stories were borderline too hysterical to really appear believable at all.

“You’re telling me the Spanish royal family is training crocodiles to invade Italian shores?”

“No,” Eve corrected him. “We are telling you they have an Ability User who can *control* the crocodiles. *That* is who they are training.”

“Unfortunately, he is only seven years old,” the other android added. “That gives us a rather wide window of time to figure out a way to have the Italian Government believe us on the matter.”

“They keep sending our letters back with demands not to shame their honor.”

“I’ve been to Italy,” Chuuya offered. “Can’t say I was expecting any crocodiles on shore.”

“Yes,” Adam agreed, pained. “That is why they will not see the seven year old boy coming.”

Sometimes after midnight, Eve announced she would retire for the night. He didn’t outright question her need to sleep, but nonetheless, she let him know androids could choose to recharge in a room they had disguised as a bedroom — just to be sure their vitals would fit with functions humans needed to display.

“My heart,” she explained, laying Chuuya’s hand over her beating chest. “It is a battery. It will not emit this sound if I do not recharge it. There are far too many risks about working with a broken heart.”

“That’s poetic, kinda,” he offered. “It’s not all that different from what humans do.”

She tilted her head, studying him. At last, she patted his head. “My analysis tells me you are a rather nice human to die for.”

Chuuya’s mouth dried. “I —“

“The folder of your memories always makes Adam very happy,” she added, nodding towards the spot in the hallway where the man had walked off. “I occasionally catch him skimming through it, on the harsher days of our missions. Androids are given a program of decision making that mimics human emotions to the point of not arising most suspicions in those like you — when he thinks about you, though, he seems to hardly need it.”

Pathetically, the lump stuck in his throat stole some time from him, before he managed to answer: “I’ve kept all his Christmas jack-in-box.”

“Ah, those silly things,” Eve’s sigh reminded him a good deal of Kouyou. “What a cellphone he is, at times.”

“*Cellphone?*” he echoed, grinning. “What — is that like calling him a child?”

“Certainly. It might seem as if their time is long past — but computers are the future, Master Chuuya.”

He curled an eyebrow. “*Master Chuuya?*”

“My partner believes you utterly worthy of that title,” she responded, simply. “I trust him with every cable and every program that helped create me. It is what I am, and what I will always be.”

Astonishing devotion lined her tone. There was something inevitably certain about the way she offered those words. Chuuya knew it had more to do with programming than anything close to an actual feeling — but when he watched them bump their foreheads together in some fun information exchange he hadn’t asked too much about, he felt the urge to pull the hems of his gloves.

“Master Chuuya understands,” Adam let her know, rubbing his forehead. He offered him a glance that had old scars itching. “He has a partner as well.”

He observed the thin knife lines carved on the counter, running his finger over them. Vaguely, he considered that might have been the first time they used any of the utensils in that kitchen.

*It is what I am, and what I will always be.*

Chuuya frowned. “I guess.”

Eve attempted to offer him an apple for the night — *should you get hungry, as humans under the age of twenty five happen to often experience* — and she didn’t quite understand why the reference made him snort. He took the apple all the same, and hung off Adam’s shoulders as the man led him to the guest room.

“Stay the weekend,” the android offered, as he walked him inside the mostly bare space — only a wide bed, some indistinctive paintings, and blank shelves and a desk, all shaded in blue. “I can bring you sightseeing. I will even make it my mission! Dr. Wollstonecraft meant to install me a *Tourist Facade* program — I will ask her to fasten the process.”

“I’d like that a lot,” Chuuya yawned, face planting into the soft pillows. “Don’t you have to work, though?”

Adam’s smile was mechanically detached — but as sincere as it managed. “I am immortal and the world is unchanging,” he offered.

“And I am eighteen and halfway to a serious potato indigestion,” he huffed. “Amen.”

Given the futon he slept on in Albatross’ apartment and the rare sleep he got on missions out of Yokohama, it was the first time in quite a bit Chuuya laid on a bed. He rolled around, kicking his feet — until his eyes landed on a framed picture on the nightstand. It was the only piece of personalized decoration in the entire house, apart from a collection of gums near the couches.

“Man,” he lamented, grabbing it. “Where did you even get this?”

“My folders,” Adam replied, sitting down next to him. He seemed surprised by the softness of the bed; experimentally, he jumped a bit on it. “I had Master Wollstonecraft print it for me. This is from when I was dragging you —“

“— away from the *Old World*,” Chuuya concluded, grimacing at the high quality picture of his startled face and too close nostrils. “You could have picked a different picture, if you missed me.”

“I have printed the first alert Europol ever received about *Double Black*,” the android offered, still staring at the bed. “It is in my suitcase. Are all beds this soft? Is that practical at all?”

“*Nah* . Just comfortable.”

Adam mouthed: *comfortable*.

Thirty seconds later, Chuuya was dragging him to his feet on the bed, biting down laughter as he watched him attempt to figure out the art of *jumping on a bed*. He seemed to like the sound of the creaking headboard — eventually, head almost brushing the ceiling, he started rating the jumps.

“Any picture would have worked,” Adam let him know, voice rattled by the motion. “8.67. I like this one very much, though. 9.45. It reminds me of how stubborn you can be.”

“You kneeled in front of me, introduced yourself as a robot, and told me an assassin who I believed to be dead was my brother,” he huffed. “A rational man would have let the Flags attempt to cut you down until you were crushed like a can.”

“6.59. You didn’t, though.”

“That was *at least* a 7. And you dragged me like a handbag. I didn’t have much choice.”

“After,” Adam insisted, studying him with unblinking eyes. It should have felt creepy, to have his gaze on him — all Chuuya could think about was the perspective of a few days tagging along to his freakishly long legs, lamenting his folder photos and forcing him to try out ice cream. He hadn’t felt that excited in months. “After, you did.”

Chuuya shrugged. “Revenge, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

He halted his jumping. He abandoned the photograph on the nightstand, and settled on the bed, legs crossed.

“Adam,” he questioned, under the man’s curious — still jumping — gaze. “When you were checking my vitals, did I feel angry — to you?”

In an odd show of non-immediate answer, the android replied: “Did you feel angry?”

“I felt like burning every inch of the world until not even ashes were left,” Chuuya offered. “I felt like finding Verlaine, even if it meant working with a pseudo computer cop — I felt like making him quit calling me his brother, if I had to cut off his tongue for it to work.”

Blinking, Adam questioned: “According to my parameters — is that not anger?”

He studied the loose threads of his gloves, pulling at the longer ones to clean them off. There had been something stuck between his ribs since the sight of Albatross’ bloodied body on the floor; it had begun to crack bones after he’d seen it again, against all odds. There had been something stuck between his ribs since Shirase had put a knife there, and Chuuya had kept it — bloodied and all he had left. Chuuya kept losing, and Chuuya kept tearing the earth apart in an effort not to feel its absence.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Maybe it was just grief.”

Eons and eons ago, Doc had taken a look at his blood and said, *being angry would do you good*. Eons and eons ago, stuck under the rain in front of a Hospital, Dazai had challenged — *you don’t have to be angry. Has anyone ever told you?*

The bed stopped being rattled. Landing on the floor with a grace that fit his vacant face to the dot, Adam crossed his hands behind his back and offered: “Perhaps there is somewhat of a point — in being angry at the necessity to grieve.”

Chuuya stared.

“For what it is worth, Master Chuuya,” the android added, carelessly fixing up things around the spotless room, “Emotions are parameters us androids have to analyze rather attentively. They will tell us much about a target — they are almost entirely to blame for any and all changes in their vitals, and for the actions that derive from them,” Turning, Adam offered him an endlessly simple nod. “I do not believe something this fundamental is meant to be entirely understood. And I do not believe you will be asked to.”

It sounded offensively easy when he put it like that. *Perhaps that was the point of being a tin can*, he considered. *Things only had to be simple*. A system wouldn’t understand them, otherwise.

Chuuya sighed. “You sure you can’t get yourself moved as a — I don’t know, a permanent overseas agent in Yokohama?”

The android beamed. “I rather like it here, Master Chuuya. But I prepared this guest room just for you, analyzing several pieces of data from our past encounters — I hope this visit will assure you that it will always be yours.”

“This is —” He glanced around, stupefied. “*Just for me?*”

“Who else?” Adam asked, genuinely. “I did my best to decorate it to your tastes. My studies let me know you rarely decorate your living spaces — though, you *have* mentioned pictures in your past letters,” He nodded towards the nightstand. “I do hope this will be to your taste.”

It certainly reflected every room Chuuya had ever lived in — from the basements the Sheep had to change every week, to the apartment he had been dragged to by Albatross.

*It will always be yours.* Chuuya had always liked overseas missions, anyway.

“You know what,” he decided. “When we go sightseeing, tomorrow, let’s buy — things.”

Carefully, Adam echoed: “Things?”

“Yeah. Decorations, bedsheets, a gaming console — I don’t know,” he insisted, infervorated. “Whatever makes a room. I’m not entirely sure. We can check on some magazines, or — your files will have something about it. We’ll turn this room into an eyesore, and I’ll be here more often than either of you can withstand.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Adam replied. His eyes were studying him bizarrely; they seemed to come to a conclusion that was entirely based on vitals and past parameters. He smiled. “But alright. As you wish.”

They stuck together for the next hour — both too excited by the perspective of sharing space again to finish the conversation. Chuuya begged him to show him what animals he could imitate apart from pigeons — after some prodding, he convinced him to tell him everything the last digits of his fingers could turn into.

He fell asleep at some undefined point, in the middle of one of the apocalyptic robot movies that got Adam to express human-like glee.

Chest aching from laughing at the creepy look the man got on his face whenever an android committed mass homicide, and heart pounding from how genuinely bright-eyed he got when he began ranting about Dr. Wollstonecraft’s promise to build him enough androids to create his agency — he slept dreamless and peaceful, feeling Adam’s eyes on him.

“I do not understand humanity fully,” he could have sworn he had heard him conclude, at some point. A blanket was laid on him — a gesture so tender, it contrasted his words viciously. “But I do believe your friends would prefer you grieving, rather than angry, Master Chuuya.”

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It was 3:03 A.M. of his fourth day at the Frankenstein household, when two bodies of wet clothes and rancid curses dropped on the floor of his room.

“For fuck’s *sake*, Yuan —“

“*Shh*, you — you’re the one who —“

“ — sneaky as —“

“ — those ridiculous boots of yours —“

“ — hadn’t dyed your hair like a tomato —“

A crash. The empty flower vase Adam had situated on one of the shelves shattered on impact.

Chuuya waited to see if either one of the androids would break into the room, fingers on their guns and screams of *UNHAND MASTER CHUUYA* on their tongues. When it didn’t happen, he came to the conclusion that both the owners were well aware of the intrusion — and had decided it posed no danger, outside of his possible reaction.

*Or*, he considered, briefly pressing his eyes on the pillow to suffocate an upcoming headache, *Adam had just decided to play therapist again.*

He sat up, turning the *abat-jour* on.

In a pathetic bundle of wet limbs and bared teeth between the shards on the floor, Shirase and Yuan strode — circled by the warm yellow light as if Murase and Matsuda’s police lights. Thinking about Officer Matsuda had his hands twitching at his sides, though — instead, crossing his arms and raising his eyebrows, he said: “Hello.”

The hair clip keeping Yuan’s dyed hair up fell, raining strands on her blushing cheeks. One leg over her head and his foot trapped between her fingers, Shirase gasped.

“*Dude!*” he hissed, seemingly excited.

He didn’t even wait for him to stand from the bed to jump him with vigor — Chuuya landed back on the pillows with a *oof!*, Shirase’s arms like a vice around his shoulders, and his panting breaths rushing through his ear with urgency.

Stunned, he stilled.

“Dude,” the boy insisted, unconcerned, his legs kicking up like a little girl. Vaguely, Chuuya began counting seconds until he lowered his voice and pushed himself away with *macho* horror — an old habit from when they were children, and Shirase’s screams were always a bit *too* high pitched.

“Dude. Where the *hell* were you? I thought you would get to us after you dealt with the *Tin Can Police* — we waited for you at the safehouse!”

“I don’t know where the safehouse is,” he let him know, deeply uncomfortable — even more speechless.

“Well, *duh*, mate, Tin Police could tell you — I spent four hours scolding the kids for keeping you chained up for days!” he insisted. “I did tell them to capture any Japanese mafiosi they saw — but I thought it was clear I didn’t mean *you*. Like — if anyone should get a chance to try to capture you, it should be *me*, don’t you think? *Ha!* I kind of did it, didn’t I, though — right? I’m the one who trained the brats, and they *got you*. How did they even get you? Not that I don’t have absolute faith in my abilities. Was *Tainted* working badly? Is it a jet-lag thing? Did you grow dumber since I left? That’s no good, mate! You think I’ll lower my guard or anything — I *won’t*. Good *ol’* Chuuya, always challenging my intellect — *I won’t*, do you hear that?” He slapped his shoulder. “Why the *hell* didn’t you tell me you were coming to London?”

Chuuya had gotten lost somewhere around the third word out of his mouth. Only years of use allowed him to get out of it, after a minute.

Then: “*Mate?*”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” Shirase said, undeterred. “When in London, buy a good dozen of backup umbrellas. Chuuya, I miss Japanese transportation so *bad*.”

“It *is* rather efficient,” Yuan offered, still on the floor.

Her voice stiffened Shirase like a brick.

Predictably, he catapulted himself off both the bed and Chuuya, landing against the desk — barely hiding the wince the corner of it against his hip caused him.

“*Oi!*” he screeched, reddening. “I see what you’re doing! You won’t make me emotional and shit! I’m onto you!”

Still starfishing on the bed, Chuuya could hardly do more than stare at him.

Shirase had grown tall. Much, *much* taller than he had expected when they were kids — at eighteen, his limbs still hung awkwardly off their joints, growing into a padded jacket and a pair of tight jeans he wouldn’t have been caught *dead* wearing in the Sheep. His hair had grown just long enough to tie up in a bun — the silver strands that escaped it framed his pimpled, wide eyed face.

It was a vertiginous sight — familiar in all lines, and utterly unknown in the colors it had been painted with. There was a scar on his chin he hadn’t had in the Sheep. His thumb rhythmically tapped against each of his fingers, again and again — a habit he hadn’t had before.

*Alright*, Chuuya forced himself to think. It was too chaotic of a world — he couldn’t afford to carry a vendetta towards *time*, too. *Alright*.

The Sheep used to say it too, he thought — after the worst storms were over, and they could finally leave the makeshift houses. Hours used to be spent recovering lost kids from the fragile, fallen roofs; without fail, though, they would hug them all close and promise — *it doesn’t matter anymore. We’re all safe. We’re all safe.*



“Are you —“ He cleared his throat, eyes on the ceiling. “Both of you. ‘You doing alright?’”

He *felt* them exchange a glance.

“I’m fine,” Yuan said, clumsy. “Apart from Physics homework.”

“Just fine,” Shirase agreed, high-pitched. “I — gang leader. As you saw. And now I’m here.”

Outside the building, the air conditioning started buzzing — louder than a bomb. None of them seemed willing to take a single step to break the triangle between their bodies — empty space they had filled with nothing at all.

“Are your kids safe?” Chuuya questioned, after the awkward pause, standing up.

“All safe,” Shirase nodded, frantically. “Left them with the older subordinates. The warehouse won’t be a big loss or anything, anyway.”

“He’s got the entire neighborhood,” Yuan intervened, pulling her fingers. She was staring at some spot of Chuuya’s shoulder — seemed deeply uncertain of where to stand. “It’s actually so cool. He’s a household name and all.”

“*Ah*, it’s nothing,” the boy preened.

“We passed by some other gang’s territory, and they actually *ran* when they saw him.”

“You’re too kind, Yuan, seriously —“

“The brats seem to like you,” Chuuya cut through — immediately snapping both of their heads to him. “They talked about you tons while I was with them. So. That’s — cool, man. Seems like you’re doing just fine as King.”

A horribly tense — devastatingly graceless — moment of silence followed.

*Didn’t we already do this*, Chuuya begged, attempting not to direct his eyes to the ceiling in prayer. He’d stood with Shirase on a cliff, and then on the decks of the port — he’d sat with Yuan while she had a bomb strapped on her, and he’d sat with her in front of the debris of a building he had dropped on a man who she’d cared for.

They had shared the settlement and they had shared the ground Chuuya had bled on. He couldn’t believe they couldn’t share a bedroom.

“Oh,” Shirase said. The imperceptible tinge of wetness in his tone horrified Chuuya so bad he *almost* started screaming for Adam. “‘You think?’”

“Of course he does,” Yuan slithered like a frightened bunny, hanging off the boy’s arm with a nervous twitch to her entire body. “You’re doing just fine, Shirase. None of us ever doubted it. The — the others wouldn’t have, either,” She hesitated; then, she dared, all in one breath: “But *Stray Sheep*, seriously?”

A beat.

The boy spluttered. “What’s wrong with it? I was honoring my roots!”

“Yes,” she pressed, “But how can a sheep be a *stray*? Where did you even get that from?”

“It’s ‘cause *I’m* the sheep, Yuan,” he spat, as if obvious. “I’ve gone rogue. I’m in *England*. I’m a proper lad now. ”

She sighed, twirling her hair the same she did when she didn’t *quite* want to go against the Council’s decision. “Yes, but — *stray* implies more of an *undomesticated* idea than a *emancipated* one, is all I’m saying —“

““You ever seen a wild sheep, Yuan? Have you? Of course you haven’t. Listen, that Tin Can called me ‘couple years ago, talking bullshit about a sheep carcass, and let me tell you —“

“That’s not even why we’re here, you god damned fool,” Yuan hissed, “Remember?”

“*What* am I supposed to remember, while you’re insulting my hard work —“

“The *knife thing*?”

“The —“ Shirase’s eyes widened. “That — I — you don’t really expect me to just come *via* a man’s window and apologize for *stabbing him* —“

“I’d think it good courtesy!”

“*You* were there too, why don’t you —“

She gaped. “I’m allergic to rat poison, and you *know* that —“

Chuuya snorted.

It snapped their gazes to him for the second time that night — called them like magnets and like sunflowers, as they wordlessly watched him try not to laugh in their faces. Yuan’s lips trembled. It clearly bothered Shirase, still — but his shoulders relaxed. When a horrid pig-like squeak escaped the girl’s mouth, he chuckled like it had been shot out of him.

It felt intoxicatingly awkward; if he thought about it too long, Chuuya’s cheeks caught fire in a less than mature way. Nonetheless, he laughed, and was left breathless when the earth didn’t crack at the other two joining in.

“That’s not even funny,” Shirase whined, his face so scarlet even the *abat-jour* couldn’t paint it warmer. “I stabbed you with *rat poison*, man.”

Yuan’s choked laughter reminded him of a strangled duck. Chuuya’s stomach began hurting from chuckles; he held onto the desk.

“*Oh*, this is so fucking *awkward*,” he heard himself pant, cheeks hurting.

“It’s not that —“

“This is so *awkward*, ” Chuuya insisted, his tone borderline hysterical. “We used to pee in the same spot, remember? And now we’re in a robot’s house. He’s got a partner who makes me potatoes. And you *stabbed me* with fucking *rat* poison.”

“Why rat poison, anyway?” Yuan cackled, tears in her eyes. “Why not *actual* poison?”

“*Where* was I meant to find actual poison, you —“

“You allied with the *GSS*, ” he reminded, his spine bent by effort, stomach aching. “You — you pointed rifles at me. *War rifles*. You couldn’t ask them for *normal* poison?”

His laughter seemed like it would break his ribs in two. At last, Shirase snorted, falling over the weight of Yuan’s stumbling onto him, giggling.

It seemed eons before they all settled, half sprawled on the floor — breathless and somewhat desperate with it. Chuuya studied the ceiling like it would fall when he least expected it — unable to recall past examples to prove it wouldn’t. London was cold and utterly drenched, and if he reached a bit, he would have touched Shirase’s calf — *and*, Chuuya reminded himself, chest tight, *they weren’t supposed to ever be in the same room again* —

*They’d come looking for him*, he realized, a bit dumbfounded. Starstruck by the idea of having been found under debris and cockroaches and blood — stupefied by the concept of ever deserving to be looked for again. *They’d come for him*.

Chuuya knew he was a bit of a fool.

“Well,” Shirase concluded, scratching that shoulder he’d broken at ten — like he did before jumping into traffic to steal cargo. “You guys want to rob a convenience store or something?”

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Under the cobalt lights of the refrigerator corner, Shirase flopped onto a shopping cart, and demanded to be wheeled around the gloomy, empty hallways of the convenience store.

“Why do you *always* get the cart, anyway?” Yuan lamented, climbing on the back of it, hands around the bar — only occasionally pushing with one foot on the floor to make it skate forward. “I’m the girl here.”

“And this is the end all your independence speeches make?” Shirase dared, popping a pack of chips open with a gunshot sound, legs dangling over the metallic edge.

“That’s *not* the point!” she lamented, arms around his throat. “I could be on my period right now, for all you know —” The boy retched. “Are you a *child*? Are you —”

Chuuya offered her a box of pads from the nearest shelf. A car passed by the glass doors they had broken through — lights barely illuminating the deeply exasperated look on her face.

The gentle hum of absence rendered that place strangely known — though it didn’t look all that much like the *konbini* back home. He made sure to leave a good hundred bucks behind the old counter, and then he roamed the halls underneath the devastatingly familiar chatter — stealing snacks he recalled being most of his diet in the settlement, and pocketing gums in flavors Adam had said he hadn’t tried yet.

He was a deer on newly healed legs; like in a dream, he chased when Yuan called for a race and he finished Shirase’s beer when the taste inevitably got his nose to scrunch up.

*The world didn’t end when they killed you*, Kouyou had once mused, tapping the scar on his side. He hadn’t had a fever — but something close enough, from a stray bullet. She had wiped sweat off his forehead and insisted, *and you did not die when the world ended*.

“Hey,” the boy called, when Yuan vanished in the noodles section. He nodded, nose red with *paprika* from the chips. “Nice hat, loser.”

Chuuya snorted, hooking one hand to the front of the cart to pull him down the aisle. “Nice hair, dumbass.”

“I think it makes me look more mature,” Shirase insisted, tightening the bun. “And it’s nice to see how it looks, *ah*? Always had to keep them short in the settlement. Lice and stuff.”

He nodded, absently — recalling the touch of the older kids’ fingers through his dirty strands, attempting to save the salvageable. Lippman had made *comments* when Chuuya’s hair had begun to grow into a ponytail — but he’d bought him some sort of specific shampoo, and he still used it.

Shirase cleared his throat. “Here. I almost forgot to give you this.”

Elbows crossed over the end of the cart — over the sound of Yuan’s out of tune singing — Chuuya studied the sticky, elastic surface of the blue band. He curled an eyebrow. “I told you at the port. I still have my old one.”

“Yeah, but you’re never gonna wear *that* again,” Shirase replied, as if obvious. “This is *Stray Sheep* stuff. It’ll tell the kids not to tie you up to a chair if they see you at the airport. Again. This,” Another nod, nudging his knuckles with his shoe, “This is new. You can wear it.”

Chuuya fidgeted with it.

It seemed utterly simple. Shirase looked at him like he had no idea about the shoebox he’d hid under Albatross bed — no idea about the ruined, barely held together bracelet; the dried

blood on the knife he'd kept for no justifiable reason.

He looked at him as if knew, too — as if he could guess. Shirase had always made things a tad easier than what they were meant to.

*Naive*, Chuuya used to think of him. Fond and stubbornly loyal, Chuuya would always insist — *naive. Blind. He will never know; he wouldn't care if he did.*

"Fine," He put it on his wrist. "But I want those freight carries back, you fucker."

Casually, the boy rolled the cart wheels over his feet, whistling as he slid down the aisle.

They found Yuan by the refrigerator point, fridge doors open and her head half stuck in it, as she mumbled to herself. "Where the hell is it?"

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Minami has a thing for this white people's snack," she offered, distractedly. Melting frost was stuck to her forearms; she'd cut her knuckles with the broken vase from their hopeless entrance. While her eyes kept roaming, Chuuya grasped her wrist, settling some of the ice over the wound — she hissed against the sensation, startled. "Why are you playing nurse?"

"Cause you never do," he huffed. "Agent Minami. 'She treating you good?'"

Her gaze was odd — somewhat indulgent. "Like you don't know?"

He kept his eyes on her cracked knuckles.

"What, is he stalking you too?" Improper as he had always been, Shirase rolled to a stop next to them, mimicking binoculars. "Can you believe the audacity? 'Found out he'd been keeping an eye on me six months into my work at the fabric.'"

"Sometimes he floats by my window and he thinks I don't see him," Yuan commented.

"No, I don't," Chuuya snapped, ears red.

"I'm a Sheep, still, you liar. First thing you taught us was how to figure out if we were being followed. You know, I don't know how things work in the Mafia — but Minami has a doorbell," With an obnoxious gesture, she pretended to ring one. "I might even open the door, if you —"

"I doubt your *Special Division* agent would like having me at dinner."

"You sent Matsuda," Yuan accused. "That's almost *worse*. You're lucky I even want you around. I had to share a table with *Officer Bald Head*."

Shirase gasped, climbing on his knees. "The bowling ball is still around?"

"*And* kicking! It's actually — Chuuya?"

The ice between his fingers had melted — he watched it land on his shoes, gingerly kicking it away from the good leather. He forced his hands to unclench.

“Matsuda’s like he’s always been,” Chuuya concluded.

Over the buzz of the refrigerators, the two exchanged a glance he recognized too well — the wordless, general agreement that had surrounded him whenever the cracks he opened on the ground were somewhat wider than usual. Yuan cleared her throat. “Want to know *who* else is still around?”

“Who?” Shirase asked, cautious.

A dramatic hand covered her mouth, as Chuuya bent to pick up the fallen frozen nuggets from the ground — she leaned over the cart to stage-whisper: “That little Mafia grunt from the Arcade who was *obsessed* with Chuuya.”

Chuuya bumped his head against one of the refrigerator shelves. When he managed to raise a furious glare on the pair — Shirase’s eyes were absolutely vacant.

“Come on,” Yuan insisted, slowly. “He was in a suit — and the bandages? Went on that whole love spiel about how *Chuuya’s his own person, blah, blah blah*? That Port Mafia runt who was the whole reason why we —“

The boy’s eyes blurred even further.

Speechless, Chuuya climbed to his feet — eyebrows brushing his forehead. “Dude. You *met him* during the Verlaine stuff.”

“No, I didn’t,” he insisted.

“*Dude. The Demon Prodigy* —“

Shirase’s jaw dropped to the ground. The light of recognition turned him paler and paler, until he resembled a far too realistic corpse. “*That’s* who he fucking was?”

He stared. “Seriously?”

“You hadn’t figured it out?” Yuan rattled him like a doll, pulling the holding bar of his cart to drag him down the aisle — *away* from Chuuya, so she could loudly narrate: “You haven’t heard? They’re all buddy-buddy these days! They’ve got an edgy code name and all —“

“*Chuuya and Daichi are Double Black?*”

“Dazai,” Chuuya corrected, teeth gritted, as he reached them. “And we are *not* all *buddy-buddy*. He’s my enemy and I will take his life.”

“You should hear how the underground talks about them,” the girl insisted, twirling the cart around in unlikely donuts that had Shirase hold on for his life, wide, gossipy eyes on her.

“And you should hear how the little runt talks about our dear ol’ Chuuya — all protective and —“

He attempted to cut her head off with one of the chips cylinders. She yelped, skidding away with the cart. “*When*, exactly, did you talk about me with Dazai Osamu?”

“Dude,” Shirase cut through, grabbing her by the shoulders. “You don’t know the *half* of it. They’ve got this weird ass mating ritual —“

“*Mating ritual?*”

“— that involves Daichi getting tied to a light pole and getting swung around —“

“It’s *Dazai*, and that’s *wildly* out of —“

“— he threw *up!* And he didn’t even tell Chuuya *no* when he had him do it or anything!”

Yuan’s eyes had turned into twinkling stars. “Chuuya,” she started, trembling knees preparing to escape, hands tight around the cart — watching him menacingly march in their direction, “If you’d gotten seduced by some slimy Port Mafia runt, you could have just let us — *hey!*”

The cart ended up breaking the glass doors clean and swift; Chuuya made sure to leave a good number of banknotes behind — *you’re seriously that rich?*, Shirase gaped, *man, that has to be unfair, you’re as much of a criminal as I am* — before he began chasing the duo down the road, cracking the concrete behind the swift roll of their wheels and their matching screeches.

Given that Chuuya had promised not to disappear on them during his stay in London, he eventually managed to convince them not to drag him to every entertainment spot they could think of — acquiescing to soon be hauled to whatever nightclub and bar they wanted.

Instead, once rain-soaked clouds hovered in the sky, Shirase brought them to the Cemetery.

“I didn’t want to make it too detailed,” he explained, hurriedly sweeping leaves off the small tombstone in the quiet eastern corner. The stone was strangely isolated, surrounded by flowers and a frame of wide trees — Chuuya wondered just how much he’d paid for that spot of land. “Don’t think any of them would want to be buried anywhere but in Suribachi — but until we can do that...”

As if all puppet strings had been cut, Yuan fell to her knees in front of it.

“Hey,” Chuuya warned, very quiet, moving her foot from an abandoned piece of rusty metal. *This is Yuan*, he thought — rainy grounds and slippery roofs and blood on the walls. *Be nice to her*. He got his hands off of her sooner than even his mind could scream at him for. “Careful, kid.”

Distantly, she nodded.

She kept nodding until her head had to be hurting — abrupt like thunder in a blue sky, she exploded in snotty, childish, desperate sobs.

They didn’t move.

The sheer quantity of *kanjis* carved on the stone had Chuuya's joints ache under the rumble of her bawling. He had gathered the weight of loss from Yuan's words — but it felt different to be faced with what the GSS had done to the people he'd left behind, once they had realized they'd been less of a catch than first assumed.

"You know, it wasn't just 'cause you weren't there," Shirase told him, a bit awkwardly.

Chuuya *almost* smiled, mocking. "London made you a mind reader, now?"

"I've known you since you were less good at that."

"*That*, what?"

"Deflecting our shit."

He didn't speak.

"The GSS were mad you were not in the deal anymore, yeah — and having feuds with the Mafia wasn't —" He trailed off. With an effort of *prideless* intent, he insisted: "But they were way madder about how useless we were."

"You weren't useless," Chuuya complained. "I have an Ability — you couldn't compare. It isn't about that. The Sheep existed long before me."

"We were a stubborn orphanage at best," he replied. "You have to know, man. You made us the *feared* bunch. The kids stopped training, secure and respected — all we did was get drunk under a bridge, and taunt the Mafia with a reputation we'd had no part in building."

He was half convinced to be hallucinating.

But Shirase's traits were calm — mature in a way his gangly limbs had made him miss. There was a placidity to him that told him that grave was to reminiscence, not to be haunted. A fulfillment that told him he'd grown up, and that Chuuya had missed all of it — while bleeding in alleys, and keeping a knife that had long since left his body under his bed.

*A grudge, maybe*, he considered. The word tasted weirdly on his tongue. He had never blamed them at all. He hadn't even been angry. He'd just grieved being killed and not dying of it.

Chuuya stretched the blue bracelet. It was a familiar weight on a wrist that had never forgotten; it felt less like a collar, and more like a question.

"You built *me*," he offered. He removed his hat, passing it to Shirase — like Kouyou had taught him, he knelt by Yuan's side. Under their silent study of him — *always observed*, Chuuya had thought; *but there had to be love in it, if it lingered* — he bent until his forehead was on the ground, brushing the carved names. "That is more than I could have asked for."

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“Don’t you dare,” Yuan and Shirase ruled, with eerie, murderous coordination — from under the blankets of Adam’s guest bed — the moment they caught him throwing a pillow on the floor in front of it.

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “It’s 5:00 A.M. Can you fucking let me breathe?”

“You can breathe *and* sleep,” Yuan assured him, raising her hand in a mocking slap. “You’ll do it in a goddamn bed, though.”

“We won’t fit.”

“Nonsense,” Shirase scoffed. “We used to share all the time in Suribachi City — and *those* were futons. Don’t be a pussy.”

“Watch your mouth,” Yuan warned.

“You both snore,” Chuuya informed them. “And you kick. I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Fine,” the boy agreed, throwing blankets to the side. “Then we’ll *all* sleep on the floor.”

“There’s no point in —“

“Get in the bed.”

“It’s not even that big —“

“Get in the bed,” Yuan agreed.

“What the hell has made you guys nostalgic all of the sudden? If you wanna reminiscence, let’s fucking play *Fire Throw* —“

“That was a fucked up game,” Shirase said, eyes momentarily shocked. He grabbed his pillow and threw it at Chuuya’s face. “*Get in the bed.*”

Mumbling, Chuuya got in the bed.

Predictably, he ended up in the middle of the two snoring kick-machines; the king-sized bed was ill fitted to their undeniably wider bodies, and it was just soft enough to drown them in sheets. A symphony of grunts filled the dim moonlight from the window; Yuan’s leg ended up over his hips, and Shirase shuffled until his chin was by his shoulder.

Chuuya laid on his back, wordless and in a haze, staring at the ceiling.

“Guys,” he questioned, eventually. He kept his voice barely audible; soft enough not to tear the quiet. All was warm and all was familiar — he was on the brink of a joyride, and his heart would end up in his throat sooner than he could withstand. “What are you even doing?”

Face down on the bed, Shirase questioned: “What do you mean?”

“All of this. Why are you here?”

Silence creaked like a low signal. Chuuya pulled his new blue bracelet, slapping it his against his wrist — he shut his eyes until they ached, and thought, to himself, *why would you fuck it up?*

Yuan turned; turned again. Hesitant like a prissy cat, she moved close enough to be plastered against his side — and then planted her cheek on his shoulder, the way she used to do when it rained on the too-delicate roofs. She felt bigger than she had back then — she pressed weirdly against bones he had carved to fit with them.

“When I met Dazai Osamu, I asked him if you had been the reason for Noguchi’s death.”

Chuuya felt it like another stab in the side.

“I wasn’t,” he swore. His guilt found no place in the faults of others — his squad’s bodies had been buried under the debris all the same. “I was just too late.”

“You weren’t,” Her voice was rough — she shook her head, *tactibly*, against his shirt. He didn’t dare to breathe. “You weren’t. He was dead, and that was all,” She cleared her throat, finger clenching on the hem of Shirase’s sleeve. “It wasn’t on you. It never was. I just needed it to be.”

On his other side, calves touching his own, Shirase was quiet.

“You don’t need to —“ Chuuya tasted the sour, sharp metal in the gums of his mouth — under his tongue and all around his shoulders. “If you want me to come around,” he changed, “I will. You don’t have to do this. I’m no confessional.”

“Of course you aren’t,” Shirase muttered, scoffing. “Saint *ol’* Chuuya.”

“Hey,” Yuan warned.

“Gets to save us,” he continued, blankly, in a lithium. “Gets to leave us. Gets to keep the truth to himself. Gets to have us hate him ‘till the grave, and gets to keep his martyrdom until he dies.”

Something ugly gathered under his nails. He still had his gloves on. The Sheep had seen his naked hands — Chuuya wore their bracelet again. He couldn’t take them off, still.

“I kept it, you know,” he said, lips numb.

He wasn’t sure of *where* Shirase heard the word *knife* in that death rattle breathing — he did, though. He kept utterly quiet. Said, after an inhale full of regret: “You didn’t have to.”

*It was all I had, Chuuya didn't manage to explain. It was all I had left. How could I not?*

*Get angry,* Verlaine had said.

"I did my best," he murmured.

It tumbled out of his mouth with finality — the last ounce of soil thrown over a grave he kept unburying. The Suribachi City project papers in his office; the dirty knife under the bed; the bricks outside Yuan's window — the coffin was constantly open. Chuuya had no choice but to carry the body outside — accept it as a living thing. "With you guys. It didn't work. The Sheep are no more, but I —" He closed his eyes — *begged*, seven and starved and clawing his way out of the debris: "I swear I did my best."

The heating system came alive with a sanctimonious buzz, outside the window. He'd have to clean up the vase shards.

It came like a heat wave, overwhelming and pounding like a heart — Shirase turned, shuffling until he could plant his bony chin on his bicep, his fingers hooking into his bracelet the way he did as a kid, lost and *trusting*. A breath was punched out of Yuan's chest — she cradled him closer than flesh should have allowed, strangling his head between her arms, her inhales frantic.

"We know," she swore, voice trembling. She kissed his forehead; then his cheek; then held him so close against her chest Chuuya couldn't *breathe* — could only focus on her claws digging into his shirt; and the relentless shake of Shirase's body, as close to his as it had only been when it was cold and it was famish and it was *easier*.

*Sorry*, he thought — to the Port Mafia; to the gentle touch of Kouyou's hands; to the way the Flags had called him one of his own. Chuuya had never been a child — but he'd been *young*, once, and it had been so devastatingly *easier* to —

"Of course we know," Shirase scolded, one hand reaching to ruffle his hair — utterly *violent*; hanging onto the strands like he feared Chuuya might vanish between his hands.

"We know, Chuuya — of course we know. The others knew it too," Yuan promised, so quiet it was barely an exhale. "We know. We always knew, we *always knew*, Chuuya —"

*Undignified*, he considered. His face was pressed against the leathery fabric of her chest, and he was too old for it — he'd always been too old for it, so no one had given it to him. His fingers seized the back of it, arm weak and nails sharp; he blinked against the numbness of his eyelids, and wished, vividly, that he could cry.

"I'm sorry," he offered.

"It doesn't matter," Yuan swore, against his forehead — too low for anyone who wasn't sharing their breath to hear. Shirase clenched his scarred, familiar hand around his wrist, and Chuuya shut his eyes. The saying of passed storms. "It doesn't matter anymore. We're all safe. We're all safe. You did good, Chuuya. No one —"

“No one could have done it better,” Shirase assured, brusque and quiet.

He didn’t move until morning.

**Three weeks before.**

As far as the precinct knew, the Yokohama Police Station was only empty one hour a day.

It was a disliked move — most insisted the place should have been guarded constantly; either from petty criminals spray-painting its walls or from the never-sleeping underground. *Turns exist first a reason*, they commented. *Where else does our tax money go?*

At 3:12 A.M., that night, only one office light was turned on.

Mountains of files littered an old desk; the small lamp near a thread-connected board painted the faces on the blurry photograph with a sinister touch. Bent over the reports, an Officer yawned. A sharp sound — a laptop getting shut in the main room — snapped his head up.

“Miss Momo?” he called. “Is that you?”

The attendant didn’t answer.

A loud *bang!* dragged the Officer to his feet, leading him out of his office before he could grab the revolver abandoned on his seat. “*Miss —*”

He paused.

“Oh,” The boy stood under the flickering lights on the ceiling. One of his shoes — clearly the good kind; lined in leather that couldn’t have come from Japan — nudged the woman’s body on the floor. “Matsuda. ‘Thought I’d have to knock.”

The Officer gaped, stunned. Blood trailed from the attendant’s temple; he tried to fly to her side. “*Jesus*, kid, what did you —”

“Put out that fire up your ass,” he replied, distractedly. “She’s just passed out.”

Matsuda’s nostrils flared. He stayed where he was, though — moved his eyes from the body to the boy standing upon it, hesitant. “I didn’t think you would care to see me anymore.”

Nakahara Chuuya hummed.

He leaned his side against one of the stone columns dividing the main room, eyes were set on him. He looked fairly unimpressed, in a clean dress shirt and that overgrown coat of his he never wore — behind the dangling chain of his hat, there was a stillness that contrasted the relaxed curve of his shoulders.

His arms were crossed. From the tip of his forefinger, a few drops of blood dripped onto the passed out attendant’s forehead.

“You know you don’t need to do all that to talk to me,” Matsuda said, pausing. His heartbeat had slowed down from the franticness of before. Finding an excuse for Momo not to press charges would be a headache, though. “Pulling pranks here is risky — even for you.”

“Pranks,” Chuuya echoed.

Something about him seemed different — he couldn’t pinpoint what. Something about his voice; the way his spine held him.

“This better be one,” the man confirmed. “If I find out your idea of a birthday celebration is breaking into a police station, we’ll have *words*.”

“You always do have those, don’t you.”

Matsuda shrugged. “You doin’ anything special for it?”

He *tsk*-ed — the first normal, familiar show of irritation from his lips. “Wish,” he muttered. “I snuck into that fishy bastard’s office, though — he planned a kidnapping for me.”

“Dazai planned — what?”

“For me to get kidnapped by a drug ring,” Chuuya said again, utterly monotonous. “It’s not like he doesn’t do it every year.”

A beat passed. The man sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Whatever,” he concluded, exhausted. “Just — happy birthday, kid. A few minutes early, but, you know.”

The boy looked at him for a long time.

“You know,” he started, eventually. “I had some interesting convos some days ago.” The line of his choker disappeared in the darkness behind him — it looked like a wound, from a distance. “Bout my life. What I’m doing with it.”

He blinked. “That’s — good, Chuuya.”

“Is it?”

“*Very* good,” he insisted, hesitantly. “We didn’t get to finish our conversation, the other day. Why don’t we — just let me grab my keys, call someone for Momo, and we can —” He moved to step to the coat-hanger near the main entrance; behind his interlocutor’s frame.

Chuuya freed one hand from his crossed arm — in a hypnotizing motion, his fingers rolled something between their pads.

Officer Matsuda stilled.

Somewhere outside the station, a car alarm began blaring.

“Chuuya,” he said, very quiet.

“Boss wanted you framed for possession of child pornography,” he offered, conversationally, eyes on the blood-rusty bullets in his gloved hand. “It would have certainly helped his case against any interaction between the PD and the young pupils at *Mori Corps*.”

Matsuda’s hand reached for his side, only pausing at the very last second — where an empty gun holster rested. The boy’s mismatched eyes followed the motion, feline unamused.

“Listen to me.”

“That was an interminable, convoluted conversation,” Chuuya continued. “But I won Boss over, so you get to keep your *good attendance* plaque at the entrance. I don’t like putting lies and children in the same shit. You know that.”

“So that’s what you’re going to do?” he hissed, almost — utterly disbelieving. “You spent all this time talking about Murase, and now you’re going to kill me?”

“Murase never sold me out.”

“Chuuya,” he pressed, “I was trying — “

“To help me?”

His tone halted the breath in his throat.

“I told you to stay away. Risked my fucking neck for it, too,” His eyes were deadly. “Spare me.”

It was unmerciful, the gaze he settled on him. He was a newly sorted enigma — same clues, same victim; new murderer. *A life like this can make you forget something very odd*, Murase had once told him, back at the Academy. *You need a damn strong stomach to kill.*

*Not to enjoy it*, Matsuda had replied.

*No*, he’d agreed. *For that, just to be a bit out of it.*

“Are you here because he sent you,” he asked, slowly, “Or because you want to be?”

Chuuya tilted his head to the side. Oddly pensive; seemingly unconcerned. His jaw was shut tight, though — maybe anger; maybe something worse. The bullets rolled across his thumb; he threw them in the air, grabbing them as they fell. “I’m afraid I can’t do you the favor of answering.”

“Chuuya.”

“Even less than that,” he insisted, “I can’t have you dying believing me anything less than loyal.”

The Officer’s lips trembled. Uncertainty pushed a bundle of words out of his mouth — thin lips, wrinkles, and raised hands; kind, at their very core, despite the years. “Chuuya,” he offered, gentle, “Listen to —“

He hurled the bullets towards the ceiling with a flick of the finger — batted them away with a gloved hand, and wordlessly watched them dig several paths through Matsuda’s chest. Squelching and cold, they buried themselves in his flesh and flew out with a wet sound — landed on the floor with a metallic *ting!*, louder than fireworks.

Matsuda dropped to the ground.

It was quiet.



The boy wiped the gunpowder off his glove on his coat. He stepped over the corpse as its blood joined the attendant's own; turned off the lights on his way out.

"Did you take care of that bother of yours, sir?" asked the driver waiting outside, holding the back door of a black car open.

"I'd say so, yeah," Chuuya concluded, with one last look at the Station's doors. "Do let Boss know on the encrypted line. He was so eager for this matter to be over."

The man's head lowered more. "Some nosy Officer, sir?"

"Something like that," He stepped into the car, abandoning long-day tired muscles on the leather — waited for the driver to shut the door and settled in his own seat to add: "Apart from his long nose, though — one of our contacts found a recorder inside his office," He clicked his tongue. "Irksofely stacked with my confession to a criminal lifestyle, and ready to send with a *Special Division* stamp. 'Made the mistake of walking him to the Cemetery, a bit ago.'"

The driver started the car. Very tonelessly, as it was demanded of a man of his position, he offered: "Luckily, he's been stopped."

Chuuya traced bars on the condensation of the window; studied the remains of it on the tip of his glove. Very neutrally, very used to it, he murmured: "It sure teaches me about trusting the same idiot twice."

The traffic lights switched. It was a peaceful night; Yokohama's bloodied moon was far enough to look white.

"The *Black Lizards* Commander wonders if you might be able to reach him at Section 17 of the Port, sir," the driver informed, after fiddling with his in-ear. "Should I let him know your shift has ended?"

"*Nah*, " the Vice-Executive fixed his hat. A red drop stained his wrist; he licked it off, fingers clenched to the point of a stuttering heartbeat. "Drive faster," he ordered. "I've got a job to do."

**Yokohama PD.**

**Report — 189.898.17**

**Matsuda Masato.**

**Reported issue: *unidentified device.***

**Recorded conversation.**

**Date: April 3rd. \*\*\*\***

Matsuda M.:

*“...a recording device of sorts. Yeah, I’m not — No, sir. It looks sophisticated, yeah. Found it in my pockets — it doesn’t match ours. No, I — I had a conversation with a kid from the neighborhood. No one important. No, sir. No, no one of any relevance. I’m not sure — no critical information. I will take care of it myself, if — yes, sir. Of course, sir.”*

**[Statics]**

*“No, sir. I believe — yes. No, of course the kid didn’t know — I only found it the morning after. My coat — of course not he didn’t put it there. I cannot imagine what the Port Mafia would gain from recording my conversations with him. He’s just a kid.”*

*“I will — Certainly, sir. Nothing you need to listen to. I’ll take care of it myself.”*

**End of transcription.**

*Port Mafia Archive.*

*Device n. 178.*

*To be returned to locker: AB15777.*

*Authorization: Mori Ougai.*

*Intelligence Archivist 061,*

*Sakaguchi.*

## Chapter End Notes

adam: master chuuya when the android apocalypse comes i will vouch for you in the robotic council

chuuya, on the verge of tears: cool man

[psa: should it be unclear, the device chuuya's confession was recorded on (the one matsuda had) was put in his pockets by mori]

and so we're about to enter the last arc (divided in two, so technically) of this fic! the time flies. i'm speechless about it, but this fic does have to end eventually so like. lol. as always, i hope you enjoyed the chapter and that you'll enjoy what comes next, and thank you so so much for reading!! have a wonderful day <33

keep warm, see you soon!

# BE

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end:))!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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## ACT THREE

---

*[...]*

*that's when i*

*got scared.*

*how strange we are*

*before we die.*

*[...]*

**[autumn poem, nakahara chuuya,  
third stanza]**

The Port was horrendously crowded.

People made up a rather inconsequential part of the issue, as never ending as their number appeared — tiredly running legs and stubbornly yanking arms; bracketing hands and wheeled stretchers carrying dismembered dead and limbless wounded down the ships anchored at the dock.

The smell of blood was more pressing.

“Out of the way!” A young doctor shouted, leading a group to the tents someone had hurriedly set up all over the port perimeter — an emergency intervention; alerted by the conspicuous bundle of war ships that had returned to Yokohama unannounced.

*Temporary*, the captains had screamed from the decks. *The enemy was clever enough to ask for a break. We were clever enough to use it.*

The tents were a mere stretched out limb of the sick chaos of the bay — heightened, in a way; smells and whines and screams echoing off the dirty fabric walls, as bodies *fought* for the nearest bed and doctors struggled to clean their blades before sinking them in. Rushing wheels stopped near an occupied bed — the doctor dug his fingers in the woman’s neck. Hearing no response, he pushed her to the corpse-filled ground, laying his wounded in the freed space.

“Sir,” an assistant begged. “They need you on the ship.”

“He’s going to die if we don’t find a way to get the shards out,” the doctor replied, distracted, hands down to the wrist inside the shrieking man’s body. It was a cacophony — a sea of damned. “You go help. Where’s Yosano?”

“She stayed on the ship. There’s too many — the authorities will keep us from getting them out soon, what with the risk of an epidemic —“

“Even more reason to *hurry* — before they force us back into those damn ships —“

“Sir, that is *an enemy* —“

“*This* is a dying man,” the doctor snapped, meeting her eyes — his own merciless enough to raise a flinch. “And *I* am a doctor.”

The woman’s lips parted, wordless. Then: “There are many dying men.”

“Go help my Yosano,” he replied. “I’m sure you will be proved correct.”

He wrapped a tourniquet around the chest of the man under his hands — tightened it until he screamed, and *screamed*, and passed out. The nurse bowed — she hurried out of the medical tents with trembling hands and a retching mouth, brushing against devastation with each step.

The doctor tied his hair.

He set to work.

Infinite dawns passed, painting the white curtains a crimson shade that only hid the blood *so*; mountains over mountains of bodies entered the doors, never ending and never leaving. The ones on the ground were dragged out by dejected hands — thrown into the Bay under the horrified eyes of the civilians. The odor was stuck to the air; the cries never ran out of vocal chords to tear.

“They want us to move the tents to the ships,” some doctor whispered, eventually, red all the way to his elbows. “The risk of contagion is too high. And the civilians — *months* of victorious propaganda are going to waste.”

“We didn’t ask for a temporary truce,” the doctor noted, pushing a young man onto the top of a bundle of corpses. They made for a strange column — fleshy and *stuck*, barely separated by bundles of army clothing.

“We look like we’re losing,” a crazed-eyed colleague replied, lips numb. “We’re all dead.”

Outside the tents, governmental officials began barking out orders to move. Devastating silence fell amongst the healers and the wounded — the doctor watched protest rise and vanish from every face.

His hand twitched.

He grasped his closest colleague’s coat with a bloodied fist, pulling him closer.

“What —“

“Go outside,” he ordered. “Tell the man we have a special permit.”

“From *whom*?”

“Fukuchi Ochi,” The doctor let him go. “If that doesn’t work, say this: *Maihime Project*.”

Hesitancy made his eyes squint. “What does that fanatic have to do with — the *Hunting Dogs* project has not yet been approved — “

“Doctor,” he interrupted. He met his gaze; smiled, lined in blood. His feet stood on a cut off limb — the mountain of corpses behind him seemed to grow taller at each blink. “Are you going to waste more time?”

A gulp. The man ran out.

The tents were left where they were.

Sunrise was approaching. The screams were beginning to lack enough voice to be shouted — eventually, the doctor removed his soaked gloves, sliding down the nearest rusty column to breathe.

The umpteenth bundle of bodies next to him was the highest of the lot. Some hands and some legs at the base stuck out of the tent — an abandoned knee nudged his calf, lifelessly polite. The doctor studied the rotting flesh.

He waited until his water bottle was empty to ask: “Do you have a taste for decay?”

Apart from the tired moans and pumped blood, not a sound came to his ears.

“I have the feeling that *breach of territory* and *self-removal* might be considered crimes even if they come from a child,” the doctor continued, undeterred by the absolute silence. “What might have been so interesting to make you sneak all the way here?”

From the center of the mountain — over a severed arm and under a wretched apart stomach; just around the edge of a crashed skull that only showed the bone — a single eye blinked open.

It stared at him with clear disinterest.

“There you are,” the doctor said. “I feared the day might have left a tool on me, maybe. Good to know I still have an ear for the living, despite the War.”

Something like hilarity coloured that single eye. The doctor got the feeling of being made fun of — pitied, maybe.

What he could see of the kid’s face wasn’t wounded — only stained with old blood and much dirtier substances. When his mostly hidden lips parted, his voice was horrifyingly young: “The War *i-isn’t* real,” he informed him.

It was the doctor’s turn to blink. His lab coat wasn’t even white anymore; he had scratches all over his face — gifts from a patient unable to deal with the pain of a leg being severed without morphine. “It speaks.”

“It,” His tongue was pulled back. “Does.”

“With a bit of hesitation, it seems.”

“*T-Temp* — te — momentarily.”

His lips curled, not unkindly. “There are much worse crimes than some thinking before one speaks.”

The boy looked at him.

“The War is certainly real,” the doctor said. “I was there. Still am, occasionally — although there are talks about an *entente cordiale*,” A pause. “Do you know what that is?”

“The War isn’t real,” the kid insisted, in *lieu* of an answer. “The *c-cat* asked her to write it. So it *i-isn’t*.”

Abruptly, the doctor stilled.

“Oh,” His voice was strangely solid for a man whose life no longer made sense. A hilarity of sorts overcame his features. “Is that it, then?”

The trickster corpse shrugged.

“This place isn’t interesting at all,” he offered. “But, she’s always said — some things should be seen, to be envied.”

The doctor thought about it. “Only some?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “*V-Very* few. Before *I-I’m* dead.”

“I see. Is the stuttering a daily issue?”

“Only when I’m scared,” He gulped; tossed and turned under that mountain, scratching old scars up his arms. The doctor didn’t offer to get him out of there; the boy didn’t ask. “Or when I’m bored.”

“I see,” he echoed. “I must be just tedious then, am I not?”

“Not scary?”

“You aren’t scared of being tossed in the sea along to the dead,” the doctor replied. “Why should you be scared of *me*?”

“The dead aren’t scary. They’re lucky.”

“What do you know about death?”

“Not much,” he admitted, sadly. “Nobody *l-lets* me.”

“You think I will?”

“Yes,” the boy confirmed, easily. A group of dejected men made their way to their corner; their clothes smelled of sea salt. “*Y— You’re* too scared not to.”

The doctor looked at him.

“You should go,” the boy said, eventually, once the men began to pull the bodies. It seemed they had been dragging them away for centuries — seemed like they would never reach his own.

“Should I?” he questioned.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

The screams seemed to rise again — more wounded. More work. More dead. The corners of the man’s eyes glinted in amusement. “May I know your name?”

He told him.

“Thank you,” the doctor bowed.



“Put it on my grave,” the boy requested. The hands pulled and pulled and *pulled* and never reached him. “I’ll *h-haunt* you if you forget.”

The doctor offered him a smile. It pulled and pulled — it reached him, and it never left his carcass again. “I shall be witness to that, then.”

*scene v.*

*[had left me riddled with holes]*

---

The Armed Detective Agency had, at last, implemented night shifts.

Or so Dazai assumed. The clean windows segmenting the brick walls of the building were lit up by a gentle glow, framing busy silhouettes and hands full of files — *Uzumaki Café*, underneath the balcony-less floors, was bustling with yawning workers gulping coffee under the moonlight.

His journeys rarely brought him to that part of the city — but he *had* seen those doors bathed in sunlight on a TV screen often enough. He didn’t know what that new time stamp meant for Yokohama. He could only assume, given the anxious glances the employees kept directing the street — gouged by the ricocheting gunshots from a few alleys away, and the police sirens doing their best to *pretend* to be intervening against it — that it meant the Port Mafia was prospering just fine.

“Sir,” a piqued voice chirped. “You might want to go home.”

The wristwatch Dazai had been given, resting next to Hirotsu’s cracked own — a distant activator for the rifle he had left on one of the roofs — ticked *03:00 AM* right as he offered a curled eyebrow curling at the man standing next to him on the sidewalk.

*Man* — he couldn’t be older than eighteen. The beginning of a blond rat tail of sorts hovered over a pristine collar, framing acne-lined cheeks that were all angles. His glasses were

centuries old; the broom tied to his back might have been even older. Dazai fiddled with the cigarette he didn't quite want to smoke. "Will the *Caf * owners be all that glad you're sending away potential clients?"

"If it saves their *lives*, I believe so," the boy said, undeterred. He had a notebook of sorts in his hands, overflowing with peerless handwriting — he held it the way he had seen Mori hold himself. "The shootouts will last all night. Some gang challenged the Port Mafia for territory."

"How disgraceful."

"I would *say!*" His eyes almost blew over the rim of his glasses, clearly vindicated. "You are so very right, sir. Kid? I can't quite see you. Why are you hiding in the darkness like that? All the same — if these people worked desk jobs a single day of their life, they might get tired enough to put an end to these — these *foolish* —"

Dazai tilted his head. "And you Detectives can't do anything about it?"

A pause. "We can't — interfere without a client's request," he mumbled, cheeks reddening. "And if Abilities aren't involved — which the Mafia will never admit —" He paused again; then, he snapped his head in his direction so quickly it hurt to see. "How do you know I work here?"

*You smell of honor*, he considered telling him. *And office ink*. Or — *I haven't heard someone talk about saving lives in a while*.

Instead, he landed on: "You've got a flier stuck to your shoe."

"Oh!" The Detective kicked it away. He cleared his throat, and pretended not to flinch when distant gunshots fired off in quick succession — so many it seemed they would never end. Once it was silent again, he seemed to be struck by an idea — he bowed to Dazai so sharply his spine creaked, offering a hand. "Forgive my manners. Kunikida Doppo. Apprentice at the Agency. You should *really* go home. The Mafia doesn't target civilians when it isn't necessary, but that doesn't make them an inch less merciless," A judgmental stare. "You look my age. There's school tomorrow, you know."

Dazai shook his hand, amused. He had a firm grip, and the gently scarred palm of someone who kept getting cut by paper. "*You look my age*. Don't *you* have school?"

"I graduated early," Kunikida informed him, not an ounce of presumption. "I was tutoring, until a few weeks ago. I'm preparing to go into teaching. Technically," A glance was directed to his watch. "I'll be at school tomorrow. You're not wrong about that. How responsible of you to check," He deflated a bit. "But, you know — I'm considering joining the Agency full time."

"Are you?" Dazai encouraged, obnoxiously wide eyed. He didn't quite care. Not *quite*, but —

“This city certainly seems to need it,” the boy huffed, directing a distasteful look to an ambulance passing by — no doubt filled with the bodies whose blood Dazai was subtly scratching off his nails. “These things happen almost *every day*, can you believe it? I used to see them on the news and all, but we get *hourly reports* from our police contacts — it’s insane!” He mumbled something into the pages of his notebook, like they would remind him to speak up. “What are these people even striving for?”

“Money?” Dazai suggested. “Power?”

“That’s too *generic*.”

“I think it’s pretty realistic.”

“Would *you* spend every day of your life doing the exact same annoyingly violent thing — all to get enough money to create yourself a business that people will ask you to do the *same annoyingly violent thing* for, again and again?” Kunikida Doppo shivered. “Ideals are meant to be *realistic*. The perfect job, the perfect woman —“

“All women are perfect,” Dazai chimed in. “Do not disappoint me now. You were doing so well.”

A perplexed blink. “Was — was I?”

“Sure!” He offered him a grin. “I like people with an objective. You look spirited. You should consider that full time option.”

Surprise darkened his frown. “You think?”

“*Detective Kunikida* sounds way better than *Professor Kunikida*,” he swore, conspiratorial. “And it’s admirable — having people who believe the world can still be helped. Doesn’t matter how improbable it is.”

“There’s nothing improbable about justice,” Kunikida scoffed.

He almost smiled.

He could see it crystal clear — the crack in the glass. It would come, at some point, if the boy was set on changing careers — it would fracture something in his eyes with a single hit, surgically precise and just a bit infected. Make him more —

Dazai asked: “Is that what you want?”

“Somehow,” He squinted at the ground. *Ah*, he realized, belatedly obvious, *the crack would hurt*. “Yes. In a way. I’m not sure. I want to do something good.”

“Like being a teacher.”

“I told you, the teacher thing is probably not going to —“ A pause. “Why did I even tell you, anyway?”

“Because I’m so very trustable!”

“That can’t be,” Kunikida replied.

“How cruel,” Dazai whined, offended. “If you ever need a sidekick, *don’t* look for me.”

“I work alone, thank you very much,” He squinted. “What do *you* want?”

Dazai sighed, passionate, hooking his hands around the streetlight to dangle his body back. “To die hand in hand with a beautiful, *beautiful* woman — to listen to our heartbeats slow down in sync, under the gentlest pressure this world can offer. To die painfully,” He thought about it some more. “And — I’m thinking, lately — possibly without bothering anyone.”

Gunshots echoed in the night, framing the silence Kunikida Doppo allowed to lay on them. An expected reaction — most strangers he met and informed stole a few, *awkward* seconds to decide whether he was kidding or not.

Once they realized the look in his eyes was all but unserious, despite his glee — the silence usually lingered. Kunikida — a delightfully bizarre soul, it seemed — spluttered like a caught virgin. “Are you *insane*?” he shrilled. “Are those ads about cigarettes real? Are you *intoxicated*? *What?* Don’t say stuff like that. *What?* What did the poor lady — are you insane? You’re a *child* — do I need to call *Social Services* on you?”

“Look how late it is,” he sighed, watching the reddish light of his rifle-watch. “Hey, Professor — didn’t you know? Schools are closed tomorrow. They’ve established a festive day.”

Immediately distracted, the boy stared. “They have?”

“A celebration for those who have died in their fight against these disgraceful gangs!” Dazai assured, holding onto the streetlight to lean closer. Wiggling his eyebrows, he added: “Honorable, is it not? You should *really* write it down in that notebook of yours, so you don’t forget.”

Kunikida’s eyes widened. “You’re — you’re so right. Yes, thank you for telling me, let me — What day is it today?” His voice lowered into a focused mutter, as he balanced on one knee to write down on the paper, “How should I phrase it? *No school*. Or maybe —“

Dazai let go of the streetlight; crushed the cigarette under his foot and began making his way down the street. “I was kidding.”

The sound of a pen snapping came almost *in tandem* with the distant crash of a bomb — if his wrist watch was to be trusted, *exactly* the one he had left near his rifle, where he knew the *GSA* had been so sure they would capture him.

“*Hey!*” he heard Kunikida roar. Dazai bit down a grin of *something* — yanking his muscles like a sore wound, stretching around his bones. A glimpse. An attempt to fill a hole in the sand with the ocean itself. Faith he didn’t have. “I’ll have you know, these notebooks are a *collector’s edition* —“

“*Newby!*” A voice called, from one of the open windows — loud enough to awaken the entire neighborhood, and clearly not caring one bit. A man in glasses waved wildly, half his body hanging from the window. “Where’s my chocolate? It’s been twenty minutes! What are you even doing, chit chatting with a mafioso?”

“I *told you*, the queue is to be respected —” He froze. Dazai was already gone — halfway down the next block with his nails still dirty — when Kunikida Doppo sucked in a squeaking breath. “What do you *mean* a mafioso —”

He turned, bewildered. Only the streetlight met his gaze, three worlds away from the faraway gunshots, gently warming up the night.

Five streets away, amidst the echoing storm of ricocheting bullets and police radios screaming in nothingness, Dazai stepped over the corpse of a sniper. Her skull had been crushed from the fall — three stores higher, a window was shattered, the seal stained in fresh blood. The soles of his shoes made a squelching sound as they separated from the crimson pool on the ground — he slithered into the next alley, and the starkly quiet silhouettes of the Executives welcomed him.

He stilled.

“ — should be the last of the season,” Mori was saying, rhythmically tapping his fingers on one of the blood-red dossiers Kouyou favored.

“Unless this *Catfish* was swift enough to lay eggs in our ranks,” Ace reminded them, with a grin that full heartedly believed in the hilarity of that comeback.

“Now, don’t be silly,” Kouyou tutted. The hems of her *kimono* had been stained in blood — the pool from the body at the center of their circle had yet to stop spreading. She raised the hems of it as if a ball gown, not an inch of care in the motion. “An Ability User who can cause earthquakes is the last of our problems. We’ll just find him before the News can get prissy about it.”

“Wonder how they’ll blame earthquakes on us,” Hirotsu mumbled, around a cigarette, leaning against the wall. His eyes found Dazai; he bowed. “Executive. Here you are.”

His bandages felt more material than usual; pressing against his skin like fabric goosebumps. Devastatingly quiet, Dazai stared at the passed out body on the concrete.

Its limbs were crumpled up like a piece of paper. Bruises of a stubborn resistance reached its neck, reddened; gasping and wheezing. Short hair had lost most of its color from the blood of a head wound — behind closed eyelids, was a frantic, obsessive twitch of eyes.

“This —” Dazai started. He wasn’t exactly sure of how to continue.

His voice came from a thousand miles away — Kouyou was studying her nails without a blink, and the flicker of a neon light on the brickwall shone absolute, utter disinterest on the faces of all Executives.

Once again, he tried: “I thought we had to conduct more investigations.”

“We did,” Ace confirmed. “Not anymore.”

Mori switched dossier pages. “So, then,” he exclaimed, with the carelessness he had dedicated to all of Dazai’s dead grasshoppers. “For the sake of those reports our Intelligence loves so much. We’ll have to interrogate a bit more; get as much as we can from those clever bones. On September 22th, nevertheless, our latest standard traitor procedure —“ His eyes flew to Dazai; he offered him a nod. “Which we have *you* to thank for, Dazai, of course — will be put in place for —“ He squinted at the paper; his perplexed blink was comical. “How curious. Can you believe I never thought about a first name?”

“Me neither,” Kouyou noted, surprised.

“Is it ugly?” Ace questioned. “Must be.”

It was odd.

Dazai couldn’t take his eyes away from the blood on the concrete — how it bloomed; how it crawled forward. How no one was saying a thing more than they would have said for a particularly displeasing weather — how no one expected him to add a word to that placid nothingness. *Why would they?*, he considered. *Why would you?*, and, *what did you expect?*

Dazai thought he’d seen the world, maybe, at some point — and everything since had been an attempt to chase the memory. Mori’s voice, still, always and forever — *why would you care?*

He opened his mouth. Felt weird; an itch he couldn’t quite reach. *I don’t get it*, he thought about saying. Raising his hand in class; pointing at suicide methods from his book that required too many knots. *I don’t get it*.

Some distant car horn blared.

“All the same — the mole’s execution will take place on the 22th,” Mori shut the dossier, proficiently. He looked up, studying his Executives with welcoming eyes. “You can take care of it, Dazai. Any further questions for the night?”

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## TWO MONTHS BEFORE

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*Case number: 89826788*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were rumored to have [...]*

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**Excerpt from Chapter: “Soukoku — The Most Devastating Rivarly.”**

**Diary XIII.**

**Natsume Soseki.**

**Special Division for Unusual Powers — Archive.**

Recovered & Analyzed by: ***Sakaguchi Ango.***

*[...] even truly knew what they looked like. Whispers spread through the underground with the efficiency of a book club. After all — voices tend to spread somewhat desperately when a great number of people have some interest in the offered wager:*

*And everyone in the underground had something to say about Double Black.*

*Most, if threatened for information, would have not sworn they were two mere boys. A pair of children born under the mark of some devil, fated to a crimson path as soon as their teeth had grown — maybe. Nobody could pinpoint what color their hair was, or what their faces looked like. Anyone who had seen them from up close had never been able to pinpoint anything else at all ever again.*

*How do you ask ghosts to describe their killer?*

*Their syndicate knew them, certainly — but even there, matters became somewhat intricate. The upper circles were well aware of Nakahara Chuuya and Dazai Osamu's involvement; but the lower one went down the ranks —*

*[...]*

*This, though, the underground knew: if one were to catch a glimpse of bandages, if one were to hear the jittery chime of a hat chain — if one were to see the inextricable silhouettes of two bodies, steps heavy and squelching, lined with pieces of decaying flesh —*

*[...]*

*Their vanishment came torturously slow — like a children's ghost tale. Their name lingered in the whispers long after the Port Mafia began relying less and less on their [...]*

[keep reading] [?]

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The first of the letters to come, after Dazai had finally answered — *only once*, he told himself; and he kept that promise, both to be petty with a street rat and to be wise with a demon — started like this: *do you think death has a point, or is God simply too harmonious not to put an end to things?*

He kept the papers under an old fridge at the edge of the dumping site, for a while — then, bored, he began leaving them in the open, their symbols and combinations meaningless to all eyes but his.

He never answered.

Somewhat.

Sometimes he answered; he just never *sent* it — thirteen letters and one answer was his current ratio; he had been drafting a second one, though. In spite of the flair for dramatics of



his interlocutor — *do you truly believe, Dazai told him, if there's a God, that he cares enough to worry about beginnings and endings?* — Dazai's fingers twitched in interest whenever he saw that strange alphabet.

*Boredom*, he considered. But not quite — he had never been entertained, not in any place. Bar Lupin, maybe — but he was there every week, and the urge to ask that Russian rat just what he thought of *existence* was horribly tempting.

Dazai had never met someone as hauntedly clever as he was.

*You aren't either, Mr. Rat*, he let the letters know, the one time he sent his answer. Maybe — if he got bored enough — he would let Mori know angels of decay would be coming to Yokohama soon. *I can hardly wait to let you find out.*

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Akutagawa was bleeding.

The *in-ear* informed him with a hurried bark — someone from the rows of *Secret Unit* men he had allowed the boy to carry out. “But are the traitors down?” he questioned, as one of his bullets struck a *GSA* goon in the knee.

“He’s guarding them near the theater, sir,” the woman confirmed. A strange texture lined the gulp he overheard — she added: “He caught them like flies.”

The streets were empty but haunted — Dazai’s shoes splattered lines of blood puddles on the walls with every step; eye searching through the armed bodies peeking from behind flipped cars, dragging the shootout out longer and *longer*.

“I’ll go check on that flytrap of mine, then,” he concluded, freeing his foot from the weight of the corpse fallen on it. “Spread out all the way to Yamashita Park. I want the *GSA* out of the territory by dawn.”

“Yes, Executive,” A pause. “Any news on the disappeared —“

Dazai took off the earpiece.

Making his way through the conflictual streets wasn’t particularly hard — a bit *unaesthetic* on the eyes, perhaps; what with the corpses rotting all over the road and the bullet-shattered windows. The summer wind should have made the drag of his coat feel lighter; Dazai still

walked as if he had stones in his shoes, though — a gun in each hand, distractedly putting down every unfamiliar man he bumped against.

The scenery that awaited him near the *Central Theater* was tragically predictable.

“You must have a taste for the pathetic stories they’ve been wasting their breaths on, Akutagawa,” he commented, unimpressed, making his way to black void kneeling on the sidewalk. He was framed by picturesque rays of blood, like a clock graffitied on the ground — each hour ticked with dismembered bodies in military uniforms. “Say, do you like it when they call you the *Mafia Dog*?”

A fairly new title, as far as Dazai’s sources reported. It had started around May, after some senselessly vicious slaughter the boy had put in place against the last of the *Division* moles attempting to flee the Mafia — a new whisper for the poison-thirsty hallways of the syndicate.

*They like those a lot, do they not?*, Ango had huffed, some weeks ago.

Chest rattled by frustrating, wet coughs, the subordinate only raised bloodshot eyes on him — raging in silence.

A *soaked* silence answered.

“*Mmh?*” Dazai insisted, nudging his side with his shoe. His recovery times were nothing to envy, truly; he nudged him some more. “You must like it, come on. No other reason to treat valuable intel sources like chewing toys.”

“You —” Akutagawa spat, fingers so tight around his handkerchief, his knuckles were white. “You *told me* to take care of —”

“The fools who freed Q from their cage and caused me a rather boring weekend? Yes, yes, I’m aware,” Dazai gaze roamed over the massacre — a jaw-dropping display, precise in uncharted cruelty. A thorn-lined baseball bat waved around by the blind. “Ten points for listening. Like those English tests, yes? *Repeat after me*. Still — *where*, exactly, did I mention killing them?”

“They were worthless, spineless traitors,” the boy snapped, stumbling to his feet with his fists clenched. “The Headquarters have reported more than ten deaths at their hand —”

“And just *who’s* going to tell us where to find darling Q’s little bloodthirsty fingers,” Dazai sing-sang, undeterred, absently scrolling down his phone, “Now that you’ve conveniently torn out the throats of those who saw them run off?”

Akutagawa set his jaw. “Three of them had Abilities,” he attempted. He could see the faded outline of *Rashomon* around him — a suggestion; a reminder of what he had been capable of, just a breath before Dazai had come to whine and spew about *sense*. “They —”

“Just how *badly* do you long for me to tell you that shadow-chainsaw you carry around like a bad posture is good for skewing fools?” Dazai interrupted, bringing the phone to his ear. “It

is, it is. Don't be whiny. Start cleaning those off and regroup the men — we can't let the voice get out that *GSA* got so close to Yamashita Park."

"Sir —"

"Odasaku!" Dazai exclaimed, skipping away from the boy, looking for an ugly enough car to get his hands on. "Any news on the lead I gave you?"

"I'm cornering him right now," the man answered, calmly, from the phone. The *swish* of a blade — probably being thrown very close to his face — didn't seem to startle his breathing pattern. "He doesn't seem particularly willing to tell me where he hid Q."

"Yes, that sounds like him," he sighed, half muffled by the effort of sneaking into an old Prius from the window he had shattered. The security alarm rang and rang; he screamed into the phone: "It's mildly entertaining, but Q's been gone for a week — Boss' getting annoying about it."

"So are the dead."

"Yes, sure. I'll come find you. Do be careful — *GSA* is just *sagged* in Ability Users. I had to kill a woman who could go through walls — but only backwards, can you believe that? Where are you?"

Another *swish*!. Some goon landed on a nearby car; another alarm started. "What?"

"*Where are you?*" Dazai shouted.

"*What did you say?*"

"*Where are* — Nevermind."

He made sure to gleefully slam his new Prius into every corner of the war field; by the time the rear view mirrors were barely hanging on, and remnants of a tree were stuck to the windshield — he swerved into a dangerous curve, mere feet from Odasaku's unavoidable silhouette.

*Report*, the muffled voice from the in-ear hanging around his neck demanded. *Fall back*.

Saluting, he hung half his body out of the car window. "Beautiful evening we're having, my friend — isn't it?"

Odasaku shrugged. Leftovers of a badly cut beard lingered next to a bright band-aid — most probably, a wound-less gift from his kids. Odasaku didn't get hit. "The rising earthquake risk makes it somewhat less nice."

"Ah, yes. *The Catfish*, this Ability User calls himself? Any idea why?"

"Old myth," the man offered, immediately. "That's what Ango said. Years ago, people used to believe earthquakes were caused by this — giant catfish that lived underneath the earth."

His eyes widened. Like an alarm bell, the concrete underneath them was slightly rattled — nothing compared to the ten minutes long shakes from the day before, but enough to make the car creak threateningly. “That’s *so* cool. This User is so great at picking names. I envy him greatly.”

Odasaku huffed. “The night’s excitement made me miss Pops’ curry night.”

“My condolences,” Dazai climbed out of the car, skipping — attempting to remove his shoe. Courteous, Odasaku offered him his arm to hold onto. “Still a perfect night for a suicide, though!”

“I don’t know about that. Why do you carry a brick inside your pockets?”

“I found it at the bottom of the river just this morning,” Dazai beamed, settling the brick inside the now empty shoe. He abandoned it on the pedal of the car; slammed the door shut just in time to watch it race mindlessly down the road, taking down a few *GSA* passersby. “I’d tell you to visit, but little Akutagawa is just about to rage on those same shores. Even *you* might have a problem with those sharp talons of his.”

In the distance, the car wheels screeched — spinning the vehicle around into aimless donuts, until it landed against one of the trash-bins of a three-stores shop of sorts.

A young, high pitched scream echoed.

Mere seconds before the car caught fire, a silhouette in black and gray jumped in, pulling Q’s kicking body away from the perimeter.

“See?” Dazai jumped in place. “No gift is to be ever thrown away.”

“Conceded,” Odasaku admitted.

They made their way to the flaming circle, occasionally hiding behind a car or a darkened alley — so that Dazai could aim and get rid of the snipers hiding on the roofs. “Why are you picking up bullets?” the man questioned, at one point.

“Recycling,” he replied.

“I see. Tragic or —“

“Certainly comic. There you are.”

Wiping ash from an hysterically giggling Q with his jacket — holding their wrists so hard they would bruise; holding them closer than most in the Post Mafia dared — Gin Akutagawa watched them approach with frustrated defiance.

“And there’s our little spider, as well,” Dazai exclaimed, smiling — lowering his darkening gaze to the extracted knife in his hands. “Aren’t I just so grateful? Always trust the *Black Lizards* to bring back a missing knickknack,” He winked. “Hey there, Yu.”

Faster than a blink, Odasaku pushed him a few steps back — just in time for Gin to wrap his arms around Q's snarling body and yank them back, halting their attempt to jump on him.

He whistled, walking the few steps that separated him from the kid's abandoned doll. The delirious shriek that left their mouth as he picked it up had Gin's masked face scrunch up, wincing.

Odasaku only watched. "I thought you'd said the doll was locked up."

"And only its guard knew where," Dazai confirmed. "Considering that that fool was laying at Akutagawa's feet just a few moments ago, I'm assuming my *criteria* need some betterment," He groaned, hugging the doll — rubbing his cheek on its bandaged head. "Mori will be *so* annoying about that."

"I'll kill you," Q seethed, foam and snot on their lips, half smiling — trembling so violently he couldn't be sure if it was anger or fear. "I'll get my hands on you, *you*, and you're *never* gonna stop suffering —"

"You used to like me more than this," Dazai commented, rolling the stray bullets in his palm. "Your hands are useless when I'm concerned. You know that. Gin, knock them out."

"I'm gonna run again," Q swore, loud and wrecked, "I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna kill you, *I'm gonna* —"

Dazai's smile stayed where it was. "Gin."

The boy's hesitation bowed. He turned his knife — knocked the hilt on the kid's convulsing head, shutting them up.

"That's better," he concluded.

Odasaku stiffened. "*Look o—*"

A wall of bullets rained on them from the highest of the rooftops behind the trash bin; Gin rolled away, Q's body held safely in his embrace — Dazai juggled the spare bullets in his palm, and threw them in the air, saying: "Fetch, Chuuya."

A glimpse of scarlet burned the side of his retina, crashing against the bullets with his leg raised. A muffled call to, *retire, it's him!*, echoed from the rooftops and the faraway victims in his *in-ear* ; hiding under the bin, Gin's eyes widened — he signed frantically, too hidden by the lingering smoke to be clear.

The voices cried out — *didn't they say Double Black hadn't been spotted* —

Hands on the torn car door he'd attempted to shield them with, Odasaku studied the roaming red dot in the sky. "That your partner?"

"You'd think so," Dazai offered, watching the wrecked body of a sniper hang off the fifteenth floor window. "You know, I actually believe our anniversary is approaching! Disgracefully, though, it seems they have spread seventeen different stories on our alleged decess."

Unbothered by the still flaming car and the raining blood, the man blinked. “How long have you guys been partners, anyway?”

“Thirty years!”

“What?”

“I count in dog’s years,” he explained, guns in hands. “Might be thirty seven? Thirty eight? I always get confused. *Hey, Hatrack!*”

He didn’t wait for the silhouette to turn. He raised both the revolvers and fired mercilessly through his suit-clad body, loud and unabashed in the night — until he landed so mercilessly on the concrete, his spine snapped on impact. A guttural noise came out of Gin’s throat — he stared at him, *horrified*, eyes fluttering back to the pool of blood spreading under Chuuya’s body.

“That’s taken care of,” Dazai stretched, as silence lingered again. “Wouldn’t have wanted him to get lost in the cracks of the street, small as he is — with all these earthquakes going on.”

He walked to the corpse — nudged it, so that it would be laying on its back while Chuuya’s semblances slowly melted off of him.

“An appearance-alterant Ability,” Odasaku concluded, calm. He directed him an indescribable glance. “And he can steal the owner’s Ability too, I’d say — how did you know?”

“The air tasted weird,” he shrugged. Then, because the man didn’t seem convinced, he added: “As if such a silly dog would ever actually respond to my fetching orders. He’s still resisting training.”

His abandoned in-ear screeched.

Odasaku and Gin put a hand to their ears, flinching — listening to the monotone voice from the Port Mafia encrypted line.

“— *mutant Ability User, taking the semblances of our — do remember — Kinoshita, Captain Yamagata, and Vice-Executive Nakahara — still in Europe —*”

A spasm went through his hand.

“*Europe?*” Dazai exclaimed, tongue tasting like rust between grinning teeth. Very abruptly, he felt like killing more of those snipers. “Who sent the Slug to *Europe*? Had they told me, I would have thrown a party!” He shook his head, feeling his friend’s eyes on him. “And here I thought he’d just been ignoring me. What did I buy a punishing sprinkler for, then?”

Odasaku eyed him curiously. “You didn’t know he’d left?”

“See what I mean about the dog training?” He made his way to Gin, shaking his head. “*Ah* — doesn’t matter. I’ll use the sprinkler anyway. Does he even have the proper vaccinations for travel? Heavens above. Gin, give me the brat.”

More *instinctively* than truly disobedient — the *Lizard* tightened his grip around the child's shoulders.

All three of them paused.

Very subtly, Odasaku straightened.

Dazai smiled.

"Come on now, little spider," he tutted, crouching down. His coat was dragged into a puddle of blood from the fake Chuuya's body — hilarity crawled through the corners of his skull, drowning amidst the entertainment he didn't quite feel. "I'm glad to let the men know you're the one who found them. Would you prefer me to tell them that you're the one who tried to help them *run*, instead?"

Gin's eyes widened. Weakly, her fingers signed, *I didn't* —

"We're not going to linger on *what* exactly went through your mind when you found them and didn't immediately bring them to me," Dazai cut through, patting his head. "There's no need! They're here now, and I, for one — *really* don't care enough. I know you, sweetheart — you would have brought them forward, eventually." He felt his smile slip off like a crack in a mirror. "Now *give me the child*, Gin."

Eyes harder than decay under sweaty bangs, he complied.

"And that's done too," With a sigh, Dazai sneezed against the tufts of hair from Q's dangling head on his shoulder. Gin had been devoured by the shadows; only Odasaku remained, studying the *die-down* of the shootout across the streets — the quietness. "Thank you for your help, Odasaku!"

"I didn't do much," the man replied. He eyed the sleeping kid with a look Dazai knew all too well — both instinctive protectiveness and an assassin's always-high guard. "Any idea on what might have caused their week-long trip?"

"For sure," Dazai nodded, fixing his grip. The blades under their sleeves pressed against his chest, causing a shiver. "Mori has been trying to train their Ability — sharpen its range. I have to be there, of course. I believe they might have decided to put the blame of this training on me."

"Not like one can blame Boss," Odasaku offered, carefully blank.

He smiled. "Precisely. Up for finding Ango and getting a drink?"

Not unkindly, the man curled an eyebrow. "Maybe when you don't have a walking bomb in your arms."

"I guess," he huffed, sadly. "Hirotsu should be coming soon — you can hurry back to your cold curry," An idea lit him up. "Unless — if you wait just a *tiny little bit* — I can leave Q on Mori's desk and we can go exploring."

“Exploring?”

“Yes!” Dazai vibrated with energy, jumping in place. The possibilities were endless — dragging the man to steal one of Kouyou’s katanas and stick a fake mustache on it; filling Ango’s dear car with honey and leaving it in a beekeeper’s backyard; breaking in Chuuya’s penthouse to catch him in the dog-print pants he *swore* he never wore —

Except —

“We haven’t gone exploring in a while. Last time, we found Kazuko! We can find your kids a pet. A domesticated rat?” He deflated. “Maybe not a rat. I’m getting so tired of rats. Their Japanese is *horrible*, especially in writing.”

Odasaku blinked at him. “You’re holding a correspondence with street rats?”

“Somewhat,” he confirmed. “But I’m not responding. They’re irritating.”

The man nodded — accepting it with utter ease. “I’d be glad to go exploring, Dazai.”

“Great! And —“

“I don’t know if the Mafia Boss waiting for you would feel the same, though.”

*Ease*, Dazai thought, as his smile blurred. *Easy-hard*, that was what Odasaku felt like. He had invented many, many words for him. *Easy-hard*. *Currycursed*. *Cookedmeattheoryeyed*. Standing next to him always made *comparison* seem brighter than the sun — all he would never be. Dazai knew it all, and the man knew better than to praise him for it. *Easy-hard*.

“Yes,” he concluded. Q had clenched a small fist around his tie; there were scratches down their face — the result of hurried running through sharp branches. “Of course. You’re right.”

A hand landed on his shoulder.

It didn’t quite startle him — he knew his eyes did *something*, though. Odasaku’s gaze was unwavering; aware that Dazai didn’t appreciate gentleness. He only wanted *focal points*.

His grip tightened — until even a breath inhabited carcass had to feel it. Until it would at least *try to*. “Bar Lupin tomorrow?”

Dazai grinned.



Hirotsu's scarf was stained in blood, when his car parked by where Dazai was sitting on the concrete. He didn't offer to take Q from his arms — but when the two of them huddled up on the passenger seat, he turned on the heating.

"Summer just started," he let him know.

"I know, sir," Hirotsu replied.

He bit down a shiver, still. Traced the blade bumps over Q's bandages.

*That's funny*, he had told Mori, during one of the first training sessions. The traitor hanging from the ceiling was staring at Q's laughing, small body, still — despite the settling *rigor mortis*. They were both soaked in blood. *Don't we look similar?*

Mori's smile had been a concession. It almost always was — to his madness or his flecks of honesty, he didn't know.

"I hate you," Q murmured, into his ear. It was too quiet for anyone else to hear — lined in a tiredness his fingers curled along to. "It's all your fault if I'm here."

Dazai fixed his grip. "Nowhere else to go."

Hirotsu directed him a glance. He was a starkly white line against the darkened roads. The lower ranks were beginning to gather the corpses. They passed by the Detective Agency; *Uzumaki Caf  * had been emptied out.

"Sir," the Commander called.

"Ol' Gramps."

"Happy birthday."

He paused.

The man's gloved hand was offering him something — shiny and square-shaped; familiar to his thieving fingers. The *Lizards-seal* on the silver wristwatch bounced the moonlight off, unassuming.

"I assume it might not be worth half as much, when you and Chuuya aren't slipping it out of my pockets," Hirotsu said, gently throwing it on his occupied lap. "But I wanted you to have it — *officially*. Eighteen is a significant age."

Dazai picked it up; studied it with nimble fingers — dragging his nails down the well-known scratches and carvings. "Eighteen is too old."

A bit too honest. He felt it like a coat on his shoulders — did his best to stretch his lips into a grin to shrug it off. It stung a bit.

“You can always die at nineteen.”

He met the man’s gaze. Hirotsu curled his eyebrow.

Dazai pocketed the lighter, clearing his throat. “Well! I’m honored, old man. I promise not to set your car on fire for a *whole* week.”

“Good enough.”

“But you need to tell me — just *how* did you find out?” he insisted. Ango and Odasaku had spent years struggling to discover it. It always filled with him a certain giddiness — watching them treat him just the same when the day arrived. “You sly old man. Worthy Commander. There are no records on it, I’m absolutely sure.”

“Oh,” Hirotsu parked in front of the HQs. The chain of his monocle dangled hypnotizingly, hit by the car lights. “Chuuya told me.”

A spasm went through his hands. It took him a moment to realize it was more than physical aggravation — when Hirotsu swore, swerving the car along to the rhythmic tremors of the earth, he leaned outside his car window, watching dust fall from the roofs of older buildings.

“Not again,” Q muttered.

The Commander’s arm was slammed on his chest with little fanfare, crashing Dazai against the seat and the kid into his ribs — the man let his car race stubbornly through the opening charms of the street, crashing against shaking warning signs and barely missing clubbing passerby. Screams spread from the open doors of the balconies; the seismic shocks grew and died with viciousness that couldn’t be predicted.

“Should we stop the car?” Hirotsu asked, as he fixed his monocle.

Dazai shrugged. “Just accelerate. Can’t have the earth catch up with us.”

Eventually — after enough rattling for Q to lean over the car window and throw up, no mind to the flying vomit from their accelerating race; and after most of the man’s car had gotten damaged from being spun around by a *moving* road — *The Catfish* settled. Through the white noises of both their own radio and of the ones they passed — inside hurriedly abandoned cars — Dazai heard emergency News reports blasting.

“That was fun,” he concluded. “We should do that more often. Except Mori will want reports on this too, which — *ah*, maybe not. We sure this guy isn’t from *GPA*, right? A freelance?”

“Quite,” the man’s voice was a thread.

Hirotsu’s knuckles turned white around the steering wheel. The lack of wristwatch turned his mind back to the last words the man had said.

*Interesting*, Dazai considered, analytically — either his own wince or the surprising adeptness for investigation that dog had shown. Whichever one would be less weird. Less uncharacteristic.

“That brainless dog doesn’t know.”

“It rather seems he does,” the man replied, after a confused pause. “Called me in the middle of a shootout — he said something about how I should be, *polite enough to make the bastard choke on a birthday hat while I’m not there*. He seemed pretty bummed out to be missing it — looks like he’s been trying to find out for a while.”

“Bummed out enough to not even tell me he’s in another continent!” Dazai felt his lips sharpen cruelly, like an unwilling reflex. “Amazing, the emotional lengths slugs’ brains can nowadays reach. Obedient like a dog — he knew the biggest present would be a few weeks with his unbearable self’s absence, and he *complied!* The wonders of evolution.”

Meanness made him a tad too honest; he kicked the car door open before the gaze Hirotsu was offering him could grow more knowing.

He was halfway up the stairs, lamenting Q’s weight just to remind himself his lips could move, when he heard the man speak again.

“Boss refused to make it a *Double Black* mission for a reason, you know.”

“I’ll send him flowers for it!” he called back, not slowing down.

“You’ve both been busy. Some missions less do not signify dismantlement — despite what the underground might be chattering about,” he insisted. And *oh*, had there been chatter — after all, Yokohama hadn’t lacked *Double Black* sightings for more than a week in years. “It only means the Port Mafia has been doing well enough not to need its shadows.”

*And what if*, he didn’t ask, *the shadows have no need for existence outside the Port Mafia?*

On the encrypted line, the Akutagawas’ names were being whispered insistently. Gently, he rubbed some blood off his nails.

A pause. Hirotsu insisted: “This Ueda mess took a toll on him, even if he’d never admit it — Boss understood that he needed to walk away from those graves of his for a while.”

“As I said — *flowers*,” he echoed. “And if Boss had some sense, he would execute him for clear insubordination on matters of funerary uses.”

“His friend Hamamoto, the subordinate,” he added. “He was killed this April.”

Dazai’s steps froze only for a moment.

Not a pause that anyone would notice; not relevant enough to lose his phantom race to the entrance Head lolling on his shoulder, strangely shaped eyes open and bright and *viciously* set on him — Q mouthed a single word.

“Oh,” he commented, offhandedly, walking through the doors. He hoped it sounded balanced; he didn’t care. Q’s lips insisted, though — *you, you, you*. “Was he, now?”

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His phone was ringing.

For unexplainable, blurred reasons, it made Dazai absurdly mad. By the sixth ring, he accepted the call — only to close it in his interlocutor's face, his thumb staining the screen. A trace left behind — a sign of corporeality. The Mafia was all smoke.

In a characteristically *well-and-tiredly-used to him* fashion, the phone began ringing again less than a quarter of a second later.

*Chuuya*, he tutted at his careless self, *was the excess of it all*, and Dazai couldn't even reach the first step of an empty well.

*Avoidance means something*, he reminded himself, *because everything means something*. Even a mere means to an end. He let the phone ring and ring — studying the bright display with the same distance that overcame his limbs a bit more every day. The shipping container was buzzing, and the ringing ricocheted against the laminated walls like gunshots. Dazai only had a physical body because his scars said so.

He never answered.

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*[In a room that wasn't his, at Kouyou's lake villa, he watched Mori sit on the edge of his filled bathtub — evidently unfooled by the too wide grin on Dazai's face.]*

*"The Mafia's financial assets," the man explained — and no windows cracked, and no thunder struck the earth; because, she'd once said, there were more biblical things than a leash, "As soon as we're back to the city, I will move all of them under your name."*

*Dazai went through the motions — splashed some water, cheeks stuffed with air; took it all so very not-so-seriously. Not everyday did one receive an inheritance. Not everyday did he gave Mori a futile occasion to believe he had stopped thinking, even just for a moment. The man's eyes traced scars he'd made sure to stitch up with no precision.*

*What's the point in a wound, he insisted, a bit more gleeful each time. There was less skin with each wound — if the space runs out, Dazai had sometimes mused, he'll simply sew more of it.*

*"That seems unwise," he let the man know.*

*"And pretending you believe you can change my mind is a waste of time on both our sides," Mori replied. "It's a good idea, and you know it. It shifts the attention from me — God knows too many are starting to believe that a connection between the namesake of the Corporation and the secret Boss is no conspiracy."*

*That's not why, he thought.*

*His amusement had to have shown. Mori flicked a drop of water off his knee. He remembered a year spent in an underground clinic; wondered if it was normal — human — longing for home. He did always long for it. He didn't want to be in that villa; he didn't want to be in those bones. He didn't want to wrap a pen around his fingers with a stolen hair tie, and sign a paper that would make him —*

*"Moreso," Mori added, like he couldn't read his mind. "The syndicate would be nothing without those assets. I believe they should be shouldered by our most trustworthy hands, shouldn't they?"*

*The implications were a hiss of summer wind — a weight on his shoulders, always, always, always; a coat never worn correctly. It wasn't hope, he knew — Dazai had none of it. A game, maybe. "Suicidal people are plenty selfish, you know?"*

*"You wouldn't let us burn," the man tutted, his tongue clicking. "If that was your intention, you would have snapped Q's neck a long time ago," A pause — Dazai studied the line of his nose, slightly crooked from an old accident. "Or Chuuya's, for what's worth."*

*His fingers curled around the edge of the tub. Body warmth, he considered, was overrated. It was the pulse that was interesting — distracting enough that his lips had no choice but to part.*

*What ties you?, Odasaku had asked, once. A deck of cards; some forced honesty, even if Dazai had never lost at cards before. The desire to overspill, if it got him more space — if it made it less tight.*

*Curiosity, he had answered. Then, with all the slyness of a thief — what about you?*

*"I don't need your permission to die," he said. He imagined it — the Port Mafia in ruins. All the accounts under his name landed in the plastic-fair hands of another organization. And*

*another and another and another — all the same. “And if all these years have given you the sincere belief that I have ever cared for flames, I pity you.”*

*“Then take a gun and put it in your mouth, Dazai,” Mori’s taunting exasperation was a work of art. A child’s victory. A mixture of poisons on his desk, and the promise that he would show Dazai just how to pour them down his tired throat. “Hasn’t this gotten boring for you too?”)*

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When the caller tried again, almost three weeks later, Dazai only let the first call go to waste.

That second time, he waited until the fifty eighth second of call — only mildly impressed that the boy hadn’t gotten irritated enough to smash his own phone by the twelfth ring. *“You’re calling Dazai Osamu, dog owner extraordinaire,”* he mimicked, immediately, with that voice that always annoyed Elise. *“We refuse to deal in temporary adoptions — so if that’s why you called, I’m afraid you’ll have no luck. If you’re looking for —“*

*“Cut that shit out,”* Chuuya snapped, from the other side of the phone.

Voices in a language too distant to figure out acted as his background — perhaps in an effort to beat their volume, he had pressed his phone so close to his face, Dazai could hear him breathe.

*“Why are you calling me?”* he questioned, utterly bored. The boy always sounded weird on the phone — occasional double voices; statics that weren’t meant to be there. Dazai’s limbs stiffened and dozed off all at once. *“I told you to delete my number eons ago. Beatrice was still alive and kicking when I told you.”*

His mocking sounded a tad too sharp to his own ears. He studied the breathing wound on the dying man at his feet — tilted his head to the side, trying to stretch the sick amusement out.

*“You —“* Chuuya let a beat of silence pass; perhaps reevaluating. *“Don’t be an asshole.”*

Dazai didn’t answer.

*“And anyway — I’ve called you since then. And it’s a wonder it didn’t give my phone a virus, you fishy motherfucker.”*

*“Because you’re obsessed with me.”*

*“You want to visit the terrestrial orbit?”*

Unimpressed, he shut the call.

It took only seven seconds for Chuuya to call again. *“You’re calling Dazai Osamu —”*

He shut the call again.

Chuuya called again. *“Can you stop —”*

*“You’re calling Dazai —”*

*“I don’t know if A.I. phone assistant is what you’re going for, but you sound like a dying whale on laxatives.”*

Something about the banter was grating on his nerves. “Always so tactful,” he offered, teeth a tad too gritted.

*“With you?”* Chuuya scoffed.

*“I’m a fragile, softhearted maiden.”*

*“You are a Pharisaical degenerate.”*

*“Oh,”* he cooed, humorless. “Big words.”

There was a steadfast flow of *something* in his veins; an indescribable urge to smash his phone against the wall and cradle the pieces with the sort of regret only a better being could feel. He hadn’t cared for Chuuya’s lack of announcements — the itch to *leave* in his fingers had been palpable long before that night in the lake. The itch in *his*, on the other hand — Dazai couldn’t quite explain it.

*Because the dog is pulling the leash*, his more rational thoughts let him know. He’d watched one of the new reclutes corner Gin, a few hours before — question the kid on that *Double Black* he kept hearing so much about.

*It’s all true*, Gin had said. *But nobody’s seen them for a while.*

*The world is autumn*, one of the first people Dazai had ever tortured had told him. *And you never notice leaves until the trees are barren.*

“Have you finally found your calling all the way through the Alps?” he questioned, leaning down to gather his discarded knife from the body on the floor. The bathroom was a crime scene — he hadn’t been spared from the splashing blood, but the walls and the ceramic furniture were more red than real. “With all the little wood fairies? Will you do us all the favor of just staying there?”

*“Fuck you,”* Chuuya said, genuinely. *“I’m in the middle of a seven hour long train ride. Seven hours long, you get that? I’m so bored I’ve actually started reading my own emails —”*

“Why did you call me?”

His breathing caught — clearly irritated.

It was the first Dazai heard of his voice in almost two months; it settled in that space between his ribs that was entirely dedicated to aggravation. *“I didn’t.”*

“You clearly did.”

*“Sat on my phone.”*

“Obviously.”

*“Do I need an appointment or shit?”*

“Yes,” Dazai confirmed, switching to hold the phone between his cheek and shoulder. The man’s corpse — some owner of some front shop of the Mafia who’d been stealing money; and *blah*, and *blah*, and *blah* — was heavier than he seemed; his own grunts, as he dragged him to the closest thing to a curb in that room, were like a ghost’s cries haunting that empty apartment. “I’m devastatingly requested.”

Chuuya’s retch managed to echo even in *his* bathroom. *“I want info on The Catfish.”*

“And you called *me*, because?”

*“Nobody was answering on the encrypted line.”*

“That’s because the earthquakes broke it.”

*“It’s that serious?”*

He shrugged, squinting at the destroyed concrete six floors down, behind the only window in the bathroom. *You’d know if you were here*, he almost said, as natural as an exhale.

Dazai paused.

*Ah*, he realized, distantly. *How silly.*

One of the corpse’s rings slipped from his forefinger, as he yanked him out of the bathtub. It made a crystalline, unignorable sound as it landed on the tiles, twirling to a stop — somehow, the creaking, waiting silence from the other side of the phone managed to be louder.

Something like scorn curled up his lips. *Not scorn*, he mused. Maybe the face Mori made every time Dazai dragged a new pet home.

At last, he landed on: “They’ve finally hired someone to take Matsuda’s place, by the way.”

The silence took a different note.

*“You know?”* the boy questioned, flat.



“Knew it the second you did it, Hatrack,” Dazai settled the corpse’s mouth on the edge of the bathtub. Squinting, he aimed his foot — crashing it against the skull until he heard teeth fall. “Guess what? I might even know why.”

*“I doubt it. Are you killing someone, you sick fuck?”*

“I’m *Port-Mafia-ing* the body, thank you,” He kicked one more time — grabbed his gun from the blood-soaked sink to prepare three bullets. “I do know. Mori’s making me rewrite the standard procedure for traitors. He wants bloodier stuff. All roads lead back to betrayal, do they not?”

It was awkwardly, mercilessly quiet for the entire duration of the shooting process. Dazai studied the bleeding holes in the man’s chest — then, the bleeding gashes from the calluses on his own palms. Shaped like a rifle; like a gun.

*Just hang up*, he thought, amidst that stilted shared inability to come up with anything to say. It seemed utterly bizarre — the notion that there was any need for that filling at all. The distance and the silence tasted like the too sweet water from the lake — Chuuya’s nails atomising the skin of his cheeks, until Dazai was nothing but aimless particles.

His hands didn’t move.

*“What does he look like?”* Chuuya asked.

“Who, Matsuda? He was bald.”

His next pause was tactile with irritation. *“The poor fucker you’re maiming.”*

“Oh,” Dazai tilted his head. “You wanna have phone sex with a corpse? Risky.”

*“I ought to eviscerate you.”*

“He’s wearing silky underwear.”

*“Mackerel.”*

“Ugly. But he’s got a nice watch.”

Chuuya hummed. It wasn’t his usual tune, but he pretended it was anyway. *“Steal it.”*

“Born a Sheep, stay a Sheep,” He hid his gun again. His wristwatch, cracked in the middle, reminded him of Hirotsu’s gift — offhandedly, he added: “You could have just sent me a birthday gift, instead of gloating *via* Gramps.”

*“That would imply any part of your birth is worthy of being celebrated.”*

“On that, we can agree.”

*“That gives me an itching urge to disagree,”* the boy commented, very honestly. There was a tentativeness to him that Dazai couldn’t place. *“So? What’s this about an earthshaker?”*

*Ah*, he realized, a bit more stupefied by his slowness. *The Slug wants to talk to me.*

He weighed his options. There were reports in the dossier he'd abandoned in the car — details on the first of the earthquakes, and on the general population belief that it was no more than an unlucky season. There was Chuuya, too — with that slightly deeper voice he had to have developed somewhere around seventeen, but that Dazai had only noted on his eighteenth birthday; that one time he had whispered on the shell of his ear and Dazai had been goosebumps and empty thoughts only. A familiar off-key breathing, tainted by all the times his ribs had pierced his lungs — the enviable taste of *serenity* that had stained his whole being since Ueda had been taken out.

*Acceptance*, Odasaku had once said, *is much harder than just letting go.*

Dazai could have broken into the boy's old apartment with ease — even the tacky penthouse. He had been sleeping inside the shipping container for more than two months, instead.

*I don't know*, he'd told his skin, when it had questioned why. Chuuya had grown into him like mold.

"I'm bored," Frustration was fruitless — and thorns were sharper when one didn't know which spot they had prickled. Chuuya had been wind and *100% success rate* reports for months — and Dazai had learnt one hundred and twelve new different bank account codes. *Here's a story*, he would have told him, in another phone call — one that hadn't stained his slug phone charm in blood. *Dazai would be Port Mafia until the day that he died, and that was all.* "Go bother somebody else."

*"You're being childish."*

"Say," he offered, casually. "How did killing Matsuda feel?"

Even his sole breathing carried white noises, that time around. *"Fuck you,"* he concluded.

Less touched by the words than he maybe should have felt, Dazai abandoned the shut phone in the bloodied sink.

Chuuya didn't call again.

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There was truly not much to do in Hell, once the ground had stopped burning.

“What a dreadful metaphor,” Tanaki let him know, holding up her pink umbrella to cover them both from possible debris. “Do not let the Archivists hear you say there are no more fires to put out, though. Given the amount of paperwork I’ve seen them carry, they might just murder you.”

“Perhaps I should have considered them as a viable way out sooner,” Dazai blinked. “Clever.”

She huffed. “Is it truly convenient to build underground tunnels with an earthquake-maker on the loose?”

“Is it truly convenient to build rooms when the sun’s so warm all day long?” he tutted.

This time, she sighed.

Over the bright yellow safety lines on the floor, men in worker suits stepped into the sewer trails, working on the nearest of the blast doors. The organization had begun building the secret underground escape route at the beginning of the year, under his own orders.

*Nobody truly cares about the sewers*, he had explained, between yawns, to wide-eyed engineers unwillingly locked in a room with him. *We could build a city under there, and the Government wouldn’t find out. Think you can do it in — ah, six, five months? No? Do it anyway. Thanks!*

“Considering our current other *issues* — most of the syndicate believe a quick escape route is the last thing we need,” she insisted, the lower they descended down the uncompleted tunnels.

Led lights and dripping pipes were the only decorations; Dazai dragged his nails over the cracks in the rock. “You mean the moles,” he concluded. “Good thinking — but no spy will be able to roam through these roads, once they’re completed,” He wiggled his eyebrows, handing her the map the engineers had given him. “I’m building a *maze*.”

Tanaki’s eyes ran over the mess of lines on the paper, fingers tight around the corners. She had lost some weight — Dazai couldn’t pinpoint *when*. In the dim-lighted shadows, the cross of her facial scars shone brighter than her silver hair.

*You’ve been hanging out around me a lot, these days*, she’d noted, when he’d dragged her to that worksite. He wasn’t sure if she had been about to call him lonely — or aggravating. *Do you have something to confess?*

*Do you?*, Dazai hadn’t asked. Loneliness was a better being’s curse, and he was used to the view behind the glass.

“Or a slippery rat cage,” Tanaki offered, pensively. “Are there any traps?”

“These blast doors can only be opened by authorized people,” he explained, swiftly. “Should someone else attempt to, they would be blown into pieces. Adding traps would be too easy —

a *quick* fear. Over so soon; barely felt. Isn't it scarier if a lost soul gets to believe it can leave — only to starve in its attempts to escape?

From a three tunnels way on their left, the echoes of a whistling worker ricocheted against the walls — sweating to turn eerie.

Dazai smiled. "I really like this place."

"Because you like mazes," she asked. "Or because you like ways out?"

He tilted his head to the side. "I'm not sure. What do you think?"

"I certainly can't decide it for you," the woman replied, smiling a bit, indulgent. "You're the one who woke up and decided to turn the sewer system into our personal getaway car."

He kicked some pebbles off; watched them scratch the leather of his shoe — three clean lines, white like scars, appearing and vanishing under the flickering neons.

Mori hadn't liked the idea much.

*Should have thought about it before you gave me the assets*, he had thought, petty. *I'm not crazy*, Dazai had told the cat outside his container, that night. *But isn't it fun that he wonders?*

Hell had gotten boring pretty soon. Mori was always holed up in his office, preparing some grand plan to gain the *Ability Permit* — only, he refused to admit it plainly, so Dazai was left to scratch at his door. Kouyou and Ace didn't even bother hating him out loud. The subordinates had stopped writing his names in blood on the walls.

The letters arrived very scarcely. In each of them, badly spelled and terribly wrong —

"How would you escape?" he asked.

Tanaki blinked, caught off guard. "Oh?"

The whistling workers started another tune. Dazai fixed his coat, and watched something crimson float down the sewer trail. "Never mind."

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Mori found him among the remains of the last *GPA* battalion, their brains wriggling out of their crashed skulls.

“I’m surprised you decided to take care of this yourself,” the man commented, walking slow steps not to drag his scarf into the blood. “Some of the *Lizards* could have gone. Or Akutagawa.”

“Was bored,” Dazai shrugged. “Explaining to Elise why I can’t braid her hair all day long gets tiring, you know? You just couldn’t have gifted her with the awareness of being an Ability?”

The doctor smiled. “You think she doesn’t know?”

He nudged one of the nearby corpses, trying to figure out if the sound he’d heard came from its mouth or its gaping, wretched abdomen.

The last battalion had shared the same astonishment as the Boss — they’d mumbled about how the underground had *sworn* that *Double Black* was not around anymore, and then they’d mumbled about being important enough to be pursued by the *Demon Prodigy*. And then Dazai and the *Secret Force* had killed them.

And now he was late for Bar Lupin.

“Still,” Mori insisted, because he was stupid to the root. “You’ve been awfully efficient — since the accounts’ ownership switch.” Dazai snapped his fingers towards the *Secret Force* members, directing them towards the missing limbs of some corpses. Black vans surrounded the abandoned warehouse where they had found them; moonlight entered from the shattered roof in shards shaped like cell bars. “Unless you want me to believe you’re finding a real vocation for —“

“What age do you think I’ll kill you?” Dazai asked, once he could freely turn to the man.

Mori didn’t even blink.

Neither did the men surrounding them — had they even heard the convo, they wouldn’t have taken it for more than a joke. Dazai had made sure of it the moment he’d landed on his knees in front of the man’s red scarf — munching on nothing with his head as low as it was *convenient*.

“Twenty three, I’ve theorized,” the doctor said, after thinking about it for a bit. He scratched his chin like a distracted child. “Or eighteen.”

“That second one is rather close.”

“All is,” He shrugged. “It depends on how long you can last without it.”

Dazai gathered some fallen bullets from the ground, pocketing them. “*It?*” he questioned.

His smile stained his face like a fingerprint drawing. “The belief that you’re doing something with a *point* to it.”

*Existence is more than a question*, Odasaku had said once. Ango had found it rather funny. He had been somewhat drunk, though — perhaps the only reason why he'd been honest enough to utter: *and thank God for that. Who'd answer?*

Faster than either of them could plan for, Dazai raised his gun, and pointed it to the man's chest.

A breath passed.

"*Ahh*," Dazai lowered the gun, whining just a bit. It sounded poisonous to his own teeth; but all Mori did was blink. "This is just as boring."

The man offered him a hand. "Come with me," he encouraged, almost empathetic. He hadn't looked at the gun; not even for a second. "I know something that might not be."

The *Under Port* was unusually crowded — a bustle of men in orange lab uniforms hurried in and out of the organs harvesting rooms, oxygen masks fogging up with every drag of their carriers. Open doors leading to the actual morgue framed an eerily silent theater of corpses, hidden by white sheets and wheeled to the furnaces. Behind the glasses of makeshift operation rooms, murmuring doctors were studying the eye-reflexes of Users — enemies who hadn't complied with their joining offers.

"I wonder if they've taken down Q's room, by now," Mori mused, leading him down a staircase Dazai had never glanced at. "Sentimentalism might have left it as it was."

"And *who* is supposed to be missing them?" Dazai replied. "The corpses?"

"Aren't they allowed?"

"What a bother it would be."

The doctor conceded.

Shizuka Kanei was an old man shaped like a question mark, bearing an oddly long white beard with the ashy tips half burned off. His glasses were round and awfully thick — it took him a moment, when he turned from the work table of the little laboratory carved in a nook of the *Under Port*, to squint and recognize Mori's silhouette.

"Boss," he exclaimed, in a frail, high voice, bending theatrically at the knee. "Haven't seen you on this haunted floor of mine in a while."

"He has his own *Haunted Floors*," Dazai let him know, immediately skipping to rusted shelves of what he recognized as urns. The room was barely wide enough to turn, but the walls were entirely sculpted to fit that crowd of ceramic, stone, and wooden decorations. The work table in the middle of that space was a mess of tools and projects, staining the blacksmith's fingers black. "But those are much uglier than these!"

"Thank you," Mori sighed. "Master — I was hoping I could have Dazai take a look at some of your works. He's eighteen now —"

“You made him wait that long?” the man scoffed. “Men have died younger. What would you have had him do? Store his ashes in a plastic bag?”

“I thought our ashes were meant for the Bay,” Dazai questioned, exchanging lids from the nearest boxes. Dreamily, he added: “Like polluted debris and luckier suicidal comrades.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ashes *are* gathered before they’re thrown in the sea,” the doctor explained, peeking from the other side of an urn Dazai had put to eye level. “It is a rather short lived coffin, but one nonetheless. You should be mindful of your choice.”

He squinted. “Did *you* pick one?”

Mori’s smile was just a hint of teasing.

“*I* did!” Elise exclaimed, out of physically nowhere, peeking from behind his legs. “Rintarou lacks the necessary taste for something *that* fun.”

“Dear,” the Master flinched. He bowed, the piece of ceramic between his hands shattering from the surprise. “Miss Elise — I didn’t hear you come in.”

“She’s sneaky,” Dazai said, conspiratorial. “A little ghost, really.”

She *hmpf!*-ed, displeased. The glint in Mori’s eyes wasn’t particularly friendly when it set on him. Master Shizuka Kanei cleared his throat in an awkward, understanding bow. “Take your time, Boss. Executive. I’ll go check on today’s ashes.”

“How secretive you can be,” Dazai noted, a good ten seconds before the man had even closed the heavy door behind him. “It’s a box. I doubt it would be useful in any overthrowing scheme.”

“To be absolutely honest with you, Dazai, I had completely forgotten about the urn.”

He curled an eyebrow, jumping on the tool table to rest his bored legs. He watched the doctor make his rounds around the breath-squeezing lines of the room, searching for his own urn — because Dazai had asked, and Mori rarely didn’t comply. In a clear temper tantrum, Elise stepped up to his tool table, arms crossed and head pushed as far as it was possible before they came into contact — Dazai did the same, pouting, allowing her to feel the ghost of his forehead on her own. A challenge that wouldn’t happen, but that tore a giggle out of her sadistic lips all the same, as she squeezed her eyes in fake effort.

They didn’t touch — they would never touch again.

“Tanaki reminded me, actually.”

“One of these days, that poor woman will implode from the sheer amount of information she has to remember in our stead.” Dazai noted. “A cruel fate for such a beautiful face. She’ll regret not having accepted *my* offer, when —“

“It seemed strangely poetic, at the time,” Mori insisted, picking a box from an undescriptive shelf. He felt his spine straighten with unexplained attention. “She was actually the one to inform me about the tradition. I was — quite unsure of how to proceed, after the old Boss’ demise,” A sigh, “And none of the old Executives wanted to deal with his remains. How sad. Dazai, should I ever end up *that* violently disliked, do you promise to sneak in and gather me in this pretty thing?”

“Let him rot in that stupid chair of his,” Elise ordered, petty, as Dazai grabbed the urn he was thrown. She glared at the man. “Maybe it will teach him to call my drawings *original*.”

“It was a compliment, dear!” Mori swore.

“It *wasn't*! And you suck!”

“Elise,” he sighed. “You break my heart.”

The urn was offensively simple — a box of dark wood, with no silver or golden decorations; only the carved lines of the Mafia symbol on top of the removable lid. It was certainly elegant, but so unpretentious it *had* to have a point. Dazai ran his fingers on the rough, crooked inside, and felt some faraway corner of his mind whine for attention.

He shut the lid. “All this secrecy for an ugly box?”

Elise pointed at him, vindicated.

“I thought you might want some privacy to pick your own,” Mori replied, easily. Tilting his head, he added: “And to discuss what Fumiko Enchi has to say about our last *Division* mole.”

He curled an eyebrow, jumping down from the table. All fake distraction, his eyes roamed over the shelves and the urns, unable to stick. Dazai did his very best to imagine ashes where his hands were tapping furniture — did his very best to imagine what the funerary version of a shipping container would look like. The idea of death was a balm; the idea of being spread in those same waters he never managed to drown into was a blessing.

Dazai didn't quite want to be in a box.

*Nonetheless*, he reminded himself. Steps and necessities and whatever else. *It might be boring if it was effortless*, Odasaku had once said. He would just ask him what urn *he* had picked — and choose accordingly.

“Fumiko left the dungeons,” Dazai said. “Is Ane-san still having fun tormenting her for info?”

“It's the whole reason why she let her join her ranks,” Mori replied. “Not to mention, the sole reason why she was even allowed to join ours. She's already uncovered seven moles. Fumiko is all but stupid — she understands the conditions Chuuya put on the table.”

The sound of Chuuya's name out of his mouth made some tauntingly irritated thing in his veins itch. Dazai ignored it in favor of taking a step back when Elise boredly began kicking



the foot of the table, twirling her gown from side to side.

“Do *you* understand them?” he asked.

“His business is his business,” Boss offered, wholly insincere. “After that whole Hamamoto — what matters is that he broke her enough to make her functional. Your friend,” he added, belatedly and entirely out of place. “Has he picked an urn? I remember you telling me he’s older than you.”

Distant pipes and nearby chests creaked. A sizzling, overwhelming rage of sorts made Dazai’s fingers twitch — he bit his cheek to blood, and did not care anymore. “What silly phrasing.”

“Fumiko swears she *can’t* say the name of the last mole,” the man continued, once he realized he wouldn’t answer. Mori had never been one to let awkwardness linger — his most secret plans, either. “It must be an Ability User.”

“When isn’t it?” he sighed — studying the underside of a cone-shaped urn. *Not for you*, some voice in his head that sounded like Ango, unless it wanted to be kind, tutted. *None of these are*. At his very root, Dazai suspected, he was made for some forgotten street in a corner of the world — fleshy remains that would leave more quietly than he had ever been allowed to live.

“She did manage to let us know this mole has been here since the *Nine Rings Conflict*.”

He paused.

“I remember that conflict,” Elise mused, on the ground. Her red skirt spread on the tiles like fresh, scarlet blood — she was too bright for the gloomy light of the *Under Port*. It only served to make her look more like an unnatural addiction. “It wasn’t very fun. Nobody had time to play. And the corpses were smelly. And those *tattoos* — “

“The tattoo maker,” Dazai concluded, once his brain had gathered the missing pieces. “It’s the one *Nine Rings* member we didn’t manage to find. And the tattoos had unclear abilities, correct? A communicator. A —“ He paused again.

Mori’s smile was gracious. “The half moon tattoos born of Ueda Akinari’s — *ah*, nightmarish virus. I’m slightly ashamed that neither of us made that connection sooner.”

He frowned. “But why would a *Nine Ring* member accept to collaborate with the *Division*?”

Some faraway screeches reached that corner of the *Under Port* — the melody that never rested and never inhaled. Elise set her ear on the door — curious of details she seemed to forget whenever she wasn’t material in one place for too long. Mori directed him a long, *pointed* gaze.

“*Ah*,” Dazai dropped the urn on the shelf, endlessly bored. “Revenge. *Et cetera, et cetera*.”

“You know, it *is* a noble purpose.”

“Is it? It just feels awfully redundant.”

“Have you never wished for vindication?”

“Have you?” he questioned.

“What for?” Mori replied. “The Mafia has already killed those who were brave enough not to bow their heads. Fumiko Enchi is the only mole we haven’t burned, and she’s proving herself useful. I carry no grudges for dead men.”

“I *did* let you get shot.”

“You?” He smiled, amused. “No revenges between us, Dazai. We hardly have time for those. I do hope you will not perceive this visit as a —“

Dazai squinted at the hand drawn projects on the table, noncommittal. “Taunt?”

“I was going to say *threat*, actually.”

He snorted. Mori cleaned dust from his coat, as if unaware the crimson of his scarf was the same shade as his Ability’s dress — as if there had not been a point to it; to *all* — and then he hid laughter under a bowed head.

*Your friend*, Dazai recalled. *Has he picked?*

They laughed quietly — a secretive shake of shoulders that rattled the room and every particle of ash inside the urns. Laughing, Dazai reached out and tapped the center of Elise’s forehead.

Mori’s smile froze in place.

Blinking, he wiped his hand on his own coat. Elise disappeared so imperceptibly it was a hiss of unmaterialized air — not even the childish echo of her fabricated breath remained.

“*Oops*,” he offered, a bit sincere. He met the men’s eyes, and wasn’t sure he knew what the swirl of thoughts behind them meant. *Not fear*, the voice that wasn’t Ango mused. Odasaku, maybe. But maybe it was better to keep the two of them away from each other. Chuuya was already a leash he couldn’t vocalize; one he’d have to distract him from. *Not fear, but what else?* “Anyway. Can you help me with the urn? I’m lost here.”

A beat.

“Of course,” the doctor concluded. Forced, but not entirely. Dazai knew what to call victories — that wasn’t quite *it*. The fool who had promised to kill him was, in spite of it all, picking his grave. “We’ll find you something.”

In a daring, equal-odds throw, Dazai asked: “Do you know anything about the death of that one subordinate of Chuuya’s? Hamamoto?”

Not a muscle twitched in Mori's pale face. It was a clear signal — disinterest in the topic, and some perplexion at being questioned on it. "Only that it was a mission loss," he offered. "Why?"

Jumping from behind his legs again, Elise hummed some song he didn't recognize, pawing at the urns on the shelves like a misbehaving cat. If she had noticed she'd been gone, she didn't act like it. Dazai settled against the table — pretended not to notice how the man had just lied to him.

In a twirl of polished shoes and Mori's scarf-tinged gowns, Elise's hums turned familiar. Chuuya's obsessive, calming tune ricocheted on the walls — only relatively louder than the shrieks of torture behind the door.

Mori tilted his head at him, spotless.

"Don't worry about it," Dazai concluded.

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There was this dream he had, sometimes.

Every corner of it was hazy — indistinct all the way to the trembling, breathy whispers against his chapped lips; blurry to the tips of his limbs, all flames that itched and called. The mouth never touched his own, but it *tried* — parted lips, broken on something too quiet to be more than his name.

Dazai could only breathe back. The tip of a nose on his cheek — his own fingers under leather, choking pulse points.

*Breathe*, the lips mouthed, sometimes.

Never upon his own. On longer nights, they parted underneath his jaw, where the spears from the dungeons would exit when he stabbed them from the top of a prisoner's skull. *Breathe*, they would say, in his ear. Dazai had claws where his hands were meant to be, and he bled out that dot of warmth upon him until there was nothing left — and the lips murmured his name anyway.

"*Shitty.*"

Barely adjusted to the cold metal between his cheek and shoulder, Dazai kept his eyes on the mess of voiceless cries and wounds in front of him, and questioned: “Have you shortened it? Usually it’s *shitty Dazai*. Or, *shitty bastard*. Or —“

There was a pause of surprise, as if Chuuya hadn’t truly expected him to respond.

The lights of the dungeons were low and buzzing — they carved caves and lighter hills on the victim’s skin. He was too tired to do more than struggle weakly against the restraints around his wrists, holding him to the old chair — dirtied in too many people’s blood.

Dazai dragged the tip of his knife down the side of his face. “*You wanted to know how it felt to kill Matsuda,*” Chuuya said, brusquely. The tone, he recognized, was a bit drunk. “*That’s how. Like a load of revolting, smelly, never ending shit.*”

The man groaned around blood landing in his mouth. Dazai offered: “Necessary protocol.”

“*I know it was necessary protocol, jackass,*” the boy replied. Apart from the usual statics, there was a strange texture to his voice — familiar in a way he couldn’t pinpoint. Echoey, as if stuck in a bathroom of ceramic tiles. “*I guess — a part of me sort of wanted to believe his whole, bring you to the light, spiel had some truth to it.*”

He paused. “You wanted that to be true?”

“*Not for me,*” Chuuya scoffed — and *that* made sense. “*But someone like Murase would have saved the Sheep some pain, had I been less —“*

He trailed off. Dazai took advantage of the pause, well aware of just how long it would last, to momentarily mute the call. He lifted the victim’s chin with the knife — leaned close enough to have him gaze right into his empty, disinterested eyes.

“I don’t care if you die now or later,” he let the man know. “I’ll get what I want out of you all the same. But you care, don’t you?”

“I...” the man stuttered, wetly. “*Please, I—“*

“Who’s the other mole?”

“*Please. Please, I can’t —“*

Some button in his brain switched off — he turned the knife and sliced the man’s lips until they parted, allowing him to sever his tongue. The morbid coagulation landed on the ground admits his shrieks; Dazai directed him a gaze that had him falling quiet.

“Now you’ll have to find another way to let me know,” he sighed. “*Shh. I’m on a call.*”

He unmuted the phone right as Chuuya let out a mumble: “*Less — something. I suppose I’d hoped Matsuda could be like him. Plenty brats in need of help,*” Humorlessly, he chuckled. “*Turns out he sold that possibility just to investigate the Mafia. So I guess not.*”

The victim contorted as quietly as possible, tears and snot and blood turning his face into a mess of contemporary art and regret.

Dazai leaned against one of the thin metal columns — quickly added to the decor once *The Catfish's Ability* had started to make buildings fall. He focused a tad more on the whistley, squelching background of the call, and questioned: “Did you call me from the middle of a couple’s bed?”

“*Hilarious,*” Chuuya spat — effortless in the ease of their circling orbits. But it recovered the tense lining it had had since Kouyou’s *villa* far too soon; the boy cleared his throat. “*I got stabbed.*”

He paused. The drunken tone made sense, at least. “You got stabbed?”

“*It can happen. Haven’t slept in three days, what with the fucking Bureau of American Idiots.*”

“*You got stabbed.*”

A beat. “*With a piece of streetlight.*”

“Oh,” Dazai said. “Oh, that’s karma.”

The squelching hum got easier to visualize with that context — the familiar picture of a blood stained bathroom; Chuuya, curled up by the tub, framed by a mess of alcohol, bandages, and needles that should’ve probably been disinfected more.

The pulsing texture of a wound on his side, oozing blood with every inhale; the indents left on his lower lip with every prickle of the needle. The boy had a tendency to pull his burnt strand of hair when hiding pain. Acutely, Dazai felt the uncanny urge to have him reachable — near his crooked fingers, to study and to mock and to make sure he *existed*.

Dazai listened to his distant, erratic breath, and opened his mouth.

Chuuya arrived first: “*So,*” he started, with a cheerfulness that was all vitriol. The gulp from the alcohol he’d just ingested as morphine echoed against his ear. “*Did you deal with the GPA?*”

He frowned, observing the pee stain on the man’s chair. Hot, liquid metal bubbled in the glass he’d had Tanaki carry him — he watched it spin, as the man’s eyes followed with horror. “Why do you sound annoyed by it?” Dazai asked. “Did they own some dogs that happened to be your cousins?”

“*‘Cause your power trips annoy me,*” the boy huffed. “*You know — you could have let me know you didn’t want help against them yourself. No need to have Boss be your messenger.*”

Dazai paused.

He poured the first drops of metal over the man’s turned arm, following the bluest of the veins on the inside. The man screamed loud enough to snap his tense vocal chords — a

drenched, rough shriek. Thoughts swirled in his mind faster than he could weave them into something *sensible*. Mori's grin — bent over reports that carried the *Double Black* name. The face he had made when Chuuya had entered the bathroom at Kouyou's *villa* — the way he'd immediately, irrevocably known that the boy was lying just for Dazai.

*But you trust him*, he'd said. *Don't you?*

He asked: "Could I have?"

*"I could have come back a weekend to help out,"* Chuuya insisted — trying too hard to sound casual. *"Our international deals are a mess, given half of our contacts turned out to be moles — but it's not that bad. But I guess you had it all sorted out or fucking whatever."*

The man bawled his heart out. The glass stayed permanently tilted — hiding that vein and rising goosebumps among burned flesh.

"Oh," Dazai said. "That."

Chuuya grumbled some more. There was a metallic *click!* and a sharp hiss that signaled he had begun digging into his skin for fragments; Dazai's fingers spasmed with the memory of his blood — the breathing franticness of his viscera, no matter how desperate Arahabaki's grip on it was.

*Touch me*, he'd said. *Don't make me beg.*

Strangely, he felt like laughing.

It was an absent, pungent need, these days — a phantom limb for a haunted house. He smiled when they brought new prisoners to the chambers and he smiled when Oda toasted a drink. The road was always the same. His bed always creaked in the same spot. If there was a *point*, Dazai didn't —

He poured the last of the liquid metal over an indefinite spot between the man's spasming clavicles. He asked: "Have you ever thought about killing Mori?"

Only static remained on the phone.

Somewhat resigning himself to be hung up on — subjected to the offense of a boy who *knew* when he was being played with; suicidal enough to pull the leash on the most loyal dog around — all of Dazai's mind returned to the squirming man in front of him, watching the bubbling blood in his newly empty mouth splatter on his own shirt.

"Nothing to say?" he insisted. "Ah. Sorry. I can have a piece of paper brought to you."

His eyes were rolling in opposite directions from the delirium of pain. He whined wordlessly, choking on tear-stained laments — and he began nodding his head forward, towards the stairs.

"I can't let you go," Dazai informed him.

The man howled, rattling the chair.

*“Five times.”*

He stilled.

Chuuya’s voice had something different to it. He couldn’t put his fingers on it — Dazai felt, rather absurdly, that he would have gladly cracked his own ribs open for a chance to hear it whispered and *understand*. Inhales and exhales were deeper — he could see his gloves, abandoned over the sink in that way that always got them soaked and got him whiny about it; could see his calloused fingers, that scar they both had to crook their thumbs, as they fixed the red crater of his chest.

He delivered that answer quietly. Dazai had been shot, last week — Mori had patched him up as a favor, and as a reminder. The wound throbbed with something that was almost envious.

*Touch me*, he recalled. *Don’t make me beg*.

“That’s more than I have,” he offered.

A huff, almost amused — too terrified to be so. Fear didn’t fit anywhere on Chuuya’s bones — but those weren’t words to be muttered aloud, and he was saying them anyway.

*“I don’t believe that for a second, bastard,”* he rebutted. His voice had lowered into the pained, drunken, deep hum it became when he was done bantering mid-stitching up.  
*“Sometimes you look at him like —”*

He didn’t continue.

Dazai watched the dying man in front of him rot, and he recovered his knife from his hand. It took a piece of his fingers with it — grabbing him by the chin, he insisted: “Even when they shot him, last year — I can’t see it.”

*“I can.”*

“Yeah?”

A distant exhale — a piece of metal landing on tile. *“He’s a man. I’ve imagined worse.”*

*Like what?*, he ached to ask.

Over his head, a panel of lights flickered. In the blink it became darker than lighter, he dared: “Tell me how.”

For a long moment, Chuuya didn’t speak. *The leash*, he thought, mind in a haze that was red and was black. *The leash got longer and the leash got shorter, and at the end of it was always —*

*“Slashing his throat,”* he dared, eventually, all in one go. An exhale that matched the first of the stitches he gave himself in that second wound; the sound tickled Dazai’s memory.

*“People in the settlement used to tell stories about that scarf. Said you couldn’t kill him if you didn’t cut that, too.”*

“That’s stupid,” He didn’t know when his hand had moved — but it had, anyway. Dazai let it trace the Adam’s apple of the man in front of him — a clean line, like the ones Chuuya left whenever *Tainted* got too boring for the hunt.

*“He felt so — untouchable. They had to make their myths.”*

“And?”

*“Poison.”*

“That wouldn’t work.”

*“It would,”* Chuuya insisted. Strategist and murderer and everything the Mafia had needed him to be — everything Dazai had forced him to call himself, in the esoteric quest of keeping up with a shared lifeline neither of them would admit to. *“The tactile kind. You could —“* He gasped, cursing out an accidental wound from the needle. *“‘Could put it on Elise.’”*

Dazai realized it, belatedly. *He hates himself for thinking this.*

The man under his hands was screaming. Warmth trickled down Dazai’s back like sweat, gathering by his wrists and some lower part of his guts — *clenching*. “She’s his Ability, though.”

A distant snort. *“Look at what mine does to me.”*

“Oh,” he noted. “And?”

*“Drop the building on him.”*

He paused.

“The Headquarters?”

*“Bury him underneath them,”* he sounded both self-deprecatative and utterly disgusted by his own words. *“I thought about it. In his office. He wouldn’t have been able to stop me. He wouldn’t even have screamed. I —“* A drunken laughter left his lips. *“That’s stupid. I’d never do that, that’s —“*

He studied the ceiling; spiderwebs and old blood. “I know you wouldn’t.”

*“I care about him,”* Chuuya noted. It was the tone he’d used when he’d asked, *did you read my files?* *“In spite of it all, I — would he even die?”*

*I don’t know,* Dazai wanted to say. And — *would it even be the right thing, if he did?*

When he opened his eyes again, the man in the chair was dead in front of him, head crushed in blackened pieces against his backrest. He stumbled, no one there to see him anymore —



hurt the small of his back against the edge of the tool table; sunk his nails in his own wrist, analytical.

*Real*, he thought, *corporeal*.

“Chuuya,” he tried.

“*S okay*,” he snapped, lighthouse and flame to the moths. There was a *thud!* — his head against the bathtub, maybe. Dazai saw a known painting — sunkissed, spasming fingers slipping gloves on. He was drunk. He wouldn’t remember a thing of being a traitor — and Dazai would be stuck there, hands gripping his own flesh, feverish and alone next to a corpse. “*It’s just shitty talks.*”

*Mori’s eyes*, he thought. Mori’s eyes over the tunnel of a gun. Mori’s eyes, turning the same red as his scarf — as the blood in his hands. Mori’s eyes over urns Dazai couldn’t pick — *what about that friend of yours?*

*But he won’t*, he reminded himself. Chuuya had promised it himself — he was just a man. He had always feared Dazai just a bit more than he had feared himself. *He won’t.*

“I’d do it with my hands,” he offered.

A sound escaped from Chuuya’s inhale. A tad too entrancing; a tad too connected to the guts Dazai had never managed to scoop out of his own unwilling carcass. He felt himself slump forward as if praying, and concluded: “Just talks.”

“*Just talks*,” the boy agreed. Because he was better than Dazai — and he never would. A bit of a mock: “*Everything for our organization.*”

“*Until our blood runs black*,” he concluded.

Mori would have executed them where they stood — cut their heads in the same blade-hit; impaled them on the same spear; burned them by the same match. *Here lies Double Black*, he would have joked. He made the ugliest of jokes, and Dazai never laughed. *Here lies Double Black, created by their killer.*

Anticlimactic as an earthquake — Chuuya let out an exhausted, drunken burp.

“*Sorry*,” he squeaked.

Dazai felt himself snort, weak and distant.

He wished, horridly and unexplainably, to sleep in that old futon of Chuuya’s — where he wouldn’t have touched him, but the *possibility* would have been there. *Dazai*, Mori had sworn, *tends to linger*. And the lingering did not touch — the lingering just breathed.

“Chuuya,” he echoed — like his flesh could not force him to breathe by sheer stubbornness. Like it needed to be reminded that for a blink — he’d been fifteen and *wanting* to live.

The boy had forgotten all about the call, it seemed — the sound of his steps around the room was faraway. Drunken stumbling and drunken curses; he didn't speak to him again. Dazai slid on the floor, silent and facing the corpse.

He listened to him hum that tune of his by the speakerphone until the battery died.

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*"The Sheepdog?"* Ango echoed, flatly. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"I'm not trying," Dazai replied, knocking on the yellow security helmets the workers on the club's construction side had given them. The chaos of tools and nearby end-of-summer waves was almost overwhelming — despite his friend's wince, he ended up screaming: "I'm nailing it."

A boringly endless, never trafficked bridge connected Yokohama to the artificial island where the Suribachi City settlement rested; a cablesless road that only freight transports and police officers ever drove through. At the end of the bridge, right on the plain, undescriptive entrance to that island — with a club, because what better place to gather fees and information on what would, *inevitably*, become a new territory of theirs — the Port Mafia had begun to put Chuuya's renovation project in place.

*What, he made this?*, he had asked, when presented with Mori's latest approved business. *I didn't know he knew how to spell "architectural"*.

Hirotsu hadn't been impressed.

"I just feel like it would be a nice tribute," Dazai hadn't been that close to Suribachi since he was fifteen. The settlement was too far to see, but the panorama was intensely familiar — the smell of ruins; the taste of rust and oil. The eyes of curious children, bad at spying. "Who in Suribachi doesn't remember the Sheep? It might even make them more amenable to the enterprises crowding their tiny dog houses."

"So you want to show off your partner?"

"No, the point is to irritate him."

"Clearly," Ango muttered.

*The Shepdog* was set to open sometime by the beginning of October; the skeleton of the club was already evident, following lines Dazai could see Chuuya had partially stolen from the *Gentlemen's Club*. But that place had been a hit before they had torn it apart, so he could privately appreciate it. The boy's projects were an organized mess — he knew the settlement better than anyone else, and the funds he'd calculated and the reconstruction he had planned showed it almost annoyingly.

*The club is for the Mafia*, he had written, in the report. *It should be placed in an obnoxiously visible spot. The settlement will owe us. It will do them good to be reminded of it.*

"Is it truly a good idea to direct this project while *The Catfish* is roaming around?" Dazai asked — hanging off Ango's elbow as the man checked developments with the few mafiosi guards around. "I mean, one blow of the big bad wolf and this is all ending up underwater."

"Not quite," the man replied, distractedly. "The island has several levels left from the military base. An earthquake would make them visible. It would take a *deep* crack to reach the Bay," Then, he squinted at him. "*The Catfish* will be caught soon, anyway. The *Division* and the Mafia have the same target, for once — he won't last long."

"The *Division* has been laying incredibly low these past few months," he observed.

Something complicated tightened his traits. "Maybe it has found something more concerning than a familiar — if bloody — neighbor."

"The *Rats*?" he guessed.

"No," Ango cleared his throat. "Someone who wishes to be dethroned as much as the *Division* wishes to dethrone them," He rattled his knuckles on the dossier. "Makes you wonder how long this will last, given that premise."

Dazai hummed, rhythmically kicking the side of Ango's shoes. In a fit of inspiration, he sat by the edge of the wooden deck, sticking his legs in the freezing, greyish waters — gathering the man's disgusted protest. He waited until he was done writing down whatever Archivists needed to know about their new front, and asked: "Ango, have you picked an urn?"

A glance. "I have, yes."

"What does it look like? No! Wait. Don't tell me. I bet I can guess."

"Can you?"

"It's probably boring," Dazai huffed. "And monochrome. And cubic."

"What's wrong with cubes?"

"*Everything*? Is *cube* tragic or —"

"Comic," Ango tapped his forehead with his pen, two times — he whined. "Obviously. Tell me you didn't pick a — I don't even know. Does the Master fabricate crab-shaped urns?"

Dazai lit up like a Christmas tree.

“What — no. No, Dazai — I was *kidding*, Dazai, don’t you —“

Once the evening sky had turned into a fit stage for the moon, they left the construction site — though he made sure to push Ango off the deck the moment the workers were faraway enough. He skipped his way to the man’s car over the sound of his cursed complaints, and didn’t wait to hear the squeaking melody of his wet shoes to fit himself in the passenger seat, cradling his console.

Ango had *words* to offer once he got inside the car — soaked to the bone and drenching every inch of the seat and the steering wheel. Dazai only *half* zoned out from them — rocked by the mean tilt of his frustrated tone as much as someone else would have been by a lullaby.

Suribachi City got more and more blurred in the rear view mirror the further they ran down the bridge.

*The settlement hides potential, as every part of this city, Chuuya’s reports had promised. Dazai burned with it, at times — the sheer number of things most people seemed to be devoted to. His own nonbeliever hands, always reaching. For too long it has been put at disadvantage, on account of a cursed birth it cannot truly be faulted.*

*Chuuya*, he considered, clinking his tongue, *was obsessed with finding mirrors.*

“The urn,” Ango said, eventually.

He still sounded gruff, but Dazai had used his own tie to dry his glasses — so now he drove right under the speed limit, and occasionally asked strangely expert questions about his video game. *I work in hacking too, remember?*

“What about it?” Dazai asked.

“Haven’t you picked it yet?”

“Mori brought me,” He shrugged. “I can’t say any of them particularly called me.”

That got his head to tilt — scrutinizing in that way Dazai sometimes felt from the side of the Bar Lupin counter. Both Odaaku and Ango knew the boy in their middle was more than what shown — both knew reputations came from facts, most of the time. They had never seemed *scared* of him — but they had never not been cautious.

*I would break my skull for you*, Dazai had once wanted to tell them.

Helpless like a child; on his tiptoes, to reach their heights and show that he deserved that spot because of something *more* than whatever the Port Mafia saw in him. Perhaps death was no gift from a man who had been waiting for his last heartbeat; but pain could be. *I would let it heal.*

“I didn’t think you would care that much,” Ango commented, after a bit.

“I don’t,” he replied. There was no better way to vocalize — *I picked a shipping container to remember there was nothing worth staying for and I ought to pick an urn like my ashes will even look like everyone else’s*. Odasaku had promised Bar Lupin was a place like no other — a room worth living a bit longer to see. Apart from Bays, apart from urns — that was where Dazai wanted to rest.

Dazai didn’t want to rest anywhere — not in windswept ashes, not in a room; not breathing and not dying. His fingers tickled — he had to sit on them to keep from tearing the car door open.

Right as he blinked and reminded himself he didn’t particularly care whether he did it or not, Ango snapped the locks on.

“Boring,” he huffed, too whiny for his dry throat.

“Odasaku needs to start smacking you,” the Archivist mumbled, glaring at him. The lights of the bridge reflected on his thin glasses frame — he was pale and stressed. “You can pick whatever you want, Dazai. No one’s going to grade you on this.”

“But it has to be *pretty*,” he insisted. “It will host *my ashes*, once my life mission finally reaches its end! It should be worthy of whatever beauty I persuade to share that end with me. What if my fated love picks a stunning, incomparable urn and I accidentally select something that will offend her gaze? I would have to end my life. Again.”

“Your *fated love* is dead, in this scenario,” Ango informed him. “She won’t care.”

“Of course she will. It’s the most important journey we will ever venture through,” Dazai let his game character lose the level, allowing himself to hit the man’s shoulder with the console. “Ango, you really don’t get it.”

He sighed. “Not quite, not.”

“I ought to execute you for it,” he warned.

The man didn’t seem convinced. “And then what — it will teach every other mafioso not to doubt the beauty of double suicide?”

“*One life lost for the good of the syndicate is a shame, but not a dealbreaker*,” he recited. “That’s what Mori always says.”

Ango made a face.

“What? You don’t agree?”

“Did you think I would?”

“You seem very pragmatic,” he offered.

The Archivist squinted at the faraway light of some speeding motorcycle. “*One life for many* — it’s always been the belief of my previous Boss, too. I never did like it. It feels...”

Conflictual scars passed by his eyes. “Diminishing. A life is a life.”

Dazai thought back to his piles over piles of necrologies. “Ango, why did you join the Mafia?”

Few cars crowded the bridge that late in the night — they could have gone faster, but the Archivist *loved* to enjoy the drive. Privately, where he couldn’t be heard, Dazai liked to imagine he was trying to make those lifts of theirs last longer. He watched his fingers tap the steering wheel — eyes squinting at something unreachably, past the old concrete and the framing Bay.

Odasaku and Ango never expected honesty from him. Dazai knew. The Executive position, the bandages, the curve of his grins — he had long since destroyed any possibility of having their trust be based on something more than instinct.

And yet he kept asking. Undeservedly, they kept giving.

“Because I have a mission,” Ango offered, toneless. “And I intend to see it to an end.”

He studied the lights. “How beautiful.”

“Remember when Boss sent me to Europe two years ago?” he insisted. “It was a difficult task. I had to make my way through one of the most hostile organizations I ever —” His knuckles grew pale — painted golden by distant fireworks from the mainland. “It really is a headache, you know?”

“What is?”

“Never being able to forget who the enemy is.”

Dazai traced the fireworks’ pattern on his face, following the blue lines — his favorites. “And does it help?” he asked. “Remembering it?”

“No,” Ango said, curtly. “Not at all.”

He took the hit in silence.

The Archivist didn’t allow it to last. “The Mafia is just like any other place, Dazai,” he said — with an *intensity* that was uncharacteristic; thus, it had to carry the weight of lengthy thinking. Dazai wondered when Ango found the time for it — in the middle of necrologies no one had asked him to write; between sips of a drink while Odasaku spoke of past endeavors. Perhaps in the *peace* he’d found, somewhere — the heart wrenching acceptance that Dazai had never managed to steal.

“I know it’s tempting — to believe *things* are worth something more here. That they *mean* something different. But death is death, and ashes are ashes. Urns are irrelevant — you will die in this place, and you will rot in the ocean. If you yearn for *something*, you’ve got to do it before they burn you,” He held the wheel tighter. “Before they catch you.”

Dazai didn’t quite understand. “But you picked an urn.”

“The Mafia is just like any other place,” the man insisted, as if reciting orders he had long since memorized. “If there are rules, you follow them.”

“Death doesn’t have rules.”

“It does,” Ango glanced at him. “Or you’d be in an urn already, wouldn’t you?”

*The cement is too soft and the river is not deep enough, Dazai could have said. The roofs are too short and the poison is too easy to throw up. Odasaku keeps offering my drinks. You keep driving too slow. Mori said he’d tell me how. Mori said he’d tell me how. Mori said —*

*Slashing his throat, Chuuya had said. The self-assured words of a god in all but blood — the ease of something he’d never dare. Poisoning Elise. Crashing the building on —*

“Beautiful women keep finding excuses not to die,” he sighed, long and deep. “My schedule has been mercilessly maimed.”

Ango didn’t seem to believe him. He never quite did — but where Odasaku never accused, he took glasses of poison out of his hands and rallied against his widest smiles like it *mattered*. “Why did you join the Mafia, Dazai?”

Dazai thought about lying.

“Can’t you just pick my urn?” he whined.

“You know I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He was still drenched to the bone. In the right light, the water drops could have been tears — an unreasonable regret. Dazai couldn’t imagine him crying — couldn’t imagine him raging either.

“Not me,” Ango concluded, very quietly. Dazai got the feeling ashes and urns were the last of his thoughts. “This is not my place at all.”

He cuddled up on his seat, turning to the side. Once the rough fabric of the headrest pressed against his pulsing cheek, he shrugged. “I’d hoped the Mafia wouldn’t be like any other place,” Dazai answered, eventually. *You’ll die here and rot in the ocean.* “That’s why I’m here. That’s all.”

*I know*, he could have said. *I know I will. I don’t know how to care.*

*Hasn’t this gotten boring for you too?*, Mori had questioned.

They kept quiet for the rest of the journey.

“*Mimic?*” Dazai read, through the trailing blood and the tapping rain, easily offering his arm to Kouyou. “That’s a silly name.”

The rose-tinged umbrella she was holding painted the Executive’s frame in gentle shades, like blood disappearing down the drain. The parking lot was empty and devoid of cars — apart from the members of the cleaning squad, busy gathering the mauled corpses they’d been alerted about an hour from midnight. It was pouring — he could barely hear his own voice over the storm, soaking him to the bone with no umbrella.

The blood-graffitied wall was the worst of it, though.

“Demon child, you better not be offering *your* arm to *me*,” Kouyou tutted, eyes forward.

“It’s slippery,” he noted, innocently. “And those long robes of your *will* trip you one day.”

“I don’t trip. You can drop the gentleman act; some of my walls are still stained by the fire you started in my home.”

“Chuuya was there too,” he whined. “You never blame him for this stuff. It’s always, *demon, demon, demon child*. It’s been *years* anyway.”

“I heard you order that kid of yours to set fire to my office during his calligraphy lessons,” she accused, sweetly. “Not only have your ways not changed a bit — you intend to get in the way of a poor kid’s honest attempts?”

He scoffed. “Akutagawa’s no *poor kid*. He’ll be able to have your head in one or two years at *most*. Well,” Dazai scratched his drenched nape. “If he doesn’t cough his lungs out first.”

“Because you’re teaching him, or because he’ll have no choice?”

“Don’t we have something to do?”

Wordlessly, Kouyou raised her arm. Dazai stared at it for a few seconds only, mollified — he hooked his arm to her elbow, and allowed her to lead him to the wall, her umbrella saving him from the rain.

“It is a curious name,” the woman agreed, once they were close enough to study the drying blood pooling down the bricks. The irate rain had already begun to wipe that sole name off the stone, but the message remained — and the unmistakable wounds on the bodies of faceless workers from the borders of Mafia territory. “Possibly a syndicate from Europe. They like their names fancy, there.”



Dazai squinted, kicking the wall with one foot. “Ango mentioned something like that.”

“This is clearly a message for us,” Kouyou surveyed the disappearing vans of the squad — the vanishing blood stains on the concrete. “No other reason to make the victims bite the curb. And the three bullets to the chest, too — too purposeful.”

“A petty attempt to get our attention?”

“Perhaps. They’re not someone I’ve heard about before — maybe they’re taunting the bigger fish to make a name for themselves,” Her blink was as callous as an execution call. “Shall we get rid of them?”

“No,” he concluded, studying the fading *Mimic* signature. He’d have to ask Odasaku if he had ever heard of them. “Not yet. It’d be a waste of resources if they’re nothing to worry about. Ango promises the *Division* is on their tail.”

Kouyou hummed. “Yes, rather — let *them* work, once in a while.”

She tapped her nails on the handle of her umbrella. Her nails, while perfect, were bitten near the ends of the thumbs — a habit Dazai had never seen her put in place, and that he was surprised she would have let anyone see the remains on. Kouyou was hardly around, those days, though — too busy dealing with the Kyouka family, clinging to their own *Demon* with a hunger Dazai wasn’t sure she had realized entirely.

“Was it hard?” he asked.

“What was?” Kouyou blinked.

Some raindrops had seeped through the old wood of her umbrella — they stuck to her eyelids, tinted in rainbow shards when hit by the moon. It made her look oddly young. Dazai hadn’t realized he’d grown taller than her.

“Being stuck here,” he clarified. “After you failed to get out.”

Astonishment hit her like a bullet; the step back she took wouldn’t have been evident to a less keen eye — but Dazai had studied her like he had studied every bundle of flesh in the Mafia; *trying* to understand what of that place had fulfilled them to the point of vitality.

She was quiet in exhaling that surprise out; her arms relaxed under Dazai’s fingers, pulse quick through the fabric he had soaked.

“Mori tells me he brought you to pick your urn,” she started, strangely enough. “I thought you would have been overjoyed.”

“You were ready to stand behind me as the Boss’ understudy.”

“It was Mori’s decision. Of course I was.”

“Is that enough for you?” Dazai insisted, curious and detached. “Standing behind him.”

“I told you once, already,” Kouyou offered, after a pensive hesitation. Her head was tilted back to study the trailing blood; her voice was calm — it was horribly honest. “Where would you have me, if not here? What light would you find for me?” A smile graced her lips; Dazai felt the uncanny desire for it to be more humorless. Her sincerity stuck to his throat, bitter. He knew he couldn’t afford such superiority. “There’s devotion in sacrifice — I wouldn’t waste it.” *Aren’t you?*, he didn’t ask. *Did Kanechi want you here, when he died?* “Of course it’s enough, little demon. And it will be enough for you, too. If not Mori — something will be.”

He scrutinized the wet tips of his shoes. “So that Kanechi of yours was your reason to leave and your reason to stay?”

Her bitten thumb tapped her umbrella. He wondered what her urn looked like. Delicate and pretty, probably — refined to the dot. Just priceless enough to make one forget what rotting inside. *A good reason to find the whole ordeal unnecessary*, he considered. Dazai disliked disguises.

“Yes,” Kouyou mused, a bit taken aback — as if she’d never considered if. He tried to imagine it; cradling a body she had loved enough to risk the Boss’ rage for — counting seconds before the light vanished from his eyes, knowing it was all the time left to decide what the rest of her life would have to be like. “How silly.”

“What is?”

Standing in front of sizzling thunder, Mori was an ink-ghost under a red umbrella. Elise was nowhere to be found, but the plastic bag of sweets hanging from his arm was a giveaway. She had never liked the rain much — in a rare show of kindness, Mori tended not to have her linger when the sky got crowded by clouds.

*Not rare*, he thought. Mori was plenty kind. He would have nailed himself to that pouring sky for the Port Mafia — just not for its people. In place of that honorable sacrifice, he showed them benevolence.

“All of it,” Dazai sing-sang, bored, turning back to wipe the last of a blood drop from the wall. It tore Kouyou’s arm from his grasp; she didn’t try to reach for him again. “None of it? I can’t recall. Mori, you’ve got flour on your face.”

“Do I?” The doctor scrambled to clean his jaw, almost dropping his umbrella. “Elise got mad at me for a senseless request — anyway. Anything I should know about this gift we received?”

“That it’s tasteless?” Kouyou offered. “Not that I’m surprised. God knows what Chuuya finds so fascinating about Europe.”

“Might be in his blood,” Mori commented.

She hid a smile, not exactly pleased.

Dazai thought of the *Ivy Dungeons* — the secret Executive who had yet to leave them. There was much to consider about the ease with which they had always kept that secret — he found

he didn't quite have the mind to consider it himself.

Still — it sat weirdly across his shoulders.

*Chuuya will know*, he thought. *Chuuya will rage*. Rinse and repeat. It sounded incorrect.

"You better not forget your promise," the woman was insisting, behind the screen of Dazai thoughts. He stuck a hand out, tasting the rain. "I cannot keep dropping unsubtle hints. We are both well aware he should have been made Executive *long* ago —"

"Only one of his many *short* comings," Dazai noted. "*Ha*. Get it? Because he's short —"

"And he will be made one," Mori pacified her, ignoring him completely.

"When you stop sending him off, maybe."

"Please, don't do that," Dazai begged. "Let *me* send him to Antarctica. The bears will teach him all about actual style."

Mori tutted: "He *asked* for this, Ozaki."

"He asked for an excuse," Kouyou replied. "You should know better than to give it to him, by now. He's been away so long we haven't received public damage complaints in *eons*. Hirotsu hasn't even been checking the ceiling to verify if he's up there to scare him —"

"I do miss his pricey wine bottles," the man admitted, longingly. "Always such a treat."

"Even *Double Black* keeps being referred to as some street myth —"

Dazai stepped away from her umbrella.

"You'll get sick," Mori warned — watching him reach out with his shoe to rub some blood left by one of the corpses. "The busy season is about to start. We can't have you coughing on reports."

"I don't write reports," he replied. "And in any case, I've finally convinced Tanaki to try that wig I stole from the *Pomegranate* —"

"*Excuse me?*"

" — she can refine her — frankly offensive — imitation of me and take part in the meetings in my stead," he concluded. "She gets more power, I get more naps, you don't have to look at my pretty face. All is well what ends well."

Kouyou snorted. "That would be a sight."

"She would certainly direct this show much better than I'll ever be able to," Mori commented, frowningly glancing at the mostly faded *MIMIC* graffiti. "I did always wonder why the old Boss left her in that flimsy position."

“Why didn’t *you* promote her?”

He shrugged. “She’s always refused.”

It wasn’t shocking. Dazai couldn’t see her in any spot that didn’t bear secretary notes and a ringing phone — welcoming recruits in from the rain and unhooking the revolver under her desk at the mere sight of blood behind the glass doors she guarded. *There’s no better view*, she’s told him, eons ago; and — *we are all moved by something*.

“I suppose some people want nothing but peace after their tribulations,” Kouyou sighed. “I was always very curious about those scars of hers.”

“Perhaps a wild raccoon,” Dazai offered.

“I’m afraid Madame Tanaki is as mysterious as she is graceful,” Mori intervened. “Not even the archives from the old regime have much on her.”

The Executive scoffed. “I’m not surprised she would try to bury it behind her. What with her family —”

“Her absent children, you mean?”

“Not quite,” she replied. “Her sister.”

Crouched down to continue scrubbing at the blood — nails wet and too short to manage; cursed by the doctor’s insistence on *cleanness, in all things* — Dazai missed the candid fragment of the lighting striking the ground. The thunder was loud and earth-rattling, though — it did not, still, muffle the notable creak of Mori’s spine as it stood a tad too straight.

“Sister?” he questioned, vaguely.

“She recounted some of it for us at the *villa*,” Kouyou explained, blind to his tone. “That one summer you couldn’t come, remember? You had that business meeting in Tokyo. You missed out on Virgil’s cooking abilities,” Something a tad sad colored her tone. “I truly do miss that lad.”

Dazai didn’t move. “And what did she tell you about her?” Mori insisted, studying the wall — now spotless; now naked.

“Apparently her sister used to be part of a fallen, disgraceful syndicate — they didn’t trust her one bit. Used to chain her in her workroom, if I remember correctly,” The woman shrugged, her smile filled with the same cruelty she reserved for the victims in her dungeons. “The syndicate was destroyed, and its dying members blamed her for her survival. She was caught by the *Division*, given her Ability, and...” Kouyou frowned. “I can’t really recall the rest of it. Demon child, did she tell us the rest?”

*Tanaki and I go way back*, Fumiko Enchi had promised, all smiles. The *Nine Rings* had given her the punishment of a traitor — but they hadn’t turned her into a *Soul*, no matter the attack.

“No,” Dazai said. The concrete had no more blood for him to rub off; he kept at it, just to fail to meet Mori’s gaze. “Not really.”

The Executive clicked her tongue. “All the same — I can only imagine how the old Boss felt about the possible conflict of interest. It makes sense that she would hide as much of her history as possible. Executions back then were —” A frown. “Well. Tanaki would have been killed on the mere ground of suspicion. Not even having an Ability would have saved her.”

He sat on the ground. Odasaku would have nudged his side — he was always suspicious of Dazai’s quieter moments. “What is it, by the way?”

Thunder rattled the air some more. From the careless, gossiping thing it had been, Kouyou’s grin sculpted itself into something smaller.

“I,” She blinked. “I’m not sure, actually. Do you know, Boss?”

There was nowhere to look. Mori was still a line of black and a shock of red; his eyes were still on the faded graffiti. He never seemed to feel in any particular way about discoveries — perhaps he was too committed to having all his dancing monkeys believe there wasn’t a piece of the world he hadn’t long since performed an autopsy on.

*The unknown is still learnable*, he’d sworn, once, over a gaping wound on Dazai’s leg. *A mere promise isn’t a lie. Why let anybody know?*

*How would you escape?*, Dazai had asked her.

That prolonged silence managed to tense even Kouyou’s shoulder. “Boss,” she insisted, a tad *too* insistent. “You do know Tanaki’s Ability, yes?”

“A communicating kind,” he offered, after a prolonged silence that had the woman’s chest rise and fall somewhat hastily. “Dormient, though. As far as I know, she hasn’t used it since she was young — after a traumatic accident.”

“Her sister’s death,” Kouyou insisted. “She didn’t tell us if she died, but — it must have been that. Yes?” She cleared her throat. “Obviously.”

*The tattoo maker*, Dazai recalled saying, as the doctor talked of moles and years old spies. The urns around them hadn’t whispered a thing — not even the dead were pious enough. *The half moon of Ueda Akinari’s Ability* — how she’d been the only one on site when Chuuya had defeated him; how she had *held* onto him, when the User had cursed him to one last vision. How she had said goodbye to every single one of Kajii’s subordinates, before they had been massacred. How she held Kouyou’s hands whenever the Executive sat with her.

How she had let Dazai draw on her shoes, when he huddled underneath his desk. *Truly*, she had tutted, only once. *When will you grow up?*

[“It’s alright,” she’d replied, eyes on the screen. Dazai and Chuuya had camped under her desk for days — apologizing for a ruined wedding and what else she hadn’t vocalized. *Sealing the coffin shut, maybe. “It will not matter anymore, soon.”*]

“As far as I know, Ozaki,” Mori corrected, belatedly, eyes set on him — like a second thought; like underground tunnels and bank accounts, and whatever else would be left on Dazai’s shoulders like a coat and a honor and a *reason* to breathe some more, “I’m afraid Tanaki never had a sister, either.”

## Chapter End Notes

dazai, depressed: angou why did you even join the mafia

angou, on the verge of tears: oh yknow

and here is the start of the end! i am more than drowning in work and exams right now, but i will take your guys’ hatred and tomatoes for the first plot twist i ever planned (planned from chapter one, btw, and here we go with the re-reading value only i shall care about) for this story! mrs tanaki, mole extraordinaire!

i am sorry.

anyway! we will talk more about it in the next chapters. i do have to run. thank you so so much for reading, and thank you all for all the love to this fic!! have a wonderful week <333

see you soon!!

# I

## Chapter Notes

...well hello there!

yes i disappeared. yes i am terribly apologetic. yes we did lose like seven people at my job in two days cause apparently they suddenly got a more convenient offer + three of my uni exams got moved up three weeks sooner than they should have been. all of it is irrelevant. my apologies aren't, on the other end <3

the good news are — this fic will 90% be done by the end of july. the bad news is, i can't give any guarantee about the posting days. this will be a journey we shall discover together etc etc. hope you guys won't mind too much!! hell has fallen upon me.

anyway! see you at the end <333

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xxxii.*

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*Case number: 73837372*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were separately dealing with [...]*

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There were seven thousand, four hundred and seventy-five files in the Port Mafia database — detailing every single crime associated with every single one of its members.

The lowest of the dogs, the richest of the kings — the smaller piece of trash thrown on the street, abandoned to merciless jobs and pictures the police actually *managed* to gather; the steadiest bomb tied to a screaming mother in the middle of a train wagon, promising power where most could only swear off their sweat, blood, and tears. All of it, in codes. Dazai knew them all.

He knew his own very well, too.

*Make sure the other prisoners don't get too loud*, he'd ordered, distractedly, to the guard at the end of the dungeons' stairs. *With that small voice she's always had, I might just not hear her.*

The woman had nodded, quiet. Most of the syndicate had been silent, in the past two weeks — ever since that meeting in the alley.

*Truly*, Mori had sighed. *And here I'd hoped we would cut back on the meetings, at last.*

The phone was slippery from the blood on his hands. “Hey,” he started, sitting on the ground by the furthest wall of the dungeons. Steps away, was the wooden chair where the passed out traitor rested. Dazai insisted: “Since Ango said no, would you mind picking my urn for me?”

If asked, Dazai would have proven that Odasaku had a very specific breathing pattern — a gently whistling, somewhat gaping type of inhale, and an exhale that always took too long to come out. He fiddled with the slug phone charm as he listened to that sound — shrouded by statics and Tanaki's harsh breathing — and waited.

*“I think you should do that,”* his friend let him know, after a bit.

“I don't think it matters,” Dazai insisted. A strange ache seeped through the muscles of his jaw — a sleeping muscle. He hadn't worn expressions in more than a week. “It's not like I'll be here to see it. It's for you guys' benefit.”

Odasaku hummed, as if conceding.

Suddenly and senselessly, he wished for the man not to tell him if he had picked his own — if he had ever looked far away enough in the future to see his own corpse. Dazai hoped not. He hoped to never see anything close to it.

A hiss of clothes — as if he had stood up. *“Are you by the riverbank?”*



“*Mmh?* Oh, no. It’s not the river,” Dazai reached out with one leg, uncurling it from where he had huddled up — he kicked one of the metal boxes connected to the pipes. “Ventilation system. The dungeons smell so awful, sometimes.”

Another hum. “*Is your prisoner wilful?*”

“Traitors can’t be clever, Odasaku,” he let him know, studying the delicate, hysterical twitch of Tanaki’s bloodied fingers. “Just stubborn.”

“*That’s what you’re here for.*”

“Is it?” The idea amused him. “Am I?”

Odasaku’s intake of breath was familiar as a wound. Dazai could feel him knocking, at times — scrubbing blood and decay off whatever wall he’d never consciously put up; reaching him, almost. He never dared. Respect or hesitation or any other hypnotizing hymn that got men’s eyes on him.

*That’s mean*, he let himself think. *That’s mean, and he’s my friend.*

“*What else would you be?*” he asked.

Dazai shrugged. The woman’s blood had reached his elbows. He couldn’t remember what corner of the dungeon he had left his coat in. The blood kept making the phone drop from his grasp. “Ashes in an urn?”

“*You need an urn for that to happen.*”

“With you at Bar Lupin, then.”

He seemed somewhat intrigued by the idea. “*‘You think the barkeep will pick one for you?’*”

“Someone has to,” he whined. “And I’m his favorite, for sure.”

On the chair, Tanaki let out a whimper.

“*I heard about it,*” Odasaku said. He hardly ever needed words to make Dazai understand — there was a frequency to his voice that bloomed across the questioning corners of his mind. *There was a life, somewhere*, he recalled telling him. They would have to talk about it in length, one day. “*I’m sorry it was her.*”

Dazai blinked, very slow.

*There’s always an after*, Hirotsu had once told him, in front of rain-wet body bags. He never lingered next to corpses the way Chuuya did; there was always *something* behind his monocle, nonetheless. *Is it not comforting?*

No one had said Tanaki’s name out loud in two weeks. Modi had shattered her picture in the Hallway himself.

“I have to go,” Dazai said, apologetic. “You know how Boss is. If he asked for more of my time, I’d live in his coat pocket and eat dust particles.”

*“That would be a shame,”* Odasaku swore, because he was kind and merciless and good, and Dazai wanted to keep him more than anything else. *“I can help you pick an urn, if you want.”*

“But you won’t pick it for me?”

“No.”

The finality — unperturbed and unknowable — morphed the quietness into one of the few, few moments, where Dazai truly felt that Odasaku was older than he’d ever be.

“Hey,” he echoed. “I don’t really care — but could you forgive me for this?”

Curiosity tilted his friend’s tone. *“What for, if you don’t care?”*

*A rat’s letters, he could have offered. A last resort. Maybe it’s God’s fault, if not mine. Maybe it’s no one’s fault, and there’s always an after. I cared for her and there’s always an after.*

“Just to say I scratched it off the list.”

Gracefully, Odasaku did.

Madame Tanaki was a bundle of flesh.

It was hardly a new sight — Dazai had long since experimented his own prowess at turning the living into something that did not want to live. A weaving of cartilage stood where her satin-shirt had once been, trailing blood across her arms like some tridimensional veins. Her eyes were black, sunk in, with fluttering eyelids — the blood stuck to her hair had been there since Dazai had first seen her captured body in the alley.

*She came with us so very trustfully,* Kouyou had commented, like nothing more than weather-chat. *I do wonder if she made a mistake, too.*

*In trusting us?*, he hadn’t asked.

Dazai flicked her forehead. “You could have spared me this bother, Tanaki,” he sighed. “You of all people know how packed my schedule is.”

Her lower lip was shattered. When she tried to speak, mouth framed by the hot metal burns, it was a mere whisper: “Dazai, *please*.”

“You know, your files in the Port Mafia’s database are *so* exceedingly lacking — I’m surprised no one ever pointed it out,” he continued, fiddling with his gun. “You’re lucky Ango’s so busy. You’re even luckier the *Nine Rings Conflict* had us carry so much pity for you,” Dazai raised the gun, and aimed for the closest of her bound hands. “I’m very surprised, by the way. I’d have thought you would have torn them apart for what they did to your baby.”

He shot. Her scream was more of an animal whine than anything; her vocal chords were far too damaged, and her chest oozed blood at a breath.

“I — wanted to,” Tanaki wheezed. She had been hallucinating for a while; sometimes, when he was too far, she called him *dear*. “The *Division* wouldn’t let me. I begged them. You — the Mafia showed me more courtesy than they ever did.”

“You mean they would have killed you.”

“I —“

“*Everything for our organization, blah, blah, blah,*” Dazai recited, bored. “I do pray you don’t expect me to let you go on that basis. I have not an *ounce* of the loyalty you pretended to have, and I would have died for much less,” He smiled. “Though I might be a bad example.”

“Dazai,” she whispered. “I *tried*.”

“You failed. *Bang!*” He didn’t shoot at all, but the expectation had her so startled, her jump ripped a piece of middle finger hanging from her wounded hand. “*Shh*, calm down,” Panic threw her features in a whirlwind; he tutted: “*Shh. Shh*. It’s alright. Promise. I was wondering, though — were you really *that* mad about the wedding cake ending up on the floor? I’d like to know if I’m missing something.”

Tanaki shut her lips, shaking.

He tickled her chin with the gun — did his best too, attempting to stay still under the rattling muscles. “Come on,” he drawled. “You’ve already told me so much of everything you let the *Division* know. Let’s get it all out.”

Her eyes were veiled with tears. Dazai had a schedule to follow — huffing, he reached for the metal brand on the tool table.

“It wasn’t —“ she coughed, desperately. “It wasn’t — there was no hidden plan.”

A bit disappointed, he tilted his head. “But you were just so heartbroken.”

Tanaki gulped. It was an ugly sight — a criss cross of bleeding flesh, oozing pus and sweat between trembling shoulders. Her lips, chapped to the point of a yellowish color, barely hung on the words falling from them. “Remember the *villa*?” she said — less than a whisper, offered with a pair of frightened, bloodshot eyes. “Remember the — *syndicates, organizations,*” she recited, and he tasted marshmallows and the bonier parts of Chuuya’s shoulder. “*Calling them crueler than whatever the Division is makes little sense.*”

“Is this that *post-mortem* phase where your brain starts relieving your entire life?” Dazai asked, obnoxiously interested. “Seven minutes, I believe? I didn’t think I’d killed you already. I’m usually much better at this.”

“You won’t believe me,” Tanaki murmured. The sobs stuck in her throat turned her syllables into something barely understandable; a flutter of nothings and everything. “I’ve been here

for *decades*, Dazai. This is my home — more than the *Nine Rings* or the *Division* have ever been. These tattoos —“ She nodded towards the mess of her arms. Dazai had carved out those inked drawings he’d never understood first; he had asked her to tell him what they represented as he did. It had all been very anticlimactic. *Just memoirs*. “I would have torn them out of myself years ago.”

“And?”

“And then I saw it,” Her heart broke on those words — the cry of a child. “I saw it, the way I’d seen it in both those places. It’s all about blood, and about massacres, and about *death*,” Tanaki laughed, a bit deliriously. “You think I care about a *fucking wedding*? I care that I’m trapped — that it’s blood and massacres and *death*, and that it will be until I die.”

“Which will be soon,” Dazai informed, not very impressed. He tilted his head. “We switched up your invitation list, Tanaki, dear. We didn’t cage you in a lifetime of espionage. *We*,” He tapped the scorching hot edge of the branding stick on the side of her arm, making her cry out, “Did *not* take your child. I’d tell you to be more grateful, but you know how I am,” He shrugged. “I don’t much care for the Mafia’s hurt honor.”

“And yet you do this,” she spat. “For *it*.”

“Yes,” He leaned down, pulling the tips of her blood-soaked hair. “I memorize boring data and I build boring tunnels and I torture boring traitors — and I do in the name of something I do not care for. Who did you do it for?”

She stared at him, bubbling rage choking the shattered veins in her eyes. “Myself,” she said, at last. It seemed she hadn’t realized it either. “You cannot fault me for it.”

Dazai couldn’t. For a moment — boredom or lingering fondness; perhaps the urge to make Mori as mad as a man who had it all, *almost*, could be — he thought he’d forgive her. But it sounded just as aggravating — it felt just as *nothing-like* on his bones; ersatz rebellion for a rat in a maze. The bad men in coats wouldn’t care either way. *He* had no way of caring either way.

*Mori would be proud*, he mused. It was just enough to have the thing in his chest beat. Tanaki looked at him, and Dazai *wanted* —

“With Ueda,” he questioned, leaning on the branding stick like a cane. “Why did you pick Chuuya and Kouyou, specifically?”

She licked her lips. “They told me to pick an Executive. The *Nine Rings’ Conflict* proved to me she had her own inferno to deal with.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Some more than others.”

“And Chuuya?”

“He,” Sincere, poignant ache tightened her ruined traits. She looked at him as if betrayed — as if she couldn’t believe he was making her say it out loud. “He is — Dazai. Who else is like him?”

He thought about it. “Haunted?”

“Unstoppable,” Her exhale was bitter. “So utterly, *frustratingly* — do you know what they did to me for my inability to get him to them?”

“I don’t care,” Dazai encouraged.

But it didn’t seem like she was listening to him any longer. “*Something* was bound to put an end to him,” she muttered, somewhat hysterical. A trail of drool and whitish foam had started to make its way from the side of her mouth; Dazai watched her twitch with dismay. “If not weapons, then his own mind. I told them — I swore to them, *this will work. This has to work. And then you’ll let me go.*”

“To live in the Mafia in peace?” he asked, a bit tauntingly. “To hide what you’d done until we buried you in the ocean?”

“ — *and then you’ll let me go,*” she insisted. Her eyes were a thousand miles away; crimson fell from her lips in sticky coagulations, landing on her lap and on Dazai’s shoes. “There has to be a way to stop him. Even gods — even *experiments* —”

Dazai struck her so hard her neck creaked with the motion, shattering the sharper edge of the wooden backrest.

“How boring,” he sing-sang, sizzling to the gums of his teeth. “Boring, boring, boring. Don’t be boring, now. With all those Cemetery visits — with all the guilt he has in his heart for this miserable sack of traitorous bones you’ve turned out to be,” He clicked his tongue, offering her his widest smile. “Don’t be boring.”

“I didn’t ask for his guilt,” she swore.

“No,” he concurred. “You just used it.”

“And you *haven’t*?”

“Don’t compare us,” he warned, amicably, tapping her lips. The skin cracked under his touch — he kept at it, smiling a mocking smile. “This is no *Spider Eyes* debate. Do you see popcorn? That desk of yours, maybe? I haven’t blinded you yet. I’m quite sure. All I see is blood, and your own admission to having pulled my dog by a leash that wasn’t yours to even *think about*,” He lowered his voice, dramatic. “And that’s the least of it. You can call me as cruel as you want, but *I* am no traitor.”

Her pupils widened. She watched the tip of the branding iron with a distant sort of distaste.

“Dazai,” she whispered, vacantly. “Dazai — what could I have done?”

*Nothing*, he answered, rationally. It wasn't an answer Mori would have taken — it was just shatteringly endless enough to make Dazai's heart beat. He felt sorry for her. He felt angry. He felt betrayed. There was nothing to feel. There was nothing either of them could have done.

"I don't know," he offered her.

She breathed out.

He put his hands on her backrest; caged her between his arms, and mourned, a bit distantly, the *Spider Eyes* finale he'd never watch. "But you'll have your wish. You'll rest with the Port Mafia for eternity," Slowly, he nodded towards the darkened entrance to the dungeons. *You do not care*, Mori had told him, easily, before sending him there. *Why would you?* "You do know what we do to traitors, do you not?"

Her eyes popped out of her skull.

She screamed until the sun came back.

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Odasaku was bleeding.

"Inconvenient," Dazai observed, face deep into his pill cabinet, diligently stealing every muscle relaxant he could find. The lights of the man's bathroom were funerary. The old and well-loved stream of sunrise was hidden behind blinds. It smelled of toothpaste — and Odasaku was bleeding.

Childproof lids were always a bother. They took eons to uncap, and Odasaku was bleeding on his ratty, creaking couch.

"I'd say," the man agreed. He was stitching himself up, the hem of his dress shirt held between his teeth — his voice came out as something that would have made his children laugh. It seemed only human to chuckle. Dazai didn't. "I've emptied out most of the bottles. And no more poison."

Dazai blinked, very slowly, leaning into the doorframe. Their shoes were at the entrance; the leftover curry from Pops on the table; Odasaku's blood, a trail on the floor.

"I wouldn't kill myself in your home, Odasaku," And then, "You're bleeding."

A half-bothered glance was directed to the stained ground. “That I am.”

Dazai sat on the ground. He crossed his legs, chin on his hands to study the layers of burned skin under the man’s third rib — the crisscross of tendons, the yielding lines of sick red and slick black, the flashes of viscera.

“I’ve hardly ever seen you bleed before,” he added, because it felt necessary. Ango was always encouraging him to use his rivers of words for something *useful*. Dazai had shot a bullet through his hand, almost, months ago — and the blood had been less dirty, because he’d *known* where it had come from.

“*Flawless* notified me that I would be shot,” Odasaku said. “I had to pick between a bullet and possibly breaking my whole body with a jump out of the window. Seemed easy,” He stitched another dot. “I already broke my body once.”

“Did you?” He perked up.

“Two times. Well, one was an *almost*,” He nodded, graceful in that brutish way of his, lowlife wearing pearls. Dazai knew better than to linger on the healed. He knew better than to linger. “Fought with this extraordinary swordsman who had a mean punch. The ricochet almost crashed me against a wall.”

He sighed, exasperated over spilled anecdotes. “Where did you even meet a swordsman?”

“At a Labour Licences office,” Odasaku blinked. “Him and this strange kid were dealing with some shady theatrical business, I believe. I’ve never fought someone so vicious. But he did get me curry during my short time in prison.”

Dazai stared at him. “Tell me more.”

“I have to stitch myself up *and* tell you a story?”

“I offered to stitch you up,” he huffed.

His eyebrows brushed his hairline. He wasn’t bleeding anymore; the smell of it was stuck in the buzzing lights. “After devouring all the chocolate in my house with your naked hands?”

“I would have *washed them*.”

He talked, and he stitched. Dazai sat on the floor and said wrong things at all the right times, and rejoiced quietly, so as not to inconvenience. *I have scars too*, he didn’t say, because the man knew, *I have scars too, and however you prod, however you ask, however you stitch, they never feel like flesh*.

But good men were often merciful, and Odasaku did not question that carcass he dragged around — and one day he would thank him for it; would explain the weight of the knowledge of being *wanted*, even without the unavoidable path through a maze of reasons why his presence would be more than convenient.

Strategy — all of him, always.

“What does it feel like, anyway?” he asked, once the needles had been abandoned.

Odasaku blinked at the cards on the floor between them. “What does *what* feel like?”

He nodded towards his unbuttoned shirt; the third rib he could not see. “Being hit so close to the heart.”

A shrug. “It kind of hurt.”

“Yes,” Dazai insisted, “But *how*?”

“Does everything have to feel like something else?”

*Oh*, he thought.

“Anyway,” Dazai said, helplessly, “I think you should attempt not to get bullets in you.”

The man flipped a card. “Better a bullet than a life.”

“Valuing your own life will get you killed. By getting yourself killed, you will *not* be valuing your life,” He tilted his head to the side. “Isn’t it sort of a contrary?”

He snorted.

Dazai’s lips parted, baffled. “What could you ever be laughing at?”

“It’s just,” Odasaku’s mouth trembled. “It’s just sort of funny. To hear *you* say that.”

Silence rippled through the room, gentle and quiet. A drawing on the wall; a trail of blood on the floor. *There was a moment*, the man had said, telling a tale of his swordsman and his detective, *where I almost envied the lengths that devil was ready to go to for a foolish child putting himself in trouble.*

*Did you wish for him to take you, too?*

*No.* Bewilderment, genuine and tranquil. A man who had seen it all. Whatever his book ended up being about, Dazai knew he would read it — and maybe he would *understand*, at last.

*No*, Odasaku has said. *Why would I have done that?*

Laughter wrecked his chest. He shook with it, vibrant as the sun. “That’s funny,” he breathed, rattled to the bone, and the other man’s lips trembled along. “That’s funny, Odasaku, that’s so —“



*“Listen here, asshole,” the rough, male voice on the phone spat, at 3:00 A.M. “You tell us what the fuck happened to our goods, and we don’t snap your Boss’ neck. ‘Deal clear?’”*

Unimpressed, Dazai moved the device away from his ear, blinking at the blinding bluish light of the screen — reflecting gently on the walls of the shipping container. The bed creaked under his shifting weight, as he laid on his back with a sigh. He hadn’t been sleeping — but the *almost* slumber had been infinitely softer than that horridly accented Japanese.

“Wrong number,” he offered.

Then he shut the call.

It took the caller a few stunned seconds to call again. *“Listen here!”* the man snapped. He had to be British, he guessed — but he’d been speaking Dazai’s mother tongue since he was young, most probably. *“Don’t ya play any games with me right now. Your Boss spilled all the fucking beans. You’re that — Mackerel, yes? ‘Thought you cunts could fool us with your codenames? We’ve got your leader tied up in a chair like the fucking —”*

Dazai stared at the screen a second time. He shut the call again.

The caller called again.

*“Seriously?”* Chuuya’s unmistakably irate tone almost rattled the phone. It was clearly a good distance from the speaker — his disgust took no hit whatsoever from it, though. *“That’s who you guys called? You manage to take an alleged Mafia Boss’ phone and the first person you contact is his one blocked contact? I’ve got a guy called “Money Macker” on there! Did your mothers feed you crack from their tits?”*

The sound of a punch ricocheted.

“Chuuya, you need to see a professional,” Dazai chirped, rubbing his forehead. “Obsessing over me like this cannot be healthy.”

*“Who’s obsessed, shitface? They called you, not me!”*

“But I’m the only number you’ve blocked,” he whined. “That *clearly* means you think about me all the time, so you had to take measures.”

His gasp was offended, framed by the wood of a chair being rattled. *“That means shit! I just wanted you to stop calling me in the middle of your torture sessions, like the freak you are!”*

“Oh, is someone squeamish?”

*“I’ll squeam you, bitch —“*

Dazai’s left eye ticked, aggravated. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

*“I don’t care,”* he spat, very honestly. *“And by the way — I saw that Chuuya’s A Sore Loser newsletter update, and let me tell you —“*

He perked up. “Did you like it? It took me so long to find all those —“

*“What — no, moron, I didn’t fucking like it? Where the hell did you even find so many pictures of me sneezing, you bandaged weirdo —“*

An uncanny, rust-lined sound echoed all the way to the speakerphone — the wet squelch of skin being punched, and wood creaking under the weight of a tied up victim. Background voices in an irritated tone fired British slang too fast for him to catch; the echo told him Chuuya was probably in the basement of some freight ship.

Bored, Dazai shifted on his stomach. “Can I hang up?” he asked, petulantly. “It’s 4:00 A.M. I have *so much* to do — all of it much better than listening to a Chibi’s tortured screams —“

Some rustle; some curses. *“Who the fuck is screaming?”* Chuuya snapped.

“That’s what she said.”

*“What? What? That doesn’t make any —“*

“Chuuya wouldn’t know.”

*“And you would? Your last date blew up your car after making you believe she wasn’t a stalker —“*

Irked, he muttered: “Not my fault if Mimi lied about being up for a double suicide —“

*“She was fucking with you!”*

“She looked suicidal to *me!*”

Another *smack!* — this time, more similar to the crunch of a skull against a metal wall. *“Are you two quite done?”* the British criminal snapped, sporting a tone Dazai was awfully familiar to. The mixture of disbelief and headache colored his next words. *“We’re not here to fucking chat. We’ve got a gun to your Boss’ head, you wanker. You —“*

“Shoot him,” Dazai begged. “Make it hurt. He has this old scar on his left clavicle —“

*“Kill yourself!”*

“Oh, *now*, you want Mimi’s bomb to —“

*“Button it!”* the criminal snarled. *“Put a god forsaken sock in it, and shut up!”*

They fell quiet.

Autumn winds knocked ghostly against the walls of the shipping container, rattling it with the delicacy of a haunted house. Dazai had the good grace of muffling hilarity in his pillow — the snort out of Chuuya’s mouth, though, was so *disrespectfully* loud it shook the phone against his ear.

“*Button it?*” he spelled out. The image of his trembling lips was too clear in front of Dazai’s eyes. “*Put a sock in it? ‘You gonna tell me to hush next? Button it? Seriously?’*”

He tutted: “Slugs should appreciate foreign cultures more.”

“*Yeah, but ‘button it?’ Button what?*”

“The sock thing is awfully visual, though.”

“*That’s just ‘cause you keep marathoning cartoons with Elise —*”

“Hirotsu put a sock in my mouth, once,” Dazai reminisced, turning on his side, ignoring him. “During a nightly shootout. He swears it was a mistake, but he always gets this weirdly sadistic look when we talk about it —”

“*My only astonishment lies in how allegedly no one had done this to you before him.*”

“You think you’re so clever.”

“*And you think that shithole doesn’t deserve a sock to stuff it —*”

“A sock to *button it*, you mean —”

“*That’s not how it fucking goes —*”

“*Fucking hell,*” the criminal shouted, over the wrenching shrill of another punch. Distantly, Dazai could have sworn he heard something *beep*, calm and unhurried. “*Can you two just —*”

The explosion didn’t tear a scream out of Chuuya’s mouth — it did somewhat end the call, though; turning it into a disorienting symphony of white noises and weird whistling noises.

Miraculously, it didn’t disconnect. It took long, boring seconds Dazai spent rubbing off Tanaki’s blood from under his nails — wondering, with the murmuring ache of a the fever he’d felt since the *Mimic*’s graffiti, if there existed a childish way of saying, *she wanted you as dead as the Sheep and more* — until the hiss of a hand picking the phone from the ground filled the shell of his ear.

Uncoordinated, half-muffled voices crossed each other through the speaker — “*UNHAND —*” and “*Do not start that again, I’m warning —*” and “*— give me back the —*”, and, “*— only wish to —*”, and a choking screech that was unmistakably one of Chuuya’s attempts at escaping a headlock.

“*Mister Bastard!*” Oddly impossible not to recognize, Adam Frankenstein’s blankest tone was a bell in his sleepless body, enthusiastic in its clearly mechanical tilt. “*It is such a*

*pleasure to hear from you again! The vitals and critical data I gathered during our only meeting assured me you would either thrive until the age of eighty-seven, or die by the next July. I am glad to attest you —*“

“*Eighty-seven?*” Dazai cried out. “Sir, Adam, that is *far* too long! You need to recheck your data immediately. You must have made a mistake.”

*“I’m awfully sorry. I’m afraid I would need to be in your physical presence for that to happen,”* He didn’t sound sorry at all, but every note of his tone was clearly meant to emulate something akin to it. *“Do not worry, though. Master Chuuya talks about you all the time —*“

A shriek. *“No, I fucking don’t!”*

Puzzled, Adam insisted: *“But my recordings can testify that —*“

*“I insult him! That’s not what —*“

“I’m well aware, my tin can friend,” Dazai sighed. “It’s a dreadful condition —“

*“You’re a dreadful condition —!”*“

“— what’s with *Mister Bastard*, anyway?”

*“Master Chuuya had me change some of my communication settings,”* Adam offered, appearing untouched by whatever war Chuuya was raging against him — or by the rescuing operation he had put in place, probably afore planned. *“Ability User Dazai Osamu has been listed with over thirty seven appellatives. Would you like to pick your own?”*

Dazai hummed. “And I *can* change it?”

*“You need to ask, first.”*

Feeling skeptical, he dared: “Dazai would be fine.”

Something screeching robotic filled his ear. “*Error,*” Adam recited. *“Only Master Chuuya can access my database. The rank cannot be —*“

*“Ha!”* Chuuya barked. *“Take that!”*

His unbridled laughter seemed to confuse the android detective quite a bit. Dazai zoned off through whatever inquisitive, stiffen questions he could hear him poke Chuuya with, focusing on the echo of his unconcerned hilarity. There was no need to put the phone on speaker — the dead silence of the shipping container welcomed the statics with open arms, filling a haunted house with something too alive to fit in.

Breeze seeped in. Dazai huddled under his blankets, staring at some indefinite spot of the wall — *thirteen panels*, he recalled, not sleepy at all — and stole sounds with ungrateful ears. Chuuya had always liked *out-of-border* missions, anyway.

*As if you’re not like me?*, he’d scoffed, once.

*I'm not*, Dazai hadn't put out his tongue and mocked. Sometimes, he wasn't sure if he had grown too talented at pretending not to care — if it had seeped, and stuck to his ribs like innermost Stockholm syndrome. *I never leave without saying goodbye.*

“Hey,” An indefinite eternity later — limbs still wide awake and Tanaki's blood still where he had left it — Chuuya's breathless voice appeared, much closer than before. He seemed surprised; his gasping inhales filled his mind rhythmically, softer than the low murmur he adapted them to. “You still here? Fell asleep?”

Dazai considered pretending. There was an ache in his fingers that was all from disuse; a tired hum in his bones that wanted him to beg.

*For what?*, he questioned. His body had never offered him any kindness; like a child, he was still cursed by a longing to attempt. *What have you not lost, after wanting it enough to ask for it?*

“Chibi ants are crawling all over my roof,” he lamented, eventually, just quiet enough to hold the stillness by the ripped edges. “They're loud and aggravating. As if I could sleep.”

Chuuya huffed. “*Hello, there.*”

His chest burned so viciously it almost tore a breath out of him. *A fluke*, he considered. There wasn't any space left between his lungs for warmth. *For the Arcade, maybe*, his body dared to answer him. *For the one thing that could kill you, Mori or not.*

“Hello,” he conceded, nonetheless.

It buzzed awkwardly. Dazai could count their actual greetings on the fingers of one hand, three years down the line. There had never been any need to introduce the well-known — *hello*, he could have said, pointlessly, whenever they collided in some public space they'd have to pour money in to rebuild. *Hello. Hello. Haven't I waited for you enough?*

“*Is everything alright, home?*” Eventually, Chuuya took the matter in his own hands.

There was a rumble behind his words that had to be a car; he kept his tone hushed, as if wary of curious listeners — not enemies, but outsiders to their bubble all the same. He knew he had been dragging Shirase around — pretending it was the other way around.

*Fool*, he thought, blankly. Dazai tended to linger, and Chuuya never let go at all.

“Elise's still annoying,” he offered. “Ane-san is still torturing Fumiko Enchi. My Akutagawa is still waving *Rashomon* around like a bat. No open conflict, other than *The Catfish* — and you're not here. It's all wonderfully pleasant.”

“*I'm sure.*”

“You should be.”

“*And Boss?*” Chuuya insisted, strangely.

Dazai pulled a loose thread from his pillow, studying the weaving of the cheap fabric. “What about him? As boring as ever. He did tell me to tell you to never return —“

*“I just thought,”* the boy interrupted, with *something* in his tone he couldn’t place, *“After — that thing you asked, the — you know. That maybe something —“*

*That thing,* Dazai traced. “How shy of you. You seemed ready to discuss poisoning effects —“

His voice hardened. *“Don’t start.”*

“What do you think will happen if I *don’t start?*” he mimicked. “Want to sing me a lullaby so I can sleep? Videocall until dawn?”

Chuuya’s teeth gritted audibly. *“I told you. It was the morons who called you. Not me.”*

*But you’re still talking,* Dazai wanted to say. Point his finger and whine, kicking his feet like the child he had never been. It always got enemies to lower their guards, and it always got the victims in the dungeons to make a *face*. They never expected young hands to hurt. They never expected him not to care at all. *But you’re still calling. It’s not just me. Haven’t you waited for me too?*

*“One of them mentioned Double Black,”* the boy said, casually — all in one exhale. His scoff was half laughter; only slightly *touched* underneath. *“Can you believe half of them tried to convince him we were out of business?”*

Dazai kept his eyes on the wall.

“A blessing in disguise,” he offered.

*“Obviously,”* Chuuya huffed, a tad too late. *“Can only pray for the day they forget that whole ordeal.”*

“Just have faith,” he encouraged.

*“I don’t,”* he mused. *“Do you?”*

The pillow deflated weirdly under his head — unused to the weight. Dazai never slept much; when he did, he slept in weird positions, trying to convince his body to fool itself into a tiredness that wasn’t forced. If he focused, he could hear Adam’s intrigued conversation with some other, unfamiliar voice — the restless, midday traffic.

*Faith in what?* he asked his body.

*Something has to stop him,* Madame Tanaki had sworn.

“They caught the mole,” Dazai said.

A surprised intake of breath. It tickled the shell of his ear, as if present. *“That was faster than I feared it would be. Was it you?”*

He thought about it. “Ane-san, maybe.”

“Of course,” Pride seeped through a grin he couldn’t see. “*When’s the execution? Should I try to be back by then? I can move some business.*”

Dazai had rewritten the *traitor treatment* — as Ace scoffingly called it — all by himself. New security measures; new databases; new methods to get the scope of what they’d let leak out. All of it was carved in some hyperaware corner of his skull, by the projects for the underground tunnels. *If I didn’t know better*, Tanaki had huffed, during one of their visits, *I’d think you were helping someone run away.*

*Even a god*, she had hissed.

Chuuya’s fingers on her tattoos, tracing lines and drawings — too fond to ever ask, but too stubborn to ever drag his nails off something he cared for. Content with what he would be given, even when the world had torn him to pieces just to fill the inside.

*Even an experiment.*

“No,” Dazai concluded. He dug himself a space in that unsatisfying warmth. He was a prodigy. He’d figure out a way to let Chuuya ramble until he slept. “Keep your dog muzzle out of it.”

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“Stand up,” Dazai ordered, vacant, nudging Akutagawa’s cough-rattled body. A coagulation of blood landed on the shiny tip of his shoe, wordless and sick. “Again.”

The boy’s pale, trembling hands settled on his knees, attempting to push himself up. It took some effort — eventually, teeth gritted so tight it turned his young face into a maze of pulsing veins, he climbed to his feet, panting.

Not entirely interested, Dazai wondered if he would be tasked with bringing *him* to pick his urn — once that body of his failed him.

“Really,” he commented, mid aimless walk around the edges of the warehouse. He scrubbed dust off the edge of an empty freight box, studying the greyed tip of his forefinger. His gun was a dead weight in his other hand — spinning whenever his thumb got too overwhelmed by the stillness, and the unwavering thunder. *The coldest Autumn in years*, the News had said, as if to spite all the dead *Ballerinas*. “You receive one appallingly worthless ode after the

other, lately. Flimsy mafiosi make it a point to bother me in the hallways to ask whether they could have you as their subordinate.”

“I won’t,” Akutagawa panted, settling in a fighting stance that was leaking from all the pipes. He was drenched in sweat — they’d been at it for more than five hours. “Their praise is worthless to me. It’s not what I want.”

“But you receive it all the same,” He fixed his coat, using the gun to scratch some old scar that always ached when it rained. “I’m aghast by your refusal to give me a clue as to *why*, though.”

“You won’t let me,” he insisted.

He curled an eyebrow. “I’m letting you.”

“*No*, you —“ the kid fumed. His fists flexed around nothing; with a sizzling hiss that ricocheted on the rusty pipes and the half-destroyed walls of that hiding place, *Rashomon* surged from the black fabric of Dazai’s old coat — sharp talons slashing the air with undeniable hunger, reaching for where he had abandoned his shoulder, studying the wall.

They vanished the moment they touched his neck; Akutagawa, who had crawled forward on that poor defense, could only groan around the fist Dazai crashed against his nose.

“An attack from behind?” He tutted. “Not very honorable of you. The Mafia’s all about things like honor, don’t you know? *Give back what you’re given. Give your life to those who save it.* That dog of mine would be very disappointed.”

A desperate, useless second attack electrified the air around them — there was nothing but rage pushing Akutagawa’s limbs in a standing position; and ire burned fast. When *Rashomon* pierced a pile of boxes, attempting to shatter it on his crossed arms, Dazai simply moved aside.

When the kid flew forward, fists raised, Dazai clenched his fingers around his flying arm. “Low,” he criticized, rolling his eyes. Akutagawa tried with the other arm. “Too high.” Dazai crossed the wrists he’d grabbed — dragging him close enough for his nose to shake in repressed *frustration* right against his own. “Focus. I appreciate the new approach, but —“

“So *what*, ” Akutagawa snapped. “You just want me to best you with no Ability?”

“Not at all,” He let go of him — watching him stumble a few steps back. *He could have used Rashomon to slow the landing*, he considered, with the same attention Elise dedicated to all her dolls. “I’m merely resigned to your inability to use it in a conscientious way, so we might as well move on.”

Underneath the bloody orange light of the falling sun, his sweat glistened like tears on the skin of a corpse. He clenched his jaw, and spelled out: “I’m not useless. I *know* how to use *Rashomon* — my mission results have been —“



“76% success rate,” he recited. He seemed taken aback by the notion that Dazai would know. Dazai circled him like a hawk, skipping steps just to have his knuckles grow candid in *tandem*. “Yes, yes. A development from last year. Everyone is so relieved. Stil, I have to ask — given you’ve gotten as *better* as you promise, why are the *Black Lizards* a few alleys away, fixing your mess?”

A vein in Akutagawa’s cheek throbbed.

“The enemy was defeated,” he said, low.

“And shredded,” Dazai nodded, obnoxious in his encouragement. “And massacred. Turned inside out like a stuffed toy — *marvelous*. I’m sure you’ll do a great job with strengthening the terror that is attached to our name,” He clicked his tongue. “My problem was there, and my problem remains, though — you left no survivors, and I have nothing to do with that whole *Red Hand’s Group* base. No one will guide us to its secrets — no one will tell us how to find all they stole from us,” He widened his eyes. “But yes — tell me more about how *Rashomon* defeated the enemy. I am *trembling* with curiosity.”

Akutagawa stared at the ground.

“What, no stories? Nothing at all?”

Silence bubbled louder than frustration.

“That’s your problem, Akutagawa,” he let him know, stretching his neck. “You’re so awfully boring. I have to hold back from killing myself whenever I’m forced to be in your presence.”

A mutter came from his lips — a whisper between bloodied coughs. He curved on his knees to try and resettle his spine.

“*Oh?*” Dazai almost smiled. “Say that again.”

Akutagawa stilled.

Attempted to — the rattling of his chest refused to let him, drool and blood dancing on his chapped lips. “I didn’t say —“

“You thought about it, then,” Dazai cut him off, pushing the small of his back against one of the taller piles of boxes. “You’re hardly the first, I’ll tell you. You’re boring in that, too. But I’ll kill myself right here, if you want,” Endlessly casual, he raised his gun — laid it against his temple. He felt its mouth scratch the bandages right as he heard the ruptured inhale out of Akutagawa’s mouth, horrified — hands twitching in his direction, but not daring to move. “Come on. You’re getting shy on me now?”

At his roots, the Mafia dog was awkward.

It seeped between his clenched teeth and his permanently stiffened shoulders — stored itself between pimples and bruises, occasionally turning him into the sketch of a younger being. He took a step back — then one forward.

Eyes somewhere else — *young*, yes; but then again, all of the Mafia had never done anything but look away — Akutagawa concluded: “I’ll do it again. Can we go back to training?”

On less bitter lips, it would have been just a tad petulant. Dazai felt himself smile without any real want for the glee. “Coward,” he offered.

Akutagawa tensed up.

“Executive Dazai.”

Drizzled in uncertain rain, Hirotsu was a stark silhouette against the storming sky, breaking the missing doors of the warehouse in two.

“Hey there, Commander!” Dazai twirled the gun around his forefinger, using it to offer a salute. “Did you and your reptiles fix our mess?”

“To the best of our abilities,” he offered, his bow horribly low. Dazai recognized an attempt at moving his attention elsewhere when he saw it — it amused him, so he allowed the older man to not even glance in Akutagawa direction, as he said: “Would you mind accompanying me? New data on *The Catfish* has been found, and Boss told me to bring it up with you.”

He sighed. “*Always me*. You’d think him a step away from retirement, from the way he acts,” Dazai fixed his coat again, hiding his gun. “Come on, come on, let’s hurry. Akutagawa, you can catch a ride with your brother.”

Not a word came out of his mouth — the tight line of his shoulders spoke for him. His nose was still bleeding; two red trails stained his chin like cellbars, turning him into a less dirty rendition of the slum kid he had first met.

Humming, Dazai dangled over him like a bad storm.

He leaned so close every motion on his face came to a halt — he studied his fragmented reflection in the pitch black of his pupils, and couldn’t really find what Akutagawa saw in him.

“Sir,” the boy tried.

“You’re allowed to want me dead, if you wish,” Dazai told him, easily. It rattled him like one of *The Catfish*’s earthquakes. “I might even thank you for it. But be very careful — make sure *hatred* is fueling you. If you merely think your path in the Mafia would be simpler without me — you’ll be terribly surprised at what will be waiting for you when you’re actually free.”

Wide eyes soaked him, as if taking his word on the matter. *Bad omen* — Dazai had been called worse.

“No,” Akutagawa said. “Of course not.”

He shrugged. “Your mistake.”

Hirotsu didn’t speak all the way to his car.

As they passed a murmuring group of some of his *Lizards* makeshift lieutenants, Dazai caught the end of a bitter, exhausted: “— always used to have *Double Black* do this stuff. I’m guessing the voices must be —“

He did not accelerate. He kept his eyes on nothing at all.

The Camaro — *and why was it always a Camaro, anyway?* — wasn’t kept quiet either way; Dazai rambled and rambled, voice cheerful by the strength of something that wasn’t quite *him*, and convinced the man to make a stop at a restaurant to get them some food. When Hirotsu refused to have them eat it in the car, though, he questioned: “Just where are you bringing me, kidnapper?”

A side glance. The Commander drove with one hand only on the wheel, always; it made him look pretentious. Familiar. “My house.”

Dazai paused in his excited motions.

“What, seriously?” He blinked.

“You don’t want to?”

“I just —“ Dazai pouted. “I was so sure you secretly lived in a retirement home.”

Exasperation almost had him driving through a red light.

He hadn’t quite have *expectations* about the place Hirotsu allegedly called his home — but when the Camaro was parked by a picket fence and a small, square garden, framing a two-stores house in the least bloodied corners of their syndicate, Dazai realized *that* had not been it. The walls were a soft grey, ruined by time in a way that made them appealing, rather than low value; the garden grew pink flowers and a peach tree, dangling gently around a wooden weaved couch. Peaceful and far too ordinary; something out of one Tanaki’s many —

*Hush*, he cut himself off. *Hush, hush*.

“Ah,” he commented, lost. Hirotsu was pushing the front door open — if he minded the way Dazai’s fingers caressed the flowers, he didn’t say. “And you’ve lived here for how long?”

He hummed, pensive. “Thirty, thirty five years? First house I bought after leaving the rooms at the Headquarters. Haven’t left it since.”

“You lived at the Headquarters?”

“Most did, in the old regime,” The door was opened, at last, forcing an unmistakable smell of homemade food and old cigarettes up his nose. “It was better to stay close. Your shoes?”

Dazai kicked them off, surging inside the house with the curiosity of a rabid dog.

There was too much, and his hands weren’t sticky enough, in their attempt to leave their trace on every surface. None of the furniture was white and modern, as most Mafia’s paychecks bought — everything was in warm shades of honey and wood brown, woven and carved and

having clearly been cared for for a long time. The rooms weren't wide, but the sliding traditional doors creaked with age; his kitchen, where Hirotsu settled, was an alcove of food, souvenirs, and a two-seats table.

He perked up. "Miranda!" he recalled, only jumping a *bit* on his feet. "Is she here? Can I meet her? I have to ask her what tragic accident had her consider *you* a viable *happily ever after* option."

"You are so very kind," Hirotsu offered, as he threw one of the Mafia projectors on the table.

Insisting, he perched on the free chair. An old fridge broke the counter in two; hung messily on it was a mixture of blurred photographs from Kouyou's camera — Gin's frowning face; some beautiful locations Dazai recognized from his international missions — and doodles Dazai and Chuuya had tended to fill his dossiers with during meetings. The habit had died long ago — he was surprised the man had kept them. "If she's pretty, can I propose a double suicide?"

Hirotsu looked at him funny.

"What?" he whined. "*Just* if she's pretty."

Machinations passed behind his eyes; with a resigned, uncertain sigh, he turned his head to the hallway and called: "*Miranda?*"

Dazai's mind braced itself — *tall or short*, he wondered, *bulkier or petite*, and, *what would Hirotsu even like in a woman that isn't deadly?* No sound of steps appeared from the corridor; before he had time to hypothesize a retired spy of sorts — an unmistakable sound reached his ears.

"*Meow.*"

His sardonic grin froze on his face.

The cat was a beautiful shade of gray — fur stained by patches of old age, turning it darker and paler intermittently. She moved with the grace of a well groomed beast, but she lacked a left ear and a left eye — the only one left was a stunning shade of green. It reflected the light from the windows, when she jumped on the table — studying Dazai the same way she would have a particularly fat rat.

She blinked at him, tail curling by the curve of Hirotsu's petting hand. "*Meow,*" she insisted.

Dazai was petrified.

"Miranda, this is Dazai Osamu," Hirotsu introduced, not an inch of amusement in his tone. The cat allowed him to scratch her chin, purring. "I told you all about him."

Cats couldn't nod, but it felt as if she did.

Cataract glossed her eye like a permanent veil — it was clear she was much older than most cats were lucky enough to end up being. Still, there was a cleverness in her gaze that was

undeniably young — the wildness of a rescued stray.

“Excuse me,” he managed. “What?”

Hirotsu blinked. “You know Miranda.”

“Your *adoratissima*, yes.”

“Yes,” he echoed.

“Who you met on a dangerous mission in Europe. More than two decades ago.”

“A wretched job,” the Commander made a face, flicking the cat’s ear. “I barely managed to save her from the incinerator. You truly can’t imagine how glad it makes me that the Port Mafia never dubbed in threats via animal corpses.”

“Wait,” Dazai’s brain was bouncing across his skull, useless. “Wait. So — wait.”

Patiently, Hirotsu and Miranda waited.

“She’s not your wife?”

“*My wife?*” The Commander didn’t laugh — because that wasn’t quite him — but he came closer to it than he’d seen him in a long time. “No, no.”

Dazai stared.

The frustration of being one-upped had his fingers twitching. “*How* is she not your wife?”

“I wouldn’t marry a cat.”

“Hirotsu.”

The Commander sighed. He picked up the cat, amidst unexisting protests, and cradled her to his chest — she nuzzled into a blood stain on his shoulder, paws playing with the silver thread of his monocle. “It was common knowledge, in the old regime,” he admitted, easily. His house was filled to the brim with paintings and cat food; Dazai could hardly believe he hadn’t picked up on it. *Bested by the handler*. Horrified, he realized Chuuya could never know. “No one asked after Mori took over — apart from Executive Kouyou.”

“She knows,” Dazai’s bones creaked. *He all but melts with his adoratissima*, she’d said. As the man rubbed his cheek on the cat’s head — he was inclined to agree. “Of course she knows.”

“You boys made your assumptions,” With head-spinning ease, the man shrugged. “Given that *someone* spread the word of Miranda’s existence as soon as they found out about it —“ Dazai stared at the ceiling, ignoring him. “And given our business, I decided to take advantage of it.”

Dazai studied him accusingly. “You made fun of us for three years.”

“I *tried* to,” Hirotzu corrected. “It’s hardly my fault if you allowed me to.”

The world was rice and lies. Evening had, at last, painted the sky a gentle blue. He watched his hands — felt more shaken than even those letters from the *Rat* had left him.

“But,” he insisted, again. “But —“

Hirotzu tilted his head. “I would appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. Apart from obvious exceptions I can do nothing about.”

“*Obvious exceptions?*”

A curled eyebrow. “You know.”

“I don’t.”

“You will,” he conceded.

Dazai felt a bit like crying. “But —“

Three eyes and one blank expression — the man and his cat stared at him, waiting.

“Alright,” He slumped on the chair until the backrest hurt his nape, studying mold stains on the ceiling like God himself would answer. “Point for you, *Handler*. Just one point.”

The man failed not to show satisfaction.

Projected into a small portion of the table, *The Catfish’s* unofficial wanted poster — stolen by an Archivist from the more easily hacked database of the lower *Division’s* ranks — painted a terribly unimpressive picture. He was tall and lanky, with a shock of carrot hair that reached his waist; the coat he wore — so long, and buttoned so tight it made it impossible to guess whether he had any clothes apart from it on — was green like dirty grass.

“He has no aims,” Hirotzu explained, as he read through stolen *Division* analyses Miranda was holding on her head for him. “No power thirst, no events against any syndicate in Yokohama. In the most elementary way possible — allegedly, he’s just a bit out of it.”

Dazai sighed. “I can’t blame him.”

“His episodes have amounted to damage costs as high as an underground conflict, though. The *Special Division* wants him out of the city.”

“Then let them do it,” He shrugged. “One less bother for us. Unless he starts knocking on our borders — this is all but the moment to call the *Division’s* attention. At the very least, *they* seem to have finally moved their eyes from us.”

Hirotzu frowned. “Boss insists this would be over sooner if we involve ourselves, though.”

“It would,” Dazai conceded, around some cookies the man had stuffed under his nose, right by Miranda’s swaying tail. “But Elise is terrified of earthquakes — so forgive me if I doubt

the wisdom of his motivations.”

Miranda purred, almost reproachful.

“I know you hate him,” the man began, his hands raised. “But you need to consider —“

*“Hate him? I don’t hate Mori.”*

Perhaps his skeptical expression should’ve surprised Dazai more. More than half the syndicate had been ready to start a *coup d’etat* in his name a little more than six months ago, though — clearly, most had come to their own conclusions about the closed doors Mori usually dragged him behind.

*I didn’t doubt you would deal with this as it was needed*, the doctor had said, a bit distractedly — but always, *always*, so focused on him — when he had finally crawled out of the dungeons. He’d dripped blood on his desk just to see Mori grimace, but he’d been untouched. Perhaps, he did hate him — just a bit. *On the matter of efficiency, you’re just like me.*

“Why would I hate Mori?” Dazai insisted, as genuinely as he knew how.

Hirotsu blinked. Graceful, Miranda slipped from his grasp, curling up between the files on the table — close enough for him to experimentally lean forward, nose to nose, squinting.

“The question remains even if you aren’t a woman,” he informed her. “Why would a pretty thing like you choose to live with Gramps?”

Miranda meowed, unblinking.

“I understand,” he sighed. “Necessity is one hell of a beast. Our world is haunted and ghosts are as bored as a bloodthirsty emperor. I’ve had to play partners with a rabid dog because of it.”

Mindless, canine yipping echoed in his ears from nowhere at all. His phone didn’t ring; the old dog charm stayed where it was, faded and hanging from a thread Dazai refused to change on *principle*. Chuuya was always the one to call — sometimes, to drunkenly ramble about some European job that was *far too easy*; others, to ask him unexplainable questions and shut the phone in his face.

*Are all birds robots?*, he’d asked, eleven days ago. He’d closed the call right as Dazai confirmed it, and he hadn’t heard from him since. *When I get home*, he had rumbled, once, drunk — *when I get home, you’ll fucking hear it.*

“Chuuya should be back by the end of the week,” the Commander commented, failing at any kind of subtlety. “He mentioned he wanted to check on the Suribachi project. According to his schedule, though —“ His eyes stayed on the files; his voice unchanging. The Mafia’s column. “He’ll miss Tanaki’s execution.”

“A shame,” Dazai offered. “He’s got a thing for bonfires.”

Uncharacteristically, Hirotsu flinched.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” he hushed. Bravely reaching for Miranda’s fur, he waited to see a hint of approval in her only eye — half smiling at the involuntary match of theirs — and caressed her, head to tail, watching her purr. “She’s a traitor. That’s all there is to it. What did you expect us to do?”

The man studied him. “I’ve learned,” he offered, after some pensiveness, “That despite what one may think, *duty* and *feeling* are not necessarily made for contrast. You can understand what must happen to her is impervious — you can mourn a friend, too.”

“Mourn,” Dazai echoed, tasting the letters. “That’s entirely unnecessary.”

“The unnecessary is hardly not needed.”

“Now, don't get poetic on me.”

“Dazai,” His tone forced him to lay his eyes on his wrinkled, time-carved face. Miranda reached for his palm as he got a bit lost in the effortlessness with which the Commander wore his age. He tried to imagine the white of his hair on his own knotted locks — the way bandages would have felt on withered skin. He failed. “We all cared for her.”

The spot Chuuya had a habit to pinch on his forehead twitched with mental exertion. *There’s my prodigy*, he recalled.

“Yes,” he agreed, slow — unusually unsure. “And you were wrong.”

Hirotsu’s face turned complicated. Dazai got the feeling of having missed the point.

“Boss asked me to tell you to go find him, one of these days,” he concluded, eventually — all the exhaustion from words not said sticking to his traits, barely erased by massaging hands. Removing his monocle and throwing it on the table, he became blind to the squinting way Dazai studied him — unused to that sight. “He’s still waiting for an answer on your urn.”

Miranda turned, offering her belly. It was an oddly undignified move for a cat as old and frail as she was — Dazai rubbed her paws, feeling how easy it would have been to break her in two.

She had the same inviting, trusting look Kazuko had carried in her too clever eyes. With his Ability and his Mafia-black hands, it was a wonder Hirotsu had never killed her by mistake.

Or perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps it was only Dazai’s pets that never lasted past the summer.

“With how enthusiastic he’s been about this whole ordeal, you’d think he was planning to burn me at the stake along with Tanaki,” Dazai heard himself whine, as childish as he knew how. “Say, old man, can’t you just convince him to get me a shoebox from Elise’s wardrobe and call it a day?”

“Traditions hold the Mafia together,” the Commander replied, not unkindly. “Burning hair strands for a loved one, throwing our ashes —“



“— in the sea,” Dazai completed, huffing. “I find this whole limbo offensively useless. We had enough bad experiences with *Limbos*, didn’t we?”

“One would think you would love this.”

“You all say that,” His smile stretched his face until it ached. There had to be easier ways to vocalize the infantile pull in his viscera; telling him that a tombstone was worse than a furnished home — but the pull couldn’t tell him why. *People don’t linger*, it promised, high with the thrill of comparing him to the impossible, *people just die. Blood and massacres and death until they die.*

“Hirotsu,” he concluded. “Let me sleep on your couch.”

The man — well aware that Dazai wouldn’t sleep where someone else was, and that conceding meant working at the HQs for the night — sighed.

A good two hours later, nonetheless, files signed and one hand on the door, Hirotsu studied his curled up frame under some spare blankets on his flower-patterned couch. Miranda had situated herself between Dazai and the door — just like her owner; an unlikely guard. Dazai burrowed in the cigarette-smelling pillow, and surfed channels on the small television like none of it mattered.

“I’ll pick you up for the execution,” the man said, stalling by the door. His scarf was wrapped wrong, but Dazai didn’t feel like telling him.

“Thank you for the ride,” Dazai yawned — fairly sleepy, and as polite as he’d been taught.

Hesitation didn’t fit the Commander, but it was there all the same. “The Mafia is not an undemanding place,” he offered, too slow. “But you’ve done good until now, Dazai.”

Running bodies chased each other in the cobalt light of the television. He traced their plastic smiles and the pathetically fake wounds — then the outline of Miranda’s protection; unwanted and unneeded. He thought about bombing his car; he thought about whether or not he’d visit the coast and mourn Dazai, sooner than later.

*I didn’t doubt*, Mori had smiled. *You’re just like me.*

Hirotsu was still looking at him. Out of virtually nowhere, Dazai hated him, frigid and sour.

“Thank you for the ride,” he concluded.

Tanaki got burned on a Thursday.

As it fit those who went against the Mafia, two faceless subordinates from the *Lizards* forced her trembling body against the curb of the interior parking lots in *Building One*, settling her teeth against the concrete block. Only the Executives occupied the circle around her — *better not to give spectacle*, Mori had ordered, pulling Elise's ribbons, *not when someone so well loved is involved*.

"The Secret Executive sends his regards," the doctor explained, from behind Dazai, clasping two hands on his shoulders. "He couldn't join."

Further away than the northern pole, Dazai felt it tug his chest — the jealousy.

Tanaki didn't seem to care.

What was left of her after the dungeons was impossibly strange to eyes that had seen her laugh — half of her silver hair had been ripped off; the rest was matted with the same blood that had long since dried on her bruised skin. Dazai did not want to be there. Her calves weren't working — once her jaw was dislocated, between shrieks her wrecked vocal chords couldn't vocalize, the men had to slide her across the floor to get her to the gasoline-soaked podium, and he *did not want to* —

Dazai switched the safety off his gun — a bit surprised that he had remembered to put it on at all; a bit at loss to *when* — and looked her right in the eyes as he shot three bullets.

Mori hummed, distracted. "The sound quality in this parking lot is truly something," he whispered, pulling on Kouyou's sleeve like a bored child. "We should start hosting official meetings here."

"What, so Ace can rate cars while we talk business?" she questioned.

The Executive huffed. "I wouldn't."

Three steps from them, Tanaki slowly bled out.

Her hands drew circles in the onyx gasoline, as she wheezed and begged wordlessly, her bleeding chest raising and falling with no rhythm. Hirotsu extracted his new lighter and threw it in the puddle she was melting into.

"*Sorry*," she mouthed.

His lips didn't move. He dreamed — only for a second — that the flames would be for him.

Dazai hadn't gotten the story of that *x* scar on her face, in the end — he decided that it'd have to be enough of an answer. Tears of terror wrecked her — uselessly, she tried to slither away from the gasoline, crawling and bawling and howling that soundless screech, slipping like a newborn fawn. "*Sorry*, I'm sorry —" He wished the fire would hurry — he wished he didn't have to be there. He wished she'd die quieter and quicker; wished he could kneel by her side

and let her know death and life weren't different at all, and if he didn't fear, neither should she — wished she didn't have to die before figuring out how *Spider Eyes* ended. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm* —"

The flames reached her skin. With the voice she didn't have, she screamed.

Burning flesh had a very distinct smell — a mixture of sharpness and sourness that always got stuck in the back of his throat, startling a gag reflex that wasn't all that *Demonic* of him. Eventually, it only ever tasted like his own drool — gulped down and gulped down again, the motion subtle enough not even Mori's keen eye could catch the bob of his Adam's apple.

Eventually, it tasted like blood. And that was it.

"Wonderful job," Mori congratulated, in his ear. Tanaki's skull had started to melt — she was a blackened, crooked mass, and the laugh-wrinkles she'd worn by her eyes had burned along to the tattoos. "We'll have to think of a grave for her. Her ashes, though —"

He blinked. Snapped his fingers towards the two *Lizards* — gestured in a way Dazai caught by the corner of his eyes only.

"God," Kouyou's nose scrunched up. She did not care, and Mori did not care, and none of them cared — and Dazai didn't either. *I care that it's blood and massacres and death*, Tanaki has sworn, *and that it will be until I die*. "The smell is always intolerable."

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And that was it.

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*[He crossed his legs on the blood-sticky floor, and leaned his chin on his hand to peek at Tanaki's face. Her neck had bent from sheer exhaustion — he had to search, tilting back; watching a thread of red drool dangle from her parted lips.]*

*Dazai lifted two fingers and wiped it off.*

*"I'm sorry," she murmured. It wasn't quite present — he would have guessed she wasn't much aware of his presence at all, until she added: "I'm sorry I have to make you do this."*

*Humming, he suggested: "Concern yourself with your wounds."*

*Weakly, Tanaki tried to raise her head. She was a doll with no strings — she was burned and she was bruised and she was shattered, and Dazai's hands had never even had the decency to shake as they did it. You're good at this, Hirotsu had sworn. I know, he hadn't told him. I know. I know. What else could I do?*

*Where else would you have me?, Kouyou had questioned.*

*"Will you concern yourself with your own?" Tanaki whispered, delirious.*

*He shrugged, crawling closer — laying his chin on the ruined flesh of her legs, and looking up at the instinctive terror in her pupils. Dazai's hands were Pavlovian and cursed — no matter all he had done, she'd die haunted by nightmares of him.*

*"No point in a wound," he recited. "Anyway. I get to keep all my scars."*

*"So do I," Painfully, her lips attempted to tilt into a smile. He had only reopened the edges of the silver lines crossing her face — tiredly, she whispered: "If I tell you how I got them, do you think Chuuya'll forgive me?"*

*Chuuya's not here, he didn't tell her. He did not want to hear his name in her mouth. He did not want to remember she'd hated him, even just for a blink. Chuuya's scars are not his fault.*

*"Don't waste your breath," he concluded, eyes closed. "They'll be gone by tomorrow." ]*

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Nonetheless — according to all scars and to all the hands on his shoulders — that was it.

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“— melted like candle wax, I swear! They had to scrape her off the ground with the guns — the ashes wouldn’t move,” Dazai insisted, over the rim of his glass. Bar Lupin was warm and utterly empty, apart from the three of them; he had been grinning for hours. “Remind me to *never* attempt that for my suicide. I wouldn’t want to bother you guys so horribly with mine and my beauty’s corpse.”

On his left — looking somewhat nauseous — Ango sipped his tomato juice in silence.

“But won’t the Mafia cremate your corpse anyway?” Odasaku mused.

He waved the matter away. “That will be official business. *This* was a traitor being burned in the middle of a smelly parking lot.”

“Ah,” the man concurred. “I understand.”

“Is *smelly* tragic or —“

“Tragic,” Ango intervened, finally. Dried raindrops were stuck to his lenses — he seemed far too lost in thought to wipe them with his jacket; the bad habit he never lost. “Given circumstances.”

Dazai tutted. “Surely you don’t mean the removal of a *Division* mole?”

Low, lulling jazz music poured from the old stereos hanging from the corners of the bar. There was a single glass the barkeep had been cleaning for far too long; the pleasant smile on his face spoke of an attention saved for that music only. Mori would have had *opinions* about discussing Mafia business where such a man could hear it — but Mori would have had words about the secrets he’s told Odasaku when he’d met him, too. Mori had so many *words* and so many *opinions* — Dazai had no choice but to pick and choose.

The blinking, perplexed smile he offered to Ango told the man to pick and choose right.

“No,” The Archivist frowned. “Of course.”

Dazai hummed, content. “This will be good. Believe me! Without the looming threat of moles, Mori might just exhale and forget all about the *projects* and the *executions* and that *business* he’s *so* obsessed with,” He gasped. “He might even let me join Odasaku in the lower ranks, as promised!”

“He promised you that?” Odasaku asked, eyebrows brushing his hairline.

“Well — not in so many words. And he *was* a bit drunk when he said it — but I’m sure he will consider my offer,” He downed his drink; raised his glass in a toast. “Barkeep! Give me some detergent to celebrate!”

“No,” the man replied, politely.

“Aw. ”

“Don’t you like being an Executive?” the man on his right questioned, tapping his fingers on the wooden countertop. The sound stole some of Dazai’s fluttering attention, hyper focusing it. “It must come with pros.”

“The pay is great for the Arcade,” Dazai sighed, enamoured. “But I learned to scam kids out of their money long ago, so it’s not that important. *Oh!* I do like the *Secret Force Squad*. Having men around means I don’t have to do stuff.”

“The *Secret Force Squad*, ” Ango echoed, a bit vacantly. “You mean the one that’s *secret*? As in, no one should know it exists, or that you have it?”

“Precisely!”

“Dazai.”

“But being an Executive is nothing fun,” he insisted, leaning his chin on his crossed arms. “God knows why that ugly dog of mine wants to be one so badly. It’s just paperwork! Mountains and more mountains of it. Report after report after *report*. Barely any field work at — you’re too busy *doing paperwork* for it.”

“Really?” Odasaku tilted his head. “Is that why that whole *Double Black* rumor spread? ‘You guys are too busy to go on missions?’”

“Don’t put it like that,” Dazai tutted, his smile wide. “That will make me more amenable to the rare joys of being an Executive, and I’m here to *complain*. Paperwork, and meetings, and watching Mori chase Elise around — and executions,” Slow, testing danger that wasn’t there, he reached out to tap two fingers on the scar on Odasaku’s hand — the one he’d given him by shooting through it. “I think the executions are very boring.”

Ango and Odasaku didn’t exchange a *look* over his head — because they were his friends, and they were kinder than he would ever get to keep.

All their words were clockhands, and Dazai kept waiting for the bomb to drop.

“But she was a traitor,” he concluded, as he studied the *blink-and-miss-it* contact of their warm skin, cocooned by the Bar’s breath. No one had brought it up but him. Dazai should have known better than to linger. Dazai should have known better than to lift his fingers. “So it doesn’t matter, and it never will.”

Ango’s face, in his peripheral vision, said he understood. Odasaku stared forward — despite his Ability, though, he didn’t take his hand away.

“Does it have to matter?” he questioned.

There was no judgement in his tone — but there never was. Not for his bloodied hands; not for the women Dazai would discard with the one proposal they never accepted; not for his insistence not to understand his desire not to kill.

Odasaku listened and watched and *knew* — Dazai wasn’t sure of how to explain to him that no one else would ever be fit to judge him.

“Not really,” he hummed. “But I keep expecting something will, one of these days. This,” He nodded towards Bar Lupin — somber and old; wooden and familiar, settled around all of their shoulders like it made any sense for the three of them to find a common ground. “This is the one thing that has come close. You guys need to tell me more stories. Are you *sure* I can’t get a glass of bleach, Mr. Barkeep?”

“No, sir,” the man reinstated, offering him a gentle smile. “No one dies at the Lupin.”

He traced the crooked edge of Odasaku’s nose — listened, a bit distractedly, to the *tip-tap* of Ango’s fingers on his work phone. Countdown after countdown — until what?

“No,” Dazai agreed. “I guess not.”

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*The Catfish* was having a night out.

“This is so unnecessary,” Dazai muttered, as his head bumped against the underside of Tanaki’s old desk. Panicked murmurs and gasps filled the hall of *Building One*, as the midnight crowd went around in a haste to find somewhere to hide from the seismic shocks. “Why *earthquakes*?”

“Because he has a terrible sense of humor,” Ace let him know, surprisingly crouching with him in that tight space. “Just look at that revolting name.”

Chandeliers dangled wildly over their heads — dust rained from the corners, as the floor shook and shook without any real semblance of a finale. It made the furniture creak over curled up bodies, filling the night in haunted, ghostly hisses.

“How macabre, being under here,” Oddly chatty, the Executive scrunched up his nose. The jewel attached to his cravat jiggled with every rattle of the earth — Dazai leaned as far away

from his legs as possible, and followed the motion. “Like an open grave hiding spot.”

“This is a secretary desk,” he said, helpfully.

“You know what I mean.”

“That secretary salaries are a misery?”

“Executive Dazai,” Ace sighed, pompous, as another shock almost bumped his temple against the chair. “You really are a despicable sight.”

He smiled, unfriendly. His calculations had hardly ever been wrong — he’d predicted betrayal from that man since the first time Mori had made them shake hands. He just wasn’t sure of *when*.

“I know,” he offered. “It’s my pretty face.”

It took roughly ten minutes for *The Catfish* to get bored of the earthquake; eventually, only the mess of the hall and the distant emergency sirens all around the cities filled the air. Dazai crawled out of the desk, tapping the empty space with lingering fingers — and didn’t watch Ace struggle to do the same, grunting from the position the small space he’d left him had forced him into.

“That will make for a report,” he sighed, in distaste, fixing the ashy blond hair splattered across his cranium like flimsy threads. “But the night is long. Are you coming to the inauguration?”

“For *The Sheepdog*?” Dazai traced dust on the floor, dirtying the hems of the man’s pants. “I have an important appointment with the river — but I’ll try to make time afterward.”

Ace looked at him with exhaustion.

“Plausible deniability,” he reminded him, his chin touching the ceiling from the superior tilt of it. “Ramble elsewhere. I have data to send out, and *no intention* of receiving the Boss’ wrath for ignoring your antics while I type.”

“Certainly,” Dazai agreed.

Out of nowhere, then: “Has Vice-Executive Chuuya been informed of Tanaki’s execution?”

He blinked, genuinely skeptical. “Why were you expecting *me* to do it?”

“Figures,” Ace muttered. “Even the Secret Executive knows, but nobody could bother to send out one more email — do you *know* how much desk work I’ve been sagged with recently?”

“No,” he said, honestly. “I never do mine.”

The Executive muttered some more.



Dazai saluted, utterly careless — and made sure to lock the *Building One's* doors and break the lock behind himself after he left.

Underneath the hands of the October sky, the river was a mirror of silver moonlight and too tall buildings, rushing gently across the trash-littered banks. They got cleaned off every week, Dazai knew — but the plastic bags and the tourists' trinkets made up hills again by the end of every Monday. When his knees were soaked in its cold, dirty currents, Dazai felt his lungs widen with the promise of *something*.

Humming to some melody he didn't think too much about, he extracted the six latest letters bearing the rat's made up alphabet, and watched them decompose into nothing between waves.

"You would be an extremely fun adversary," he let the disintegrating paper know. "Had I any intention of living long enough to meet you."

The ink floated away through the waters, mocking him with no words. Dazai decided that he was bored — and set to swimming to the Bay, so that he could arrive at the Suribachi artificial island without getting bottled up in bridge traffic.

*Yes*, his mind let him know, sarcastic. It did not sound like Odasaku, but it didn't sound like Ango or Mori either. He made a face. *Real clever.*

The *Sheepdog* had been built on three floors and a triad system, connecting squares of buildings with neon-illuminated bridges that reminded him of Christmas decorated emergency stairs. The slick black and the new bricks fit like a bruise against the settlement only mere alleys behind it; Dazai could only imagine what the reflected lights of the club would look like from the depths of the crater.

*The bar is an indenture*, Mori'd explained, as he shoved Chuuya's project on his desk to look through. *My assurance that we will get something out of this, whatever happens.* His smile had been wide and proud. *But a splendid idea, is it not?*

It wasn't hard to see his touch. He doubted Chuuya would have asked to build an unreachable diamond right by the settlement — at the very least, not before anything else was given to the starving ones underneath.

"Executive Dazai," The two bouncers in front of the glass doors straightened.

"Good evening," he greeted, soaked shoes squeaking against the ground. "Is there any chance either of you knows if neon paint would kill a person, if ingested?"

The men exchanged a perplexed gaze.

Dazai sighed, and got inside.

The *Sheepdog* tried too hard to be a club — but it had clearly been built with the same aims the hole-in-the-wall bars across their territories carried. The furniture was a tad too antique, wooden and illuminated strangely by the colorful LED lights; the chandeliers shimmered like

mirror balls over what should have been a dancing floor, but looked more like an aristocratic charity event. The bar counter wouldn't have been out of place at Bar Lupin — but all the stools were occupied.

The room was dark, interrupted only by the moonlight bathing the floor from the glass roof — and by the green, orange, blue, and pink neon body paint open barrels at the entrance allowed guests to splatter all over their bodies.

“I'm surprised you showed up,” Mori said, appearing from the shadows at his right. “You're not one to check on your finished projects.”

Curling his hand in the freezing blue liquid in the nearest barrel, Dazai replied — barely louder than the strangely tasteful music some too elegant mafiosi were discussing deals over: “If this is about the underground tunnels, I already told you — I've decided they make claustrophobic.”

The doctor sighed. Someone — Elise, most probably; or Kouyou, because no one else was half as brave — had drawn neon pink cat whiskers on his cheeks. “Sometimes I feel like your excuses have had less and less effort put in them, lately.”

“I'm bored,” Dazai offered, easily. “And you usually believe me, anyway.”

Mori conceded.

The crowd was a bundle of familiarity and distant threats — Kouyou's kimono, dragging slow and inconveniently across the new tiles; Hirotsu, discussing meeting spots and payments with the Suribachi owners they'd partnered with for the place; mafiosi Dazai didn't recognize and had no wish to evaluate outside of their bloated, bloodied sense of self-importance. People who joined the Mafia were always either desperate or too glad.

Chuuya was sitting on the bar counter.

Something, in the paper-thin space between his bones, melted with the creaks of hot metal.

“How nice,” Mori commented, following his line of sight — which was enough of a mistake. He had a drink in his hand; Dazai couldn't recall if it had been there when he had approached him, and couldn't believe he'd dare to drink it. “Chuuya was afraid he'd end up missing the inauguration. I'm glad to see that wasn't the case.”

There was something he was missing. He couldn't put his finger on it, so he rubbed his neon paint dirty hands together — until they shone the same blue as *No Longer Human*. “Can't believe we'll have to check for fleas on opening night.”

Mori laughed, like it was funny.

There was nothing but approval in the way he looked at Chuuya — all slim, short, vibrant black lines on the counter; because the stools were all occupied by the *Guerrilla*, surrounding him like domesticated sharks. But Chuuya couldn't die for them on a casual Saturday night, so camaraderie was probably the best next thing.

It was always kind of strange — seeing how people perceived Chuuya, material storm as he was. *Dangerous*, their drooling gazes said. He couldn't deny. And then they always got close enough to bite all the same. Dazai didn't get it. Dazai understood in the way of viscera figuring out blood.

"I'll make him Executive by the end of the year," Mori said, very casually.

"And the sky is blue," Dazai offered. He felt the urge to check his phone for missed texts — but he knew he wouldn't find them, so he didn't.

Instead, he sneaked a look to a nearby small table, temporarily abandoned to an impressive amount of half empty glasses — and set to filling them with the more neutral shades of the paint.

"Of course," Mori agreed. "You wouldn't have promised the *Guerrilla* to Akutagawa otherwise."

He spread part of the paint across his knuckles. Chuuya was nothing but one of Mori's pawns — a pawn he cared for, certainly; to the same extent he dedicated to all who fell in line with his plans. He added: "You know, I found them."

"Found who?" Dazai asked.

"His parents."

His fingers twitched — only a moment.

"I'm thinking of letting him know when he gets promoted," the doctor continued, as if a less monumental convo wouldn't have fit under those neon lights and neon skins. "He could pay them a visit. It would be a nice way to celebrate, don't you think?"

Momentarily abandoning his glass-filling quest, he stole one of the drinks for himself. "I'm surprised you'd let him go."

The man's smile was mocking. "Don't tell me you think he would stay."

"I didn't say that. I thought you'd keep that leash a while longer, that's all."

"Chuuya is —" Mori thought about it. "A stable point. He's certainly proven himself to be. I like to believe I know him enough. In fact —" He flicked a speck of green neon paint off his scarf; threading fingers through the fabric with a bone-sculpted tranquillity that would have dragged the syndicate to safer shores — until the end of times. "Here, let us have fun with it. I bet you our Chuuya will talk to them, and come back to us before the sun falls."

Dazai studied the blue dripping from his fingers. "I'll bet you he won't even talk to them."

Startled, Mori turned to look at him.

Unfortunate timing — it was exactly then that Chuuya's wine slid too crookedly against his mouth, trailing across his chin and startling him. His head snapped up, and he found Dazai.

“Hey!” he screamed, immediately, a step from jumping on the counter. He wasn’t drunk — not yet — but his frame was blurred by the lights and something awfully well-settled in its bones. “You! *Get out of my fucking bar!*”

Irritation spiked so quick it almost felt like a heatwave. “I *named it!*” Dazai screamed back, almost breaking the last of the glasses he’d ruined. “I surveyed the works. *Get in line!*”

Chuuya spluttered, speechless. The crowd between them had its skin lined in neon colors and unsubtle shut jaws, eyes settled on them with the horror of someone who’d been assigned to damage compensation jobs too often. “This is *my* project, you toilet paper puppet! I fucking sent out *keep up the good work* worker helmets!”

He gritted his teeth. “Not my fault I know not to waste money on little yellow hats.”

“Work endangerment fees, *shithead!*”

The sound of Mori’s sigh disappeared some time around the starkly inflated *thing* in his veins began to throb; Dazai stalked forward, smiling in that taunting way that got Chuuya’s veins to explode. He only had a speck of a second to notice the orange neon paint someone had stained the side of his neck with — rhythmically drooling into a smaller barrel situated by the counter, like a vampire bite.

He stopped by the start of the swarming sharks, cradling Chuuya like a fortress. Either not caring or not noticing, the boy squinted, distracted by his next long sip of wine — curling one finger in the air to call him closer.

Something in Dazai’s guts burned. Just to annoy him, he stayed where he was. The effort to pretend he *wasn’t* aggravated by it twisted Chuuya’s entire face.

“Europe always gives you the complexion of a street criminal,” he offered, obnoxious. “Either that, or whatever that stray sheep of yours puts on his knife before he stabs you with it. Assuming that’s the way you two pass the time?”

Chuuya’s head tilted as if he’d crushed it. He seemed to wonder about possible innuendos, only for a moment — only to land on the certainty that Dazai *would* mock him about betrayal faster than he would about childhood romance. “And whatever nasty fumes you’ve been inhaling in those sewer tunnels of yours are making you look more and more like your rat relatives.”

“Says the dog.”

A smudge of green neon paint has stained the underside of his jaw; Dazai kept his eyes there as he threw his head back to laugh. “Says the guy named the place after me.”

“It’s an insult,” he noted, very, *very*, slowly — in the tone he *knew* would make him feel like the idiot he was. “And calling yourself a dog won’t do well for your reputation.”

“Ah,” The boy raised his glass. Some guy in the stool by his thigh was lighting a cigarette — he bet it was for him. Chuuya dug two fingers in the pink fluorescent paint and — flicked it

off, so that it landed, cold and merciless, on Dazai's cheek. His grin was brighter than the sun, and Dazai hadn't looked at his face in more than six months. "Still better than a prodigy's partner, yeah?"

Abrupt enough to make his head spin, he was starving.

Sharks and cigarettes and whatsoever — he stepped right through their painted, armed bodies, and saw Chuuya's hand twitch on the counter, as if keeping from clawing towards him. Jittery and electrified; sudden and impossibly light, like a swarming head that had bled too long and too alone. He wanted to drag his nails down his arms until *Corruption* scars reopened. Dazai hated him with viciousness. Chuuya's fingers flexed again, gloves against wood, and his mouth dried up.

The crowd swarmed around the counter, along to the music and the non-mafiosi who were there for the numbers — he *felt* the fast arrival of a body slamming against his back.

Before it could touch him, a leg was hooked around the back curve of his knees, plastering him in the space between Chuuya's thighs.

"The word you're looking for is *hi*," he told him — leaving his leg where it was for virtually no reason, and finishing his glass of wine. "Unless the dog food I found in all of my office drawers was meant to fill in. It didn't. It was shitty."

"Did you try it?" Dazai asked.

"It was in the *paperwork*."

"Of course the first place you'd go to would be your work office," Dazai supplied, leaning both his elbows on the counter, by each of Chuuya's thighs. It sounded slightly better than, *the food's been there for months* or *I didn't know when you'd come back* or *I hoped you wouldn't* or *you did*. "You'll be happy to know I fired all your favorite goons."

Chuuya had the gall to snort — as if Dazai hadn't pulled crueler, sicker pranks in the past. "I doubt you care enough to ever learn to document firing procedures."

"I just wouldn't document it."

"That would get *you* fired, hypothetically."

"Chuuya," he whispered, conspiratorial, smearing a dot of blue paint between his eyebrows — to watch him go instinctually strabismic. The hand he rubbed it with sported a blue Sheep bracelet; Dazai gulped down violence and something far too young, still stuck underneath *Arcade* lights. His teeth tasted of iron. "Haven't you heard? You can't fire the next in line."

He was unimpressed. "The only line you're part of is the one at the end of hangman game."

A distinctive, unmistakable scent filled the air, uncurling from the mixture of alcohol, smoke and body sweat — something like earth and blood, and that shampoo Kouyou had bought Chuuya once, that he'd never changed. Someone had slid a knife by the seam of his mouth, during a mission — that corner was reddened and still healing, wrinkling his skin when he

talked. Dazai's coat was warmer than fire, and Chuuya's leg was a line of prickly needles, reminding him every few instants that he was a physical thing — when it dropped, he mourned it with a shiver.

“Hello,” he offered, eventually — with the grand tone of a merciful concession.

Somebody toasted. For the first time since they were fifteen, Chuuya's eyes were the same, unclear color under the kaleidoscopic lights — he roamed them across his face with something both breathless and conflicted. Dazai's elbows had him curved, looking up at him — and adding that to the counter, there was a rare height imbalance that had Chuuya finally able to study him from above.

“Hello,” he responded, very quietly. Frowning.

The toast got a second shout out; Chuuya refused the cigarette his goon was offering, which made Dazai pettily satisfied — then, with all the repressed rage of a feral dog, he strangled Dazai in a merciless headlock, rubbing his knuckles across his hair to make some sort of *point*.

“Hey!” Dazai whined, attempting to escape the sweaty fabric of his dress shirt and the bicep vein beating right against his ear.

From some nearby corner, a familiar voice called out: “*Back already, Exec?*”

“Just to kick your ass, Kajii!” the boy yelled back, something *purely* enraged in his tone — as if looking at Dazai had snapped *something* in his evening charm. “I told you to have that lemon tree out of my office by the time I was back, didn't I —”

Dazai punched him between the legs.

All it got out of Chuuya was a humiliating huff. Dazai pushed himself off — filled with glee and released frustration, the boy snorted, gloved hands coming to cup his scalp and *almost* bump their foreheads together. He rattled Dazai's head, instead — as if too breathless to figure out if his grip should have been delicate or not — studying him with the charged attention of someone who had stumbled on a chameleon.

They were entirely too close for murmurs not to swarm across them like flies. Drunk on the smell of the fluorescent paint — on the childish need to make sure someone would have something to say about *Double Black*, next morning — Dazai leaned close enough to smear the shell of Chuuya's ear with the paint on his own cheek, and bit the space between his choker and his jaw.

Chuuya didn't even slap him for it. His hands ran through his hair like electric shocks, the Sheep bracelet getting caught in the strands — out of any real control, Dazai felt his eyelids drop.

“It's a *gift!*” Kajii was complaining, still.

“It's a tree made of *bombs*. ”

“Not anymore!” The texture of his gloves was harsh against his knotted hair — Dazai inhaled a whiff of gunpowder from his jacket, and felt so pathetic for it he deflated. “It’s just lemons, now.”

“Oh,” Chuuya paused. A bit awkward, he cleared his throat. “Oh — thank you, then.”

Exasperated, Dazai groaned.

Pulling his hair harshly, the boy dragged his head back to meet his eyes. “Die somewhere else.”

“Tell me about London,” he insisted. *Tell me why you’re not mourning anymore.* The spot he had bitten was turning red, glinting with spit. He felt utterly confused. “Anywhere must be more entertaining than this place. Better yet — it smells here. I’m annoyed. Tell me in the backrooms.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow. “The *what?*”

Stepping back, he chased some whim and pulled on both his gloved hands with his own — a mere suggestion. “You ran so far you missed all the work on your little pet project. I’ll show you.”

His eyes hardened. “I didn’t run.”

“You did,” he replied, final and blank. *That, or they made you.* “I’m figuring out what made you return, though.”

It wasn’t much of a question at all. The Yokohama skyline — the way the buildings of the Headquarters looked when the sun fell, reflecting blood orange on rusted, rotten walls. *Coming back is a matter of wanting it more than something else,* Odasaku had once said — and Dazai had never gotten to ask him, *what was ever home enough for you to want it back?*

The low accusation had stiffened Chuuya’s shoulders. He pulled on his hands. “Come on,” Dazai insisted, in a specific tone. “Look around and trust your bored instincts.”

Gloved fingers curled around his hands — unsharpened talons. Dazai wondered if he could have torn that Sheep bracelet apart without him noticing, petty and childish and *because*; wondered if Chuuya would have raged about it.

He felt, sudden and strange, that he could have asked him to raze that place to the ground, and that the boy would have simply done it.

If Chuuya was played just right, he would have done almost anything Dazai asked of him. The thought was both revolting and lonely — a disappointment Mori wouldn’t have understood, because he wasn’t stupid enough to despise his best cards for being loyal. But Dazai disliked that dog whistle with superiority and childish contempt. Chuuya would never learn a thing. Dazai wouldn’t either — allegedly, it would only hurt one of them.

The boy jumped from the counter. “If I miss *Free Shots Hour* I’m killing you.”

The moment they reached the double back doors decorated with a *DO NOT ENTER* sign, squeezing between the dancing crowd and the too clever banter of scrounger deal makers, a booming voice thundered, masking even the music: “*What the fuck did you do to our drinks?*”

Dazai hooked his hand on the upper part of Chuuya’s harness, over the waistcoat. “We need to run.”

“What — *oh*, you fucker —“

Unluckily, they weren’t allowed to make a wild run for it — Mori appeared from seemingly nowhere, grasping the back of his coat as if he was a misbehaving kitten, loudly proclaiming apologies in his stead.

The unfriendly guy — whose mouth was stained by the blue neon paint Dazai had put in his group’s drinks — softened the moment he got a good look at Mori’s scarf and Dazai’s bandages. By the time Dazai managed to turn to Chuuya again, though, he was gleefully being dragged away by Kajii and some chanting men from the *Guerrilla*, calling for a *welcome home* drinking round.

Dazai’s fingers were being pulled along, still tied around his harness. Chuuya — frantic like the dog he was, attempting to find his eyes over the back of some tall *Guerrilla* woman; *but regretful, almost*, he thought, like a fool — grabbed his hand and squeezed, just once, mouthing: *later*.

“Now don’t be impatient,” he said, even if it was too low to be heard. Chuuya frowned as if he had. Dazai hated him some more.

He watched him disappear between the dancing crowd and his own startled laughter, as the men attempted to throw him in the air.

*Prettier than a ruby and ten times harder to break*, Dazai had once described him as, ranting to the cat that slept by his shipping container when it rained. *Despite those ugly expressions he makes all the time*. The entire syndicate seemed to bloom around him the more men realized he’d come back. Chuuya belonged to them before he belonged to even himself. *Ten times harder not to miss*.

“You know better than to anger drunk mafiosi, Dazai,” Mori tutted, as if hadn’t noticed a thing, cleaning invisible dust off his coat. “Come on. We managed to send an invite to *Le Directeur’s* representative. Play him for me, would you?”

Eyes on the glimmer of a buckle choker — Dazai could do nothing but nod.

The high society Mori had somehow tied to the Port Mafia — between Dazai’s plans and his own endlessly convincing alleged awkwardness — seemed to be entirely mystified by *The Sheepdog*. A good number of them had started playing cards in the widest of the VIP section — at the head of the table, a newly arrived Ace was scamming them with the joy of an elementary schooler. Looking at him brought, *has anyone told the Vice-Executive?* questions



back to mind — burrowed in a couch with his console plastered to his face, Dazai looked for Chuuya, and found him being handed a lit cigarette by a man from Kouyou's.

“ — *Hunting Dogs*, despite the success,” a man on Mori's other side was saying. Dazai won the next level of *Smash Smash!* and listened, quiet and unassuming. “The project has some virtue to it, but I wouldn't bet on its vitality.”

“It has worked enviably for almost ten years now,” Mori replied, with that tone he used with all outsiders — interested like a friend, and just vacant enough under that layer to make his interlocutor relax. The lack of expectation from a man who expected everything on a silver platter. “Any surgical procedure of that might comes with the side effect of a short life for its first subjects, but as long as the method is perfected —“

“And who says they won't cultivate an immortal life as well?” another woman intervened. “God knows Captain Fukuchi has invested far too much in this project not to subvert expectations.”

Mori laughed in a strange way. Dazai let it linger between a jump his character didn't take and the shiny golden coin on the other side.

“The Captain is a man of principle,” His fingers tapped the glass in a rhythm he recognized from Elise's hums — *war times songs*. “I've never met him personally, but an acquaintance of mine happened to hold him very close to his heart. A man like no other,” Something mocking pulled his lips. “And an infallible ally to our Government.”

The man snorted. “Which is surprising in its own right. Everyone knows how they feel about Abilities.”

“Why?” Dazai jumped in, widening his eye to its most childish extent. “Don't they like them?”

Miraculously, he didn't recognize him — his laughter echoed even over the music. “It took them the *Great War* to tolerate us, and even then — if it hadn't been for the *Maihime Project*, they would have simply dealt with us like the unstable freak show they think of us as.”

“The *Project* wasn't even supposed to even be popularized,” the woman next to him cut in, rubbing a neon orange smudge from her forehead. “Too dangerous; too high of a failure risk.”

Mori smiled in his glass. “You think so?”

“Someone spread a rumor — some poor man who was undoubtedly killed for it. Our only saving grace was that the *Project* didn't get revealed until after the *War* was over,” She shivered, a tad too dramatic. “Can you imagine if the public had been informed of the beginning of thousands of Ability-focused experiments in the middle of such a situation? Protests for the misplaced funds on one side, protests for the borderline inhuman trials Users would be put through on the other — it would have been a mess.”

Several tables away, a *Guerrilla* man tipped Chuuya's hat off his head — offering him a beer in exchange. Chuuya watched him try it on with a tight smile and no protests — he took it

back with no fanfare, spinning it from the chain.

*He'd have to show him the tunnels*, Dazai found himself planning. There was an itch under his skin he couldn't scratch. *And pray he got lost there until he starved.*

"Not like there weren't protests anyway," the man corrected her. "But people saw what all those Abilities had been able to do for the *War*, and it made them more amenable."

"The attention was suffocating, still."

"An entire side of the journalism force has only been focused on figuring out the extent of the alleged Ability experimentation, ever since," With a scoff, the man finished his glass. Mori studied his profile as he would have the Yokohama view from his office — *swearing* he could see the big picture from a few rooftops. "My theory is that they get fed some truth between fake information, so they have something to fill the papers with —"

"— without revealing any real business we aren't meant to know," The woman nodded. "The Port Mafia police system."

Mori grinned, raising his glass — gracefully untouched, thanks to Dazai's petty warning — and toasted right in his direction. "You flatter me. One of the Executives came up with it. We cannot claim such an old strategy for ourselves, though — the big fish have always known how to hide."

He wondered what Odasaku was doing.

"Still, with all these rumors you hear —" A lingering frown matted the woman's forehead. "I don't entirely know if the *Maihime Project* should have had the life it had. *Has.*"

"Why not?" Dazai questioned, in the right moment. When Mori brought him along, if not to fool some *unfooled* people, it was usually to ask his questions — so that Mori wouldn't appear too curious.

She shrugged. "My spies have ears in all relevant corners of the Government — they have torn that paper apart just to make sure their every whim would be approved on its basis."

"They technically based the entire treaty against the *Ballerinas* on it, all those years ago," the man agreed. Several tables away, Chuuya had laid his eyes on him. Dazai clicked his console. "The *Project* detailed a correct study of Abilities that would allow the community to benefit from it — it was basically authorization to act against any force attempting to self regulate Abilities."

"And it gives them ground to hide skeletons in their closet," The woman sighed, stretching her neck back to study the colorful lights. "God knows the international mess we would have had if the *Arahabaki Project* hadn't been —"

Dazai didn't even twitch.

He knew he didn't; would have sworn it in front of a curb and three set bullets — he was nauseatingly, *utterly* aware of the thin layer of frost petrifying his muscles in a cold field,

immobilizing him like a cornered prey. It made him *feel* his skin all too much — gave him corporeality that should have been terror, perhaps, but was all too sharp to be so. Thoughts swarmed across his head faster than he could convince them it wasn't worth it — he'd thrived on knowing more than the person beside him. He'd heard it — he'd never forget it.

It didn't seem to matter. Pressed against his right arm, Mori turned to look at him.

Before he could smile — a warning and an order and a question all in one; because Dazai hadn't even *twitched*, and if Mori had known to turn, all the same, there was *something* he had to be doing wrong — the ground began to shake.

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*Golden Demon* crashed against the falling metal beam upon their *VIP* section mere seconds before it could squish them like bugs.

“*Get out of the building!*” Hirotsu shouted, as every wall and every ceiling began to shatter by the corners, raining dust and thundering like the end of the world. The ground vibrated as if the earth itself had started spinning; the sound of the agitated sea from behind the coverage of screams was head-spinning. “Gather by the bridge —”

“*Don't get on the bridge!*”

Chuuya floated over the mass of panic and swarming bodies; his eyes were bloodshot. “Don't get on the bridge,” he insisted, using that barking voice of it to make every mafioso wince. “Not until the shocks are over. Gather by the settlement!”

““You wanna bury them in the crater?” the startled hiss out of Ace's mouth — close; helping two *Lizards* drag Dazai and Mori away from the ruins of the destroyed beam — was disbelieving.

“That might be fun,” Dazai offered. “Just the way to make the clubbing experience more —”

““You wanna let them drown, jackass?” the boy insisted. He stuck to the ceiling; roamed until he found the red shock of Mori's shoulder. “Get the Boss out! *Now!*”

Dazai crawled out of the *Lizards*' hands — he found a small group of *Secret Force* by the doors, which had been locked by the fallen *The Sheepdog* sign; brain resettling itself, with a deep sigh, he began ordering: “Get Chuuya and that User from the *Lizards* to open the doors. Move Mori to the closest car and get in the middle levels of the settlement — *not* the deeper

one, and not outer ones. *Middle*. Signal the Headquarters and have them call firefighters for the other end of the bridge, so they can send boats —“

“*Boats?*” one of the women questioned, as another shake — stronger and more vicious than any of the ones from the last weeks — tore a hole in the ceiling. “Isn’t the bridge better for —“

Cracking the already shattered ground, the unmistakable glow of Chuuya’s presence appeared by his side. “The bridge is gonna fall,” he told her, immediately understanding. “*The Catfish* is taking advantage of the higher floors being all in one place — a separate island, nonetheless. God *damn* —“

Before he could finish, darkness engulfed them.

It took him half a second to figure it out, eyes roaming over the sole light of the neon paint still stuck to the escaping crowd — *The Sheepdog* had been built with a higher tower on the side of its three-stories cube, planned for later *VIP* sections and more private businesses. The glass roof of the main room showed its fall in a devastatingly slow motion — groaning with a metallic screech.

Dazai moved before his mind could think — he pushed Chuuya with all the adrenaline left in his body, watching his *Tainted*-glowing body crash against the nearest wall.

Predictably quick with getting the plan, he tore the entire wall down — opening a chasm just wide enough for an elephant to pass through.

“*Go!*” Dazai ordered.

When most the crowd was gathered outside the club, the tower still didn’t fall — in the middle of the panicking shoulders bumping against his to run to the settlement, and the rain of debris from the destroyed two highest floors, the unmistakable glow of Chuuya’s flying silhouette peeked through the ruins. He jumped faster than the eye could follow, touching the tower and brushing his fingers on every falling piece of concrete, holding it all still in a floating, crimson haze.

But the earth kept shaking, so vicious Dazai fell to his feet at a mere attempt to breathe — even as the pieces didn’t fall, the ground cracked open.

Dazai crawled across the rumbling concrete, stumbling to avoid cars slowly slipping into the Bay. Standing on the nearest, taller piece of fallen wall, he cupped his hands around his mouth. “You need to follow the car with the Boss,” he screamed, over the deafening rumble.

Chuuya — hair floating around his face like luminescent tentacles, and flying far too high to pretend he’d read his lips — frowned.

“There’s still men inside,” he screamed back, probably guessing what he’d said. “Get them all on the road to the settlements and I —“

A hellish, horrid groan filled the air.

*The Catfish* was a blur of carrot orange and green, vibrating in the same yellowish light that had painted the Bay floor in reflected golden waves. He floated aimlessly, a thousand feet from where the bridge had already begun to crack, sending the few cars crossing it skidding into the water — even from a distance, the somewhat unstable expression stuck to his traits was unmistakable.

“Great,” Dazai huffed, nails bleeding from the effort to hold on onto the trembling piece of concrete he’d found. “*Seismic Jesus* is here.”

With unchanging focus, all the pieces held together by the glow of *Tainted* shoot for the sky with vertiginous intensity — with a battle cry of sorts, Chuuya crashed more than half of what had once been *The Sheepdog* into that flying dot.

One of the skyscraper-tall waves from the storm soaked Dazai head to food, slamming one of his temples on his makeshift lifesaver. “*Great,*” he whined, again. “We’ll have to rebuild. Where are your stupid yellow hats *now*, Hatrack?”

“*Can you shut the fuck up?*” Chuuya roared.

Both news and rescuing helicopters began to populate the sky, right as the bridge was finally snapped in two clean halves. *Mori wouldn’t like that*, Dazai barely had time to think, watching the helicopter’s lights shine a white circle on the waves — golden threads, thick like cables, erupted from the tips of *The Catfish*’s fingers, hooking around the half of the bridge not connected to the city. In a single move — it was raised like a baseball bat.

“Oh,” Dazai offered, helpful.

*The Catfish* slapped Chuuya away with the bridge like a misbehaving fly.

The rumble it caused in the air sent a wave of pressure that almost had Dazai land into the sea — the roar was like thunder. On the other side of *The Sheepdog*’s skeleton, mafiosi sped across ruins of buildings that had fallen when the settlement had been created, attempting to flee the maze to land in the crater. The golden threads had hooked themselves on the edges of the artificial island, as if to pull it closer — all they did was rattle it.

“Boring,” *The Catfish* said, hysterical. He wasn’t laughing, but it was a near thing — he had the crazed eyes Dazai had seen in every man he had tortured. “*Boring! All of you! All of—*”

His baseball-bat bridge half landed on him with cartoonish, horrifying swiftness — glowing a merciless, *Tainted* red, and weighing at least twice as much as usual.

“Do I *look* like a baseball ball, you *fucking carrot?*” Chuuya questioned, standing on top of the guilty structure. He didn’t seem hurt — he had to have modified the gravity of the makeshift bat the instant it had hit him. Momentarily childish, Dazai let out a, *woah*. “*Do you know how much this is gonna cost to repair?*”

Golden threads appeared around the piece of bridge, circling it like spiderwebs.

Before Dazai could see the smile fall from Chuuya’s face, his in-ear began whistling.

“—Boss,” Kouyou was calling. “*You guys need to stop this earthquake right now!*”

Dazai huffed. “It’s kind of hard to nullify a flying man, Ane-san,” he informed. “Poor Chuuya got crushed like the minuscule ant he is, and he didn’t even die! I’m really trying here —“

“*Demon child!*” she snapped, tone lined in *something* that had him straighten. “A building fell — we need Chuuya here, *now*. Boss is —“

*Underneath.*

He exhaled.

“Got it,” he concluded. Then he took his in-ear off, and threw it in the Bay.

Crawling upwards, bloodied nails sinking in the destroyed parking lot around him, Dazai set his eyes on the swinging-bridge match still going on between Chuuya and *The Catfish*. For a blink, he couldn’t understand how Chuuya hadn’t yet crushed him — then, he noted the golden threads hooked around the night streets of the mainland, and knew Chuuya wasn’t willing to risk startling the User into a *last breath catastrophone*.

Whining and huffing, Dazai stumbled all the way to the edge of the coast. When the strange bat slashed the air near his face — close enough to startle someone less aggravated — he hooked his elbows on the shattered pieces of road and metal, and landed on top of the bridge.

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” Chuuya screamed, jumping from spot to spot of the bridge — attempting to find an opening to knock *The Catfish* out where the bridge wouldn’t crash the city. “Get off!”

“You need to go to Mori!” Dazai screamed, helpfully — hands tight around two cracks in the concrete, body being swung around. Vomit was gathering behind his teeth. “He’s stuck under a building! Ane-san’s moaning about it!”

Horrified, Chuuya turned to look at the settlement.

“It’s useless,” *The Catfish* insisted. His voice reached Dazai’s ears with the intermittency of a washing machine, depending on how close he was to the baseballing source. “It’s *useless* —“

“*Shut up for a second!*” Chuuya snapped. “What do you *mean* under a building —“

“I *told* you to chaperon him on his way to the settlement —“

“Well, *sorry*, if I’m a little busy here —“

“Doing *what!*” Dazai screeched. “I’m about to fall in the Bay!” He paused, skull bumping on the stone. “Actually, that might not be too —“

“*Shut up!*”

“It’s useless,” *The Catfish* insisted. Both the floating and the earthshaking seemed too much of a concession; Dazai imagined the fun Ango would have writing down their full Ability — then, he imagined Odasaku shaking his seat, blank faced, to recreate the experience as he described. Dazai began to realize he might have gotten himself a concussion. “All the corners of this earth touched by my threads will do just as I say. Not even your gravity can stop them. Not even —” He giggled. “Not *even* —”

The bridge was agitated higher — before he or Chuuya could do anything about it, it hit both the emergency helicopters with one swipe.

They crashed in the ocean between alarms and screams, effectively cutting any recording and any possible help on the way to the settlement. His ear rang, as if Kouyou’s voice was still screaming at him, *Golden Demon* uselessly digging the earth.

Across that vertiginously shaking reality, he saw Chuuya straighten.

He understood his idea the instant that he saw it bloom behind his mismatched eyes — partly because it began swarming across the *worst ideas possible* in Dazai’s own mind. He followed his line of vision all the way to the settlement — too deep and too far away for the golden threads to reach, and seemingly unshaken.

“Chuuya,” he called.

Their eyes met. It seemed — annoyingly but trustingly constant — to be enough.

He reached for the gun under his coat right as the other boy jumped away from the bat-bridge, landing on the other half — still connected to the mainland. Head ringing and spinning from the unstopping movements of his only anchor, Dazai squinted, and shot *The Catfish* in the shoulder.

It wasn’t nearly enough to kill him — still, he began screeching; an ear-defending sound that shook the Bay harder than the golden threads.

In the corner of his eye, Dazai saw Chuuya *rip apart* the other half of the bridge off the city’s coast — and fling it, with a frustrated shout, onto the Suribachi City island.

Chuuya passed by like scarlet lighting — he barely saw him sink his fist through *The Catfish*’s chest, stilling all the motions in his face. The plan unveiled across Dazai’s eyes in the blink of a second *The Catfish* took to rage, and to throw him away with the whole bridge like a boring, useless ragdoll.

*Use the other half of the bridge*, he recalled, as he fell. *Separate the artificial island in two, so the golden threads can’t reach the settlement, and they can escape with no earthquakes.* Then Chuuya just had to fling himself at maximum velocity — land among the ruins before the bridge could, and take Mori out before the landing once-road could trap him permanently under there. The bridge *would* cut the island in two — even if he calculated it as precisely as possible, there was the possibility that Mori wouldn’t be on the right half.

Dazai understood the plan.

He knew it immediately when it changed.

Distant waves rushed by his ears the further and faster he fell — Dazai widened his arms and his legs, eyes closing, focusing on nothing but the air whipping his face. *This might work*, he thought, in a haze as grazing as his bandages. Suicide always seemed to flash by his mind, in near death situations. It was funny. Dazai had to be concussed. *This might just* —

Gloved hands grasped his sides, pulling him flat against a scorching hot body.

“God fucking *damn you*,” Chuuya snarled in his ear, with something like funerary acceptance.

Every bone in Dazai’s body screeched. He opened his eyes to red hair and his mind traveling too fast to follow — the absence of *Tainted* around Chuuya’s goosebump-covered skin; the fact that he was supposed to be *miles away*, dragging *Mori* out of the end; the sinking, catastrophic weight of the bridge plunging onto their tiny, Ability-less bodies at devastating velocity. How they were both falling, and Chuuya *didn’t fall*, as a rule. He was the excess of it all. Gravity didn’t fall. A heart beat against his chest, enraged and everywhere and *known*.

*Not with you*, he thought about snapping, with a terror he realized he’d never felt before. *Not with* —

They hit ground with a blast that shattered his entire skeleton to pieces. Dazai had hands that weren’t his printed around him, and then a sharp *something* piercing him, and a sharper howl of pain ringing in his ear, and the sky itself burying him — and then they were falling again, and they were falling, and they fell.

The world turned back, and that was it.

## Chapter End Notes

random businesswoman: oh yeah the man who came up with the mahime project really is a genius

mori: :D

dazai: :|

random businesswoman: the arahabaki project being connected to it really is —

mori: :0



dazai: :0

WELL HELLO THERE i hope you guys missed me! as i already said at the start of this chapter, it has been some very long days. hoping this chapter being posted will translate to more stability in my life, and hoping to get the next chapter out soon!! for now, miranda will have to be enough of an apology. be honest, did anyone theorize Cat. just Cat? did you. it's what hirotzu deserves.

and cliffhanger ending! i would like to tell you it's the last one, given we're basically at the end, but... i'm actually not sure i can say that. hope you'll like what comes next ;)

as always, thank you so much for all the comments and the love you show this fic, and i hope to live up to your expectations <33 i'll see you soon, have a wonderful week!

# MAY

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xxxiii.*

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*Case number: 37837387*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were rescued from [...]*

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**Excerpt from *Archive Number 738766*: “Testimony of Sakaguchi Ango.”**

**Special Division for Unusual Powers .**

Written & Analyzed by: ***Sakaguchi Ango.***

*[...] I would often be asked what infiltrating had been like, in the following months.*

*To be absolutely honest, my last year in the Port Mafia was the beginning of the end for any semblance of legal control over Yokohama — the peak of a position that they have maintained since. And yet, from up close, I did witness some cracks in the marble. They carry them still — with their losses and their weaker spots. They have merely learned how to jump and skip them.*

*A great part of it, I theorize, can be faulted to Mori Ougai's slow, inevitable realization — that the greater the power, the greater the risk to lose it. I have never referred to ~~the Boss~~ Mori Ougai as a power hungry man, and I still refuse to do it. It would not be quite accurate. But there is hunger in him, and it has pushed him to gather a number of extraordinary people to surround himself with. He has encouraged their power thirst — he has also, I suppose, failed to realize that he held power as well. That starving people will eat even those who have taught them that hunger.*

*I do not know when Mori Ougai began to fear Double Black. I do not think he would have limited their agency in any of the Mafia affairs — he is far too clever to keep his best card out of the battlefield. But I do know this: the moment a clever man realizes his chess pieces might be starting to slip down the board, he just pretends to knock them to the ground — and then he starts another game.*

*I do not think either Nakahara Chuuya nor Dazai Osamu ever realized their [...]*

[Continue reading] [?]

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“...ear me?” A mechanical screech, somewhere over him — around; nowhere. “Tell me you can —“

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Dazai woke up to Chuuya's corpse staring at him.

*Chuuya*, some lost corner of his thoughts supplied — non-anesthetized by the ache throbbing so *vividly* across the entirety of his body, it sort of felt like nothing at all, *always woke up first*.

It was rare for them to be together at dawn — or at night; or in the evening; all depending on the Mafia's less than set schedule — despite Dazai's insistence to invite himself over and roll Chuuya out of the futon, happily taking his place. He slept when his body allowed, and Chuuya — even if it meant being left with offensive drawings all over his face — slept when work permitted.

But there were exceptions — and Chuuya always woke up first.

“How unideal —” he attempted to say. A croaking, ugly thing came out instead, scratching his throat to blood he had nowhere to spit.

The darkness was material — pressing and suffocating, embracing and burying his every sense somewhere too far away to reach. Portion of the weight *was* material, pressing against every inch of his body in a sweaty, blood-warm mass that had his skin prickle and scream in frustration.

His head was pillowed on something sturdy — laying his cheek on that same spot, nose brushing his cheek, Chuuya's eyes were glazed and lifeless.

Staring right at him.

“Don't,” he tried to say. Nothing came out but the regurgitating taste of old blood — and for an instant, Dazai was sure he was going to die like that, choking on his own vomit. “Don't — what a boring matter,” He tried to move, and the weight didn't move, and the darkness didn't move, and his heart beat out of his chest with *something* — Dazai wanted his bandages. And if he had them already, he wanted more of them. “I've told you, I'm not — dying with —”

He tried to sit up, lungs stuffed and ears ringing, elbows digging into a rough, hard floor.

Reality trembled and rumbled and shook — something sharp and unbearably heavy hit his head, falling with dust and the blood starting to trail from his forehead. Chuuya stayed dead.

He closed his eyes as the floor dropped.

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Part of the ceiling had cracked, allowing a line of moonlight to strike the darkness in a line.

There was something *more* to the ache — a burning throbbing a little under his ribs, pulsing along to his blood. Dazai didn't know why he had not noticed it before, but it was unignorable — it pierced a bit *more* with every breath he took, and it sizzled as if electrified. Chuuya's nose was stuck on his cheek, still — his eyes had been closed, though. Dazai tried to feel his breath on his skin, and felt nothing but his own puffy exhales.

"Ane-san will kill me," he croaked out, very displeased.

Chuuya — the bother — didn't respond.

The moonlight allowed him a better look at his cage — something that turned out to be harder than predicted, given his pounding head and his *vision*, so blurry it was nauseating. The sky was a void of cracked concrete, crumbling imperceptibly under the pressure of — *something*. Dazai couldn't quite recall what he was doing there.

Over their bodies was a slab of concrete, stretching out over them; a makeshift pocket of space, free from the rocks and the rubble, smaller than the space one would have found between bunk beds. It was scattered in horribly unstable points — metallic, days-new rebars poking out.

He inhaled, squeezing to gather thoughts. It was a supremely bad choice — the pounding of his head turned into hammering, and something far too warm and liquid pooled across his nape.

He tried to focus on Chuuya's dead face, because, *ugly things tended to wake people up*, he thought, sensibly — but there was nothing to see, not behind the makeshift a rain-wet glass of his eyes; breathing musty air that was a bit more disgusting with every lungful of it.

"Hey," he tried. It sounded awfully quiet to his own ears. Dazai wished he could have at least *seen* him, ugly as he was, if he truly had to die that humiliating death. Staring at his ceiling had never been anything but lonely. His eyes were rolling to the back of his head. "Hey —"

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Madame Tanaki's tattoos were immaterial under his fingertips.

He traced them with little attention, most of his gaze directed to the liquid blue light of the laptop in front of them. Swirling lines and crooked curves — sharp angles and circling ink, spreading into tree roots Dazai didn't know how to read. He had once been told how to count plants' years, but he could never remember.

"I got most of them when I was younger than you," she told him. Dazai wasn't supposed to know, but he knew that meant she'd given them to herself. "Granted me good sight, good hearing — they made me stronger."

*What can your tattoos do?*, he'd asked, with his fingers deep in her blood. *What can't they?*, she had whispered, between terrified wheezes.

But that was — somewhere in time. Not at that moment. He was tracing her tattoos and she was breathing and unbloodied, and Dazai had no place to mourn the living. *Hypocrite*, she mouthed. He was tracing her tattoos, and his fingers were crimson and familiar and far too caring.

*You're just like me*, Mori had warned.

"Dying isn't painful, is it?" he asked her.

He knew — he'd always known — but he wanted to ask anyway. She opened her mouth, and the word were suffocated by the *Spider Eyes*' music or by some distant wind — concrete cracking over his head, and a corpse sleeping on his —

"Somewhat," she concluded, pensive. "Not when it ends."

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"Oi," A pained groan, right in his ear. He knew how punches felt — the hit on the side of his arm was too weak to be it. A lightning strike under his ribs; an inhale. "Don't you *fucking dare* be —"

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He woke — he stayed awake — under the sound of shifting rubble and settling dust, and a dead Chuuya's half-hearted curses.

Instinctive panic, claustrophobia, and some lingering ache amalgamated into an uncanny sort of calm. Dazai's head was hammering still, but he felt slightly more *inside* it — enough to taste the dried blood splattered on his chin, possibly from biting his tongue during the fall; and the familiar burn of a broken leg.

*It wasn't the worst pain he'd ever felt*, he mused, *probably*. But there was something —

“— fucking *great*,” the voice by his ear was saying. It was awfully quiet; it tickled his cheek. “Just what I —”

“Can you *stop* —” Dazai muttered, trying to land the words between his teeth, and not somewhere in the pasty nothingness in his mouth, “ — touching me? You're slimier than a slug.”

Chuuya halted breathing all together.

“Ah,” he said. Then, much squallier: “You goddamn *moron* —”

Coughs wrecked his chest, rattling Dazai along with no mercy. A vague idea crawled up his nostrils and under his eyelids — putting his hands on the boy's chest and *pushing*, just to get that alarming, dreadful feeling out of the unbandaged corners of his flesh. But his arms were jelly, and it seemed like every lungful was taking air it'd never give back.

Blood and drool landed by his ear, both coagulated and fatigued. Chuuya laid his forehead on that spot of the concrete-pillow for a moment, inhaling and exhaling in that whistle-like tone he knew signaled broken ribs.

He dropped his cheek down, staring at him; barely visible, on his blind side. Dazai didn't dare complain — but with aggravating understanding, Chuuya grasped the edge of his eye bandages with two bloodied, shaking fingers, scratching him in the effort to messily pull them down.

Dazai thought about getting mad about it.

The boy's tone was blank, when he asked: ““You gonna stay awake this time around?””

The moonlight wasn't of much use, but he saw Chuuya clearer than the crumbling pieces of stone. Blood refused to dry on his freckled face, aided by the sweat of that airless space — where it didn't clot, it flanked and rained down, turning Chuuya's face into a puzzle of decay; all pale cheeks and lips scrapped to white, raw skin.

Dazai mouthed *something*. When he noticed it had made no sound, he insisted: “Why haven’t you...”

Chuuya stared at some nothings over the bridge of his — *broken*, he noted — nose. “Look around and think carefully about what you’re about to ask me.”

Wobbly and uncomfortable, Dazai tried to focus on something other than the stickiness of the blood and the asphyxiating breathing space. He was bound to not stop thinking, not if Mori was around — and Mori wasn’t, but wasn’t he always? They’d fallen with the building and Mori had to be somewhere. From the slit the moonlight had used to pass, vertiginous distance was shown separating their landing ground from the road itself — but still, it was nothing Chuuya couldn’t have crushed, if he’d just *gotten up* and stopped *touching him* —

Very purposeful, Chuuya lifted his hips.

Pain erupted under his ribs.

“Ah,” Dazai said, helpfully.

There was a metallic, too-new pole sticking out from Chuuya’s back — *a bar of sorts*, Dazai thought; *the railing of a balcony?* — which was weird, and nonsensical, and Dazai barely had three blinks to wonder *where* exactly it had come from, considering all that was under Chuuya was Dazai himself — and then he understood, a bit crooked and a tad too calm, that the bar had impaled Dazai first, and Chuuya had followed.

“Ah,” he whined, again. The ache in his lower sternum had been noted, and now it would not fall back. Delirium was on the verge of tipping him off a cliff. “*Ah*, this is so unfortunate.”

“Got my arm stuck under — something,” Chuuya added, looking as if he’d been thoroughly *done* with that whole matter hours ago. “So I can’t even try to —“ He went a bit strabig; pressed his lips together the way he did when swallowing his own vomit. “— lift me up. We’re stuck.”

Dazai was horrified. “This can’t be.”

“Listen — don’t fucking waste our air —“

“*With Chuuya?*” he snapped. His tone hurt his wounds and made dust fall. “Get yourself off. Right now.”

“*How*, jackass?”

“Bend your minuscule body! Do you think I’m willing to live my last instants stuck in a lovers’ embrace with *you*, of all —“

Chuuya spluttered. “*What* fucking *lovers’ embrace*, we’re piled up like a meat skewer —“

*Meat skewer double suicide*, he thought, all corners of his body screaming in tandem — when he heard of it, Mori would laugh until he dropped and died. Mori would know — dead was dead, and all the beasts always knew. Dead was dead, and —



Over a strike of pain across his skull — *concussion*, he thought; along with having wriggled wildly enough to bump the side of his head against their makeshift pillow — he blinked too hard.

When he opened his eyes again, time had passed.

He knew it sporadically — there was some pressure around his head, a familiar fabric that he only recognized when he felt the lack of tie around his neck.

Dazai was still terribly confused. “I —“

There was pressure around his head; the familiar fabric of his tie, tightening around a head wound he didn’t quite feel. Nails gripped his wrist — the same side of his usually bandaged eye. The added ache was not much of an ache at all — it took him a moment to understand the words being traced. *Don’t talk*, Chuuya said. *Roof. Fragile.*

It was less verbose than usual — it lacked snark too. Either they couldn’t afford to move, or Chuuya’s own concussion was paying off.

He darted a glance to the grim, sharp point of the balcony bar sticking from his lower back — the curling metal was sculpted like a leaves-covered branch, which explained the painful dig Dazai felt across every organ he’d never counted. Blood and grime were splattered across the pole, turning it into a dirty conglomeration that Mori would have cringed about — the edge was stuck on their roof, holding it a single foot from Chuuya’s back, like a too thin column.

“How long?” Dazai whispered, just to test the resistance of that precarious hiding spot.

Chuuya’s voice was a whiff across his cheek, drying the blood on his face — so quiet he had to close his eyes to focus on hearing it. “Few hours, I think. They didn’t see where we landed.”

“You —“ He blinked, forcing himself to order the little he remembered into neat boxes. Permanent head damage would have given Ango an ulcer. “You broke the island in two.”

A huff tickled the shell of his ear. “‘S not even the worst thing I’ve done to Suribachi City.”

Dazai barely had time to tell himself he wouldn’t laugh at it, and he was already snorting. The chuckles hurt his chest a bit more with every motion; he wanted to open his eyes and watch the self-deprecation on Chuuya’s face, and ask him — *how did you not make it hurt*, and, *how did you manage to make it hurt?*

“Who am I in this context?” he asked. That wouldn’t have been a bad death, had it worked on *impact* — but the pain was blinding and hot and *distracting*, and Chuuya had been a corpse and he wasn’t and he would be. “The Sheep? Arahabaki?”

“Oi,” Chuuya warned. “Don’t go crazy.”

“I’m going to die with *you*. Something like that would send most men in a padded room.”

His scoff was disbelieving, curled around a voice that sounded somewhat wasted. “We’re not *dying*. Idiot. We just have to wait for them to —“

He trailed off. His breathing pattern was far too accelerated; Dazai felt it smudge blood from his wound across his chest — rattled by tremors that were less voluntary than even the spasms both his hands went nowhere without. He darted a look at his sole free arm — his glove had gotten ripped apart, leaving most fingers naked.

“Ah,” he concluded, again, trying to exhale the tension insistent on making his muscles bleed out faster. “This is even worse than a phone call. I can’t even block your number.”

Chuuya’s snort was dazed. The stuttering ache of his still limbs couldn’t possibly be worse than what *Corruption* usually put him through — but something in his tone was acutely speechless. Dazai wondered how long he had spent trying to wake him up.

“Want me to tell you about London, now?” he asked, crudely. He didn’t sound like talking was something his body particularly wanted him to do. “I convinced Adam to break into a royal wedding.”

He cleared his throat, trying to get blood coagulations away from his vocal chords. “Did you jump out of the cake?”

“No,” he admitted. “But I *did* have to dress up as one of those *big-ass-hat-having* guards.”

“Tell me there are pictures.”

“For you? Never,” Chuuya scurried a bit closer, to ease the painful curve of the pole. All it did was land him far too close in his peripheral vision for Dazai not to open his eyes. Ephemeral, the curve of his nose — splattered in fresh and old blood — brushed his cheek almost shyly. The materiality of it startled him. His ears buzzed. Abruptly, he could feel every inch of Chuuya’s body on him — the needles and the pins and the *life* of it; *dead was dead and the beasts always knew*. Dazai had never been buried under a corpse at all. “I did think about attempting to murder the Queen, just to annoy *him*.”

His brother’s unnamed presence was a rock on a still lake. Chuuya’s tone lacked sincere humor.

A faraway memory peeked between Dazai’s blurred thoughts — they had been taken prisoners by a group in Spain, once, handcuffed just close enough for *Tainted* to be useless. They had taunted the cocky capturers until one of them had stepped close enough for Chuuya to bite his nose off — the knife he had stolen from the man’s waist had been buried into the second capturer’s chest with his teeth.

*I like out of border missions*, he’d told him, then. Dazai had vaguely thought that maybe it was all effortlessly sensible — that Chuuya could only be truly vicious when Yokohama and its people weren’t on the line.

A shoulder nudged his. “What about you?”

He studied the cracks on the ceiling. “Me?”

“What have *you* been doing these past few months?” Chuuya insisted — nauseatingly, casual; drowning in the ease of someone who could have been gone six *years*, and not have blinked all the same. Chuuya existed everywhere and in all times, as careless as the wind — too powerful to be stopped. Collaring him had been a badge of honor, and the conversation was maddening — the roof seemed to drop with every goosebump inducing whisper between them. “Seems like everyone is shitting their pants about you just the same. Tanaki said they’re working you to the bone.”

Her name fell by his ear like a pebble.

Dazai vaguely thought about kicking it — except his leg was broken, and too far away, and it had taken ten minutes and fifty seven seconds for Tanaki to burn to the bone.

*Perhaps*, he considered, it would have felt better if she’d died after finishing *Spider Eyes*. In a way. *All of Spider Eyes is over*, she would have told Dazai, in his dreams. *What can I do next?*

*What do I owe you*, he questioned. All of it was transactional; Mori had sworn so. *Truth?*

Instead of mentioning the underground tunnels — of mentioning the bank accounts, or the way Mori’s smile looked as it rotted with pride and no fear and the *certainty* of a gun to his back, he offered: “I’ve implemented new punishments for boring high rank goons.”

“*Pot, kettle,*” Chuuya gulped down blood — then, he settled his cheek more firmly against the concrete, tickling Dazai’s dislocated shoulder. His gaze was strangely focused on him, when he turned his face just *so*; in the darkness, his eyes were almost the same color. “An example?”

There were flares in the darkness — either that, or his vision was growing spots. They painted a *Ferris Wheel* reflection in the boy’s pupils. A bit distracted, a bit concussed, Dazai said: “Pudding.”

A frown. “What about pudding?”

“That’s the torture.”

“As in —” Chuuya squinted. The *Ferris Wheel* spun and spun. “As in, eating it or as in —”

Dazai shrugged. It jolted the breathing, scattered edges of the wound around the metal bar, startling something like a whistle out of his lungs. It was sort of maddening — waiting to die. Or waiting to live. Both. Neither. “I buried a man alive behind a wall.”

Somewhat interested, he asked: “Why?”

“I was tired of how much he was screaming,” he recalled, vacantly. “At first it was insubordination, but then it became traitorous. I tortured him. He screamed and screamed. I built the wall right as he screamed in my face, and then he stopped screaming.”

Chuuya moved a bit against his shoulder. He couldn't see him, in the darkness — he could taste the *wondering* swelling his face along to the ruins-made bruises. Chuuya wouldn't have done something like that. But Chuuya would have stood and watched him do it, had he been there.

*No*, Dazai thought. Mori would have tutted at that stupidity. *No, he would have put the bricks down too.*

“And?”

“I forced Gramps to go on a date with one of Ane-san's girls, after he messed up the cargo count,” he added, recalling the humiliating sight the man had made over the candlelit table Dazai had hidden and sneered underneath of. “So he could get a taste of the unemployed life.”

With only one arm free — one bent in a less than optimistic angle — Chuuya still managed to punch his side.

He coughed. “Not on my deathbed.”

“You *ass*,” the boy hissed. “He's *married*.”

Clearer than any real memory Dazai held of *The Sheepdog's* wreckage, realization sizzled down his spine like a reinvigorated life force. “Chuuya,” he breathed. *I do hope you will keep it to yourself*, Hirotsu had said. “Listen.”

“No, that is *so* fucked up — why would you cause him marital problems? Last thing we need is for him to become grumpier —“

He wanted to reach up and shake him. “Chuuya. She's a cat.”

A moment of silence — constellated by the wheezing, shattered breaths out of their tortured lungs — had him feel Chuuya's hesitant heartbeat in full force. Eventually, a bit serious, the boy dared: “That's just no way to refer to a lady —“

“No,” Dazai insisted. It felt utterly urgent, all of the sudden — words he hadn't spoken on a phone call he hadn't received and hadn't cared to make. *What are some good last words?*, Odasaku had asked him, once. “You aren't listening to me. Miranda is a *cat*.”

Another pause.

The boy raised his head as far as he could, looking him right into his closest eye. He breathed over the bulb, startling tears in the corners. “When you say *cat* —“

Mournful, he confirmed: “Feline. *Meow*.”

The last breath of quiet turned deathly near the end. “That —“ Chuuya gaped at nothing, his face utterly speechless. “That *motherfucker*.”

“I know.”

“For *three years*?”

“I knew it from the start, obviously.”

He squinted — winced, when it made the cut across his temple bleed. “No, you didn’t.”

“Of course I did,” Dazai hid his face from him, studying the makeshift ceiling with all the superiority of the strategist he was meant to be. Hirotsu wouldn’t snitch — not when he held his secret in his hands. “I was waiting for you to figure it out. A hopeless crusade that lasted years — predictably. A supposed wife who even Mori had never met? Who he only talked about whenever his clothes got destroyed by impatient fits?”

Dread painted Chuuya’s cheeks redder than even the blood. “Women can be violent.”

“You are so stupid it’s a wonder the weight of your empty head managed to crash through the concrete,” Dazai noted, pitifully, knocking on the stone underneath them.

Purposefully masochist, Chuuya shifted his weight on the metal bar, *pressing*. The gasp out of his mouth was too dry to be pitched any higher than a groan — light-headed, Dazai squeezed his eyes against the faded moonlight, and gritted his teeth over the sound of blood bubbling between Chuuya’s lips, as he choked.

“Bad idea,” he wheezed, a thread of voice. “Bad fucking idea.”

“And the sky is blue,” Dazai panted.

No answer came.

Chuuya’s mismatched eyes were shut, that time around — he looked strangely peaceful; the way he never did when he slept. His chin dug his shoulder uncomfortably. When fresh blood began to pool from his ear, he watched it trail across his freckles in a crooked road — noted, for the first time, that the stains of neon paint on him offered a dim light across the darkness.

“Are *you* going to stay awake?” he taunted. It lacked the necessary bite; stuttering, imprecise flames were weaving patterns on his frontal lobe — all in an effort to have his eyes feel too heavy for the space they’d been buried in.

*Make-a-doll*, Elise had nodded, once, dragging him to some pink shop by the hand. *I’ll make one of you*. Dazai hadn’t realized just how much she touched him, until she hadn’t been allowed to anymore. Sunken in the earth, he found himself missing the world outside — pointlessly. He had studied it as a child and memorized it too well — everything he had seen from then on had been blind in one eye and blurred. Memory.

He ached, for a moment. Then it passed; as everything did.

Behind the glass of Hirotsu’s wristwatch, the clock hand ticked.

“Didn’t even get to pick my urn,” Dazai let himself mutter, a little more than an hour worth of ticks later. Mori would whine about that too — *you should have done it when I said it*, he could see him tut over his corpse, right before the flames got to keep him forever. *How haven’t you learned to listen to me yet, Dazai?*

The blood loss swarmed across his body like a particularly persistent corpse bug, devouring most of his rational sense.

It took him a moment to figure out the groggy, sluggish syllables against his shoulder were words: “Urn?”

It was hard to say how long they had been there for. There were no echoing sounds from the world outside those floors upon floors of a cave — not even the rush of waves. Dazai couldn’t recall if there were time limits that weren’t meant to be crossed — when impaled and concussed and bone crushed. There had to be. Dazai didn’t want to die in pain. *There must be a point*, Mori had sworn.

Chuuya sounded pasty and confused — a moment before he could bet on him not recalling their current situation, he croaked: “Where —“

“Impaled,” he offered, lowering his tone to a whisper that had him visibly shiver — letting him know not to scream. “Concussed. Bones crushed.”

“Oh.”

Wet squelches crawled across the silence — a hint of Chuuya moving around the wound; a hiss of pain suffocated against Dazai’s coat.

“I picked mine years ago.”

Suddenly, he felt tired. “Professor N almost toasted you crispy and electricity-flavored,” he let him know. *Dead is dead* and Dazai hoped he died before Chuuya, if he had to. Less time listening to his voice. But they’d come get them, at some point — he knew. It ached almost more than the wounds. “That’s not a badge of honor. Only mere rationality.”

“You’re such —“ Something that was too wet and bloody to be a burp left Chuuya’s mouth; he planted one hand by the ruins next to them — realized he couldn’t *stand*, a second after. “An *ass*. ”

“No, I’m not,” Dazai lied.

“You *are*, ” It almost sounded like a whine — but Nakahara Chuuya didn’t *whine*. “What the fuck did they put in your baby formula that you’re that fucking allergic to being a good person?”

Dazai had dug himself a grave near one of the few people who had his dirt under their nails. He stared at the ceiling, ignoring the call of fluorescent paint in the groaning, settling body over him. *The blood loss*, he thought. The idea of dying alone was the only part of it that was terrifying.

*Not enough to fear it*, he always concluded. *Not enough to —*

“Do we deserve a grave?” he questioned. He hadn’t meant to — he pretended the opposite.

Frustratingly straightforward, Chuuya did nothing but shrug. He was sickly warm against all parts of him — he smelled like ruins and dust and blood. Dazai had wanted to touch him since he had seen him under Arcade lights, and that was the closest he’d ever get — forced and *skewered* and bloodied. *Dazai tends to linger*. “Do you want it?”

*How stupid*, he thought. Wanting it would just make it worse. Quietly, Dazai tried to make his peace with the understanding that he could never tell anything to anyone ever again.

*Odasaku*, he remembered. Belatedly guilty. *Odasaku would get it*. If Dazai had to die next to anyone, then —

“They’re all ugly,” he lamented. How many hours had it been? How many more left? How many bandages should he have worn as to not feel nauseated? “Far too small. I’m not you. And far too big, too — my ashes can’t spread themselves around. What if a piece of me lingers?” The words were slipping dangerously, down a drain not even the building could crush into inscrutability. “What if I don’t die at all?”

Sticky silence pressed against him.

He half convinced himself that the boy had passed out again. Then, in a tone that was *inches* less woozy than Dazai’s own, Chuuya said: “That’s stupid.”

It carried all the feather light flippancy of a fool who’d shaken his ghosts’ hands. Dazai hated his sincere tranquillity almost more than he had despised his rage. “I wouldn’t expect someone of your intellect to —“

“Just get in my urn.”

Abruptly, Dazai knew nothing at all.

Silence creaked louder than the screeches of metal — than the squelch of their connected, wet sound. “What?” he managed to ask, flatly.

“They —“ Chuuya squeezed his eyes very hard, trying to find his train of thoughts across his own sick delirium. “They put— people together, sometimes. Battle comrades or — if they’re close and they haven’t picked one yet.”

He made it sound horrifyingly easy. Dazai wondered what a day in his bones would have felt like. “We aren’t *close*,” he reminded him — spelling it out, uncertain if his concussion had worsened.

“No, but when I kill you — I could carry them with me as war spoils”

“You want my ashes as war spoils?”

“Bastard,” A disorientated, exhausted yawn stretched Chuuya’s mouth until he could see the tooth he’d cracked on the landing. “You’re making this too big of a fucking deal. Put your stupid ashes in my urn or don’t. I don’t care.”

Dazai knew, unexplainably, that he truly didn’t.

It escaped like a prayer — a begging to get a peek at how a more human mind breathed. There was no reason why he should have offered anything of that scope — no reason why Dazai should have accepted. *And get dog ashes all over mine?*, tickled the tip of his tongue — and a thousand sharper, emptier answers. Dazai was haunting his own body — every effort to die was a petty ghost’s proof of existence. Stupid, hopeless Chuuya couldn’t even see phantoms anymore.

*We found his parents*, Mori had said.

*Does he look like someone who lingers?*, he hadn’t taunted him, in response. *Does he look like me?*

It escaped before he could exhale — pensive in that way that belonged to reports, and to clinic rooms, and to the less alive: “Is your slug brain truly stupid enough not to actually want me dead, or are you just tired of mourning?”

*There’s devotion in sacrifice*, Kouyou had told him — not quite an answer; not a question of, *do you wish to die, or are you still happy here?* But Dazai hadn’t expected more. Grief had never truly known him, but the woman was always somewhat soaked in it. It made studying her a boring, unchanging, awfully tempting affair.

*I wouldn’t know*, he hadn’t told her.

What was devotion? The gleam of Ango’s glasses, when he carefully, tiredly abandoned them on the Bar Lupin’s counter. The valleys of the crooked scar he had marred Odasaku’s hand with, when he attempted a card trick Dazai was trying to teach him. Perhaps the water closing over him, grayish and polluted and a *possibility*; the way Mori never offered his back to Dazai, when they stepped in the room where he’d murdered the old Boss. Dazai didn’t know if begging for water and having faith it would rain was the same thing.

*I wouldn’t know*, he hadn’t told her. *The only thing I’ve ever been devoted to is —*

It took him a full, still minute of silence to figure out Chuuya had stiffened.

His lips moved around nothing, hesitant. Maybe because waiting to die was a torture — because waiting to live was a little worse; because Chuuya had been unreachable for six



months, and he clearly didn't care if he left for six years more — Dazai said, helplessly quiet: "Sorry."

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"It's not going to work," Dazai informed the struggling weight upon him. "We should just give up and die."

"Fuck that shit," Chuuya replied, between gritted teeth. "You think I'm letting my last breath come from your regurgitated bullshit?"

By the time of what they estimated to be their twelfth hour down there, air had become a flimsy thread that not even tired lungs could take much from. Suffocatingly, they began passing out in strange synchronization — each gulping down the oxygen left behind by whoever got light headed enough first. Efforts to stop talking in favor of skin tapping or *kanji* tracing got abandoned as soon as an argument started; they grew used to waiting for the other to wake up again and continue.

"S just —" the boy grunted, attempting to pull his trapped arm out of the piece of concrete. "Just a small crack, and air will get in —"

Dazai nodded. "Or the whole building will collapse on us both. A quick, painless death — you're onto something, maybe."

"You *said* you wouldn't die with me —"

"They're going to get us, at some point or another," he agreed. There were flares floating in front of his eyes, framed by a taste of rust stuck permanently on the roof of his mouth. "I do have words about the efficiency of my own systems, though," he slobbered. "But until then, I'm free to fantasize as much as I —"

Chuuya stuck his flat palms on the ground, took a big breath, and surged upwards.

The bitter scream out of his mouth had his ears bleed more profusely; Dazai winced against the subtle movement of the pole digging around his wound, as the boy elevated himself enough to — for the blink of an *instant* — be separated from him. Red oozed down the imperceptible space of the bar between their bodies, as Chuuya's wound tore itself apart higher across his chest — when his eyes began to roll to the back of his head, Dazai's hands flew up instinctively.

“*Don’t*,” he hissed, quicker than he could touch him. “Don’t — *just* —”

His broken, glove-ripped fingers ran over the heaviest of the concrete pieces around them — in a desperate push, a crack was opened, raining in a single line of moonlight; blinding him wretchedly enough for his head to be swarmed in buzzing, immaterial flies.

Chuuya fell like a puppet, landing heavily enough to squeeze a yelp out of Dazai’s mouth.

It shook the space around them in a rumble that was only *barely* louder than the desperate exhales out of his mouth, choking against Dazai’s ringing ear.

“You know,” he grunted, half stuttering, chest rising and falling so fast it was a wonder he wasn’t shrieking with every slither against the pole bar. “I can’t remember which one of all those fake IDs we got crafted is my real one.”

*Me neither*, Dazai didn’t admit, superior. “Are you delirious?”

“Trying to —” He retched, once. “— stay awake. Shut up.”

“By talking about your tiny brain’s inability to remember your own social security number?”

Chuuya groaned. “Fuck you. I’m betting you don’t remember yours.”

“Details are unimportant,” he insisted. “It’s a bothersome tool. People should know me at one glance. Women certainly do.”

“With how many you’ve stood up?” His next groan was more disgust than rage. “Whatever ugly picture of you they do rituals on so that you’ll blow to pieces on the spot must be one hell of a memorization technique.”

He scoffed. “You’re just jealous.”

The concept repulsed him enough to raise his head from Dazai’s shoulder — just enough to look him in both eyes with all his contempt. The neon on his cheek had started to melt and mix with the sweat, creating swirling spirals of pink and blue that turned him into a child’s finger-paint. There was a bleeding hole in Dazai’s guts and there was a dangling curl on Chuuya’s forehead. “What do women see in you, seriously.”

It wasn’t a question, given the tone. But Dazai liked women, and women liked him blindly and adoringly. It was mutually convenient and exclusively impersonal, and Chuuya’d never gotten it. “My impeccable personality? My pretty face? My inestimable intellect? My massive —”

“God,” He muttered, plastering his face on his shoulder again, biting back a scream. “Dante should take notes. *This* is a *Limbo*.”

Dust fell in a soft hiss. After Dazai tried to reach for either of their phones — squeezing more blood out of their wound as a result, and obtaining nothing but the understanding that Chuuya’s phone was lost, and his own had regrettably lost its *Chuu the Slug’s* charm and

gotten destroyed under his broken thigh — Chuuya entertaining himself with pinching both of their arms, to make sure the added effort wouldn't knock them out.

"We'll need to tell them where we are when they reach this area," he explained, sensibly. As he watched Dazai open his mouth, he warned, far too certain: "Hirotsu's *Babysitting Union* would gain shit from losing its first pet projects. Believe that, if you want to be a bitch about Mori."

Time passed without mercy. Eventually, as something that *could* have been languor — had it not been a burning kind of torpor — started to dim the lights of their concussed skulls, they talked nonsense over the echoing silence.

"— so their golden idea was to hang me upside down for two days," Chuuya muttered, his mouth squashed so heavily against Dazai's coat it was hard to hear all of it. Occasionally, he signed a few of the words on his wrist, refusing to waste his vocal chords. "Which was fucking *stupid*."

Dazai hummed. "Surprisingly, I agree. It's not even in my torture methods list — and there's *such* enviable variety in those files."

"Pudding?"

"Pudding," he agreed. "You used *Tainted*?"

"Obviously."

He paused. Belatedly, he noted the way the boy had stiffened against him — cursedly catching up, faster than most were meant to with Dazai.

But the frustration was familiar, and the pole stuck through the both of them was too heavy to pretend a less flesh-bound connection wasn't somewhat useful. "We could get crushed," Dazai warned, very slowly — tentative.

"Not if I'm quick enough," Chuuya said, frowning. A thought process — one too connected to his threads of ersatz gravity to understand — flew past his mismatched eyes, twirling around the pupils like a ring from Saturn. "We'd have to rattle this enough to get the roof to fall on me, though. It'll fuck the wound up. It's probably already infected."

"Not too much of an issue if we get out."

"The Ability Users doctors can heal *me*," the boy reminded him, roughly. "If *your ass* gets torn dick to jugular, you're done for."

"Finally," he sighed, dreamily.

A vein in Chuuya's temple throbbed.

"Alright," he concluded, settling his hand by Dazai's ear. The other was still stuck — still, he did his best to drag his elbow on a less cracked corner of the ruins underneath them. He

breathed in from his nose, rushed and wetly, and morphed his traits into that determination he would have never let Dazai call self-destructive.

*If I do it to live, isn't it life?*, a book he'd stolen from Odasaku had insisted.

“Try to — flatten yourself, I don't know.”

Coagulations of blood and drool gathered on his lips, hovering over Dazai's face. His vision was steadfastly blurred — if he squinted, it was no more than another crimson stain in the silver-lines darkness. Chuuya planted his feet, biting back a breathy whimper from whatever bone he'd broken — and lifted himself off Dazai's body, doing his best to crawl on all fours over him.

“Shit,” he cursed, utterly calm, somewhere over the blinding shock of pain Dazai's guts were forced to take. “*Shit*. Fuck this *shit* — go.”

Thinking of nothing at all — thinking of the frigid metal of Mori's clinic table — he curled his fingers around the imperceptible space between their bodies, attempting to keep the sides of his blood-soaked hands off Chuuya's pulsing wound — and pushed *up*.

Sounds followed in quick motion — metal and crumbling stone and skin-wet squelches and the *sound*, either out of Chuuya's mouth or his. The plan — *the plan*, his mind supplied, not very helpful — swarmed across his buzzing skull like flies. If the floors over floors of debris touched Chuuya in the split *instant* Dazai removed his hands from the pole — he could activate *Tainted*. He clenched his hands tighter than his body could stand, forcing their makeshift roof to fall from its precarious spot and land on —

Lighting struck his forearms.

“Hey,” Muffled — echoing, as if under the sea — a voice reached his ears. “*Hey* — “

The pain snapped his eyes open from a half slumber he hadn't noted — all he saw was red and black and *red*, oozing off Chuuya like a mass of webs and shattered glass. Dust rained from ruins as the metal *screeched* — cracks widened and spread from a spot Dazai only saw because of blinding, unreal moonlight, wriggling across the concrete in a steady, rumbling growl.

Faster than a blink, the piece of stone broke away from the ceiling — bigger than a motorcycle and digging through the air with murderous focus — and Dazai *knew* where it would land.

“Hurry,” he managed to say, between tight teeth.

His hands flew off the pole. Chuuya's teeth were gritted so hard he saw an invisible chasm across one of his incisors — and then he saw those Saturn rings in his pupils disappear, devoured by his blown out pupils, as he abruptly realized keeping their wounds separated was impossible.

*Does your blood do it too, I wonder?*, Mori had asked, months ago, after Dazai had touched Elise's head and watched her vanish.

*Would you let me test it?*, he hadn't replied. Mori hated waste.

He forced his hands to cup Chuuya's nape — all at once, no matter his cursing, breathless complaints, he pulled him *down* and *away* — mere seconds before the piece of concrete could shatter into his skull.

It landed somewhere over the rocks on Dazai's half-trapped arm, trailing dust all over both of their frames. Everything was shaking, as if the single paper they'd taken from the house of cards had started another earthquake. A *scream* left Chuuya's mouth at a vertiginous frequency — as the sky fell around them, he realized it came from the glinting metal of one of the other metal bars from the makeshift ceiling. Under his blurred eyes, its carved leaves buried themselves onto Chuuya's shoulder like an arrow.

The floor dropped underneath them. He closed his eyes to a speck of moonlight.

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The moment his waking tongue ran across the blood of his dehydrated, hellishly chapped lips, Dazai knew almost a day had passed.

A new, vacant bubble of cracked stone had welcomed their impaled embrace — it didn't look much different from the first, but the chasms in the concrete were too thin to let any moonlight in. There was nothing to see — all Dazai could focus on was the asthmatic quality of Chuuya's breath against a new wound across his neck.

He thought of Akutagawa. He'd probably be dragged to play rescuer, too. *Perhaps*, he mused, *the idea of dragging Dazai out of his grave would motivate him, at last.*

"If I was that brat, I would have killed you eons ago," Chuuya's wobbly, *barely* whispering voice informed him.

More than surprise at the sudden noise, it was the quality of those words that startled him. It wasn't like the local god to let pain seep into his tone — no matter the wound he'd be dragging across the Headquarters' floor; no matter the body bags waiting at his feet. The aching, breathing ache in his syllables was impossible to ignore, though — it turned his words in barely understable hushes.

There was a hand under Dazai's skull.

Chuuya winced when he pushed against it; *broken knuckles*, he guessed. He tried to imagine the sound his head would have made as it smashed against the concrete — tried to imagine dying as he was passed out. Missing it.

“He’s Mafia,” he said. He only realized that same note of exhausted soreness had spread across his voice when his throat burned with it. “So am I. There’s no one to kill.”

It didn’t entirely make sense. Mori would have put it like that, though — Tanaki, too. They had always shared a purpose. She hadn’t lost her position when the doctor had killed the old Boss — Dazai wondered, all of the sudden, if Mori had always known who she was.

*And if I did?*, the doctor questioned.

Chuuya attempted to turn. The new piece of metal had struck through his shoulders cleanly, though — the edge brushed Dazai’s chest only *so*, making the boy’s every movement a flinch.

He gave up with a curse. Lips as chapped as his own brushed against Dazai’s Adam’s apple; in a tone that didn’t even echo, given just how close every ruin around them was, he offered: “Boss once told me my loyalty should be to the syndicate. Not to its people.”

Dazai could see his lips shape it — a bit less kind than the brush against his own throat. He had always had a tendency to put dangerous things near his jugular.

Mori *cared*, he thought — but he cared for reasons that were the same red tinge as the scarf constantly holding his head up.

“I don’t think I know how to do that,” the boy concluded, like a secret. He sounded high and he sounded absolutely frustrated — buried as they were, air would end soon. *Still* — “But that’s how I know they’re coming to get us.”

He searched the darkness until the lines of rusty metal became visible. “Good investments?”

An intake of air — whistle-y and wet. “Don’t flatter yourself,” Chuuya warned. Too, *too* careful, he tried to fit himself more comfortably in that bloodied space — as if to share something less dirty than the warm fluids oozing from their linked wound. Dazai wasn’t scared of the darkness at all — but it was hauntingly suffocating. Chuuya’s heartbeat filled the silence of his most prodigious thoughts — unsure of how to proceed, for once. “Hey. Tell me one of your stupid stories.”

His pounding head slid into a comforting twinge. He had the vague idea of asking Chuuya just *where* he’d learned that melody he always hummed. “I thought you hated them.”

“I do,” he confirmed. “We’re stuck here, though. It’s already boring as —” His breath died down; the next inhale he took was shaky, littered in the haze only *Corruption* left him in. “As it is.”

That unfathomable conclusion landed like a pebble on water.

*Double Black* died crushed like a shooting star, Dazai imagined them saying. And they would answer — *wasn't Double Black over?*

“Here’s a story,” he offered. “There are two boys under the ruins of a tacky club —“

A wet cough. “Come on.”

“— and they both die.”

“The end?”

“They hold the highest top scores ever registered by the Arcade,” Dazai conceded, helpful. There was no firmament to study — his voice stayed soft, as if they were stargazing all the same. “And they both die.”

Something petulant filled Chuuya’s cheeks, spreading the blood and the dirt over his collar. “This story sucks ass.”

“It’s the only one I got.”

“I was away for *six months*. ”

“Yes,” he agreed, blankly. *Wasn't Double Black* — “It was very peaceful.”

“They kept talking like we died or shit.”

Dazai wanted to shrug. But it all — *all*, in everything — meant something, and Chuuya was too capable where it mattered. “We will.”

“They’ll come get us.”

“We’ll die anyway.” Tanaki had had a point — after a bit, it didn’t really hurt. He thought of his shipping container. “A reputation is too much to leave behind.”

A scoff pulled the dried pieces of blood on Chuuya’s lips off. “It’s no reputation if it’s true.”

The chasm-webs on the fake ceiling were like tree roots. Dazai had a feeling he had already thought that — he still couldn’t remember how to learn a tree’s age. Odasaku would know. He had to ask him, as soon as they got out.

“Hey,” Chuuya questioned, both quiet and horribly, *horribly* awkward. “Is there no air in here or is it just me?”

*It was very funny*, Dazai thought. Wasting more oxygen laughing was stupid, though. Instead, his hand wriggled aimlessly up, unsure of what it was searching — until a familiar scar on the length of a thumb scratched his fingertips. His fingers were shaking out of any real control — all nerves he couldn’t feel being affected, and the low pulse of a wound in his very being. He hooked his little finger around Chuuya’s own, and that was it.

“If it breathes,” the boy muttered, clearly just for himself. Chuuya’d never really felt *feverish*, before — but his forehead was burning against the edge of his face. “If it beats.”

“What?” Dazai asked, like an exhale before he slept.

The tip of his nose was strangely freezing. It brushed the skin underneath his jaw, aimless. He never did that when they rested in the same bed — he just kicked and stole blankets and didn’t dream. They never touched at all. *Are you going to sleep, now that he’s here?*, his mind asked.

*It wasn’t about him*, Dazai replied, just to make sure he was going crazy.

His mind didn’t care. Merciless, it traced constellations on the ruins that would kill them — that would morph their skeletons into a mushy, sharp bundle of bad intentions and Mafia orders; and they would share a urn, because Chuuya was stupid and careless and his partner — his *partner*; he’d told Odasaku, younger and bloodied on his front porch; *his partner*; he had insisted, as if the astonishment of what he had managed to take for himself would make him more worthy in the man’s eyes — and he paid no mind to the dangers of the inhuman.

They would land at the bottom of the Bay, bickering, and Mori would intertwine his hands less *calmly* over the loss of the diamonds he had rolled and rolled in his palms — all mourning and no grief.

“I don’t wanna die with you,” he whined — a useless conclusion; low and childish and *begging*.

“Well, I don’t want to die with you either,” Chuuya snapped, shivering. The effort had the warmth of their shared wound get *warmer*. “If you weren’t a — an overestimated *off* button —“

Dust poured from the roof. Dazai blew it off, trying to keep himself from sneezing.

Their pinkies were still linked.

“Hey,” Chuuya cleared his throat. “Listen.”

Dazai kept his eyes closed.

“They’re going to send me away again, by the end of the week,” It was barely a whisper, tentative like fingers on a bubble. Brusque, the way Chuuya was when he had to be sincere with him in particular. Dazai wasn’t used to being touched — Dazai knew better, and he fell for it every time. He would burst, and Chuuya would still be talking. “There’s still some European business Boss wants fixed, and —“ He cleared his throat, again. Dazai ached with something too irritated to be fondness. “If you come with me, I might even keep myself from throwing you off the plane.”

*I wouldn’t know*, he’d sworn to Kouyou — only in his mind, where she wouldn’t know what it meant. She had killed a man she loved with her own hands; he knew she would look at Dazai and find him just as guilty. *The only thing I ever let myself be devoted to was him.*



*Just get in my urn,* Chuuya had huffed.

“How boring,” Dazai said, very quiet.

A subtle, almost inaudible buzz circled over their heads. Unluckily used to it, he recognized it as the roof giving up under the weight of the floors upon it. They had to be worlds under the world. It was a bit sad. Odasaku surely had some nice stories about getting impaled.

“As long as it isn’t those fucking lab coats,” Chuuya murmured, nonsensically.

Dazai held his pinky tighter. Wished, like he always did, to be afraid.

The world ended a breath after.

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Someone was shooting with Dazai’s gun.

*Of course I know the sound,* he’d told a red cheeked Akutagawa — or as *red* as he could get, walking corpse he was — when he had caught him training with it behind his back. He had been mildly impressed that he had *managed* to take it at all. *Don’t you think I hear it enough?*

“—zai,” the buzzing in his ears was saying, urgent in its professionalism. Hands were grasping his body, shaking and pulling and — *settling* him on something too high not to make his head spin. It was a nauseating experience; Dazai had the vague knowledge that it shouldn’t have been as windy as it was — but the cold air whipped him. “Dazai, can you open your eyes?”

He whined. *Awful request.*

“I know, just —” Sirens blared somewhere in the distance. Voices screaming and bullets being shot and familiar orders — an attack? “Open your eyes for a moment, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

*It couldn’t be helped,* he supposed.

Hirotsu’s face was covered in concrete dust.

Focusing on him was an effort Dazai had no intention of going through — when a silhouette in white pointed a light right into his eye, he whined louder. Realized, belatedly, that someone had hid his bandaged eye again.

“My —“ He tried. His hands dangled from a too high spot — he clenched them around metal and recognized an ambulance stretcher. Then his fingers started aching, and he whined more. “My gun, is —“

“The earthshaker User survived too,” the man explained, far too quickly for his brain to keep up with. Sirens and voices and *bullets*. “He climbed out as we were getting you — they’re taking him down. Can you nullify him?”

Dazai laughed until it hurt. “Oh, *can* I?”

In the background, behind the blurry car lights and the blurry ambulances and the blurry *all*, men in black were screaming. The earth wasn’t trembling, though — perhaps the User had found a new passion for guns. *Good for the environment*, he thought. Then the open space underneath his ribs ached and breathed, and the woman who had pointed a light at him pressed her hands on what had to be bandages, and Dazai thought —

“—*zai*, ” Hirotsu was calling, more frantic than he’d ever seen him. “Where was Chuuya? We can’t find him. Did you see —“

His mind blinked.

*Right here*, he insisted, as the wound was bandaged. *He was right* —

The cursing doctor stuck an oxygen mask on his mouth, fogging up his thoughts. His leg was broken all the way to the thigh, he thought — no other reason for it to burn that viciously.

“*Where is he?*” the voices screamed, in the background. “*He’s got a gun!*”

“*Protect the Boss!*”

“*Find him!*”

“Mori?” Dazai questioned, curious, over the hum and the buzz of the mask. *Mori couldn’t know*, he thought, nonsensically gleeful. He turned his head on the pillow of the stretcher, no matter the doctor’s hands. “Is Mori —“

His eyes landed on Chuuya.

Something about the sight — the speck of red that he made, half buried in the ruins of what had once been a bridge; the way one of his hands was abandoned over a ruin, glove destroyed — had his mind spin over the *incorrectness* of it. There was a hole in his guts, and there was a spam to his little finger, and he *knew* —

“*Dazai!*” Hirotsu snapped, hand over his nose, where Dazai had headbutted him in his haste to stand. “Dazai, you’re *bleeding* —“

He fell from the stretcher, landing on his knees — as he ripped the oxygen mask off roughly enough to scratch his own face. The night world — *constellations*, his brain supplied, helpfully — spun *almost* faster than the hands reaching for him, attempting to drag him in place again. Dazai registered it as a silly thing, so he smiled a bit — he forced the vomit in his mouth back inside his body, ignoring the strikes of lightning crawling across his leg, and made his way to the body in the rubble.

“Be right back,” Dazai screamed, over his shoulder, stumbling throughout the ruins.

*Really*, he thought, exasperated. There was an urgency in him that he didn’t understand. The concussion and something else. *He’d offered him his urn* — and so Dazai owed him to at least — *really, how do you get lost from a shared pole* —

A shock of carrot orange appeared from a corner. Holding Dazai’s own gun in a trembling hand, he let out a sound that was almost laughter, and started shooting Chuuya’s unconscious body.

Dazai paused.

Once, twice, *thrice more* — the speck of red jolted with it, hand unmoving and eyes open; a wet, squelching, *nauseating* sound mixing with dying laughter, as coagulated blood was spat from his wounded body like humorless fireworks. *No point in shooting dead bodies*, Chuuya had scoffed.

Dazai didn’t quite remember the rest.

Hands and skin — broken knuckles and a man laughing, no matter the broken teeth. He’d never had a mean punch — Chuuya complained about it on the daily; and Odasaku had offered to help him, *if it stays unbloodied* — as if anything in his near vicinity ever had. Concrete under his knees, which was familiar — his gun in his hand, which was even more so. Pain, all over.

*Truly*, Dazai and his mind debated, over the sound of gunshots. The ricochet shook his arm, rattling his dislocated shoulder, and it was oddly familiar, too — the GSS and a green leather jacket. *No use in shooting dead bodies*.

“I’ll kill you,” he promised, vivacious.

The taste was like rust scratching against teeth. *Would you quit that?*, Ango always snapped, when he munched too loudly. He kept shooting, and he sank his heel in a skull, and stepped on it, and stepped on it, and *stepped on* — “I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you —”

*Truly*, he added, *Chuuya dying wouldn’t have been much of an issue*. But who would he have told? Who would he have bragged with, mighty and scornful; swearing it was plenty deserved and not enough gruesome — *Chuuya would hate to be told*, he considered, *so he should tell him*; but how to tell him, if he was —

“—*op*, ” a voice called. The gunshots seemed to be the only crickets around. The voice got closer and closer. “Dazai, *stop!*”

That final order got his attention right as golden flew past him — a silhouette in flowy layers of *kimono*, sinking an immaterial katana in Dazai’s carrot-shaded target practice. He tried to protest — a childish whine of jealousy, and something else. Nails sunk in his shoulders — *just where was his coat*, Dazai wondered, because Mori *would* notice, and how *annoying* he’d be about it — and he was spun around quicker than his leg could take. His face was pressed against scratchy fabric that smelled of *known*, and Dazai saw nothing and heard —

Heard *something*.

Kouyou’s heart was racing against his eyes. She’d always had callused hands, despite the well manicured nails — they sunk in his hair only to keep his skull immobilized, pressing so *firmly* they *had* to be cutting their own circulation.

Dazai’s broken leg gave out. He breathed in her scent and wanted to laugh in her face.

“Stop,” she insisted, without an inch of the softness of her clothes. “We found you,” she swore, as if only her ears were listening. Her handprint was carved on the back of his head, and she never, *ever* touched him, truly — “We found you. We got you out.” She was covered in dirt — had they all been digging? *And still you’re so damn late?*, Dazai mocked, so utterly still he wasn’t breathing. “We’re getting Chuuya.”

Just once, his aching spine was jolted with humorless hilarity. He pushed her off.

“Careful with your hands, Ane-san,” he let himself chuckle, holding onto his pained leg with a half grimace. There was nowhere to lean on. Her hands were still outstretched, sharp like talons. The unmistakable silhouette Hirotsu always was in his peripheral vision was approaching Chuuya. “I hear insubordination gets them cut off of you.”

There was *something* in her gaze that he didn’t want to look at. “Dazai.”

“First time you call me that,” he insisted, in the same tone, as if continuing where he’d left off.

She flinched.

He reached Hirotsu right as the man bent to pick Chuuya up. Standing on nothing but pure, hysterical ecstasy, Dazai tilted his head to study the bleeding breaches all over his body — the *crimson* edge of it all; the viscera pulsing wildly underneath scarred flesh, and the *Corruption* scars that were nowhere to be found, and the twitch of his little finger, and the *urn* he’d offered, and his red soaked hair — and blinked.

“You need to lay down,” Hirotsu ordered, turning to look at him. His eyes ranked over his guts. Dazai didn’t know how he was standing. “Dazai.”

“Ah, it’s fine,” He waved the matter away. What was everyone so worried about? The haze of it all was sickening. He hadn’t died, and he hadn’t feared, and there was nothing more.

Chuuya's finger twitched. Dazai blinked.

*Oh*, he thought. Awfully stupid of him — awfully blind. Mori would have been disappointed in so many ways. *Oh*, he thought, *that's what it is*.

A sound nested itself in the back of his throat, burrowed and jealously kept — it escaped. Dazai got overwhelmingly lost between the sluggish motions — the cataclysmic, pathetic realization that they would never be closer than they had been in that dawdling darkness, and that Mori couldn't *know*, and that he wouldn't get to keep any part of this — not when he wanted it.

*Hello*, he thought, curious. Chuuya would live, and he would be damned all the same. The world had made him flawed on purpose. *Hello. How have I lost you already?*

"I can carry him," Hirotsu said, behind all of Dazai's repetitious stupidity — good willed old man; understanding and a killer. Dazai hadn't even noticed his hands were slipping under Chuuya's body. Perhaps touching him was somewhat uncourteous — Dazai was covered in blood. "You'll tire yourself out. You're injured."

He stared at him, mind slowed down from blood loss — slowed down *because*.

He had watched every warm thing roll in Mori's palm like Yokohama didn't weigh more than the sky — and truly, *truly*, there were few things in existence that weren't heavy. Chuuya's head in his lap — his own hand on his blood-matted forehead, tracing stupid drawings and waiting for an attack or for death or for *something*. He held him still and held him close and held him *alive*, and there was no way to make Hirotsu *understand*, what with the concussion he'd gone and given himself, what with all of it, Mori and the constellations and —

"It's not tiring," he swore, confused. "I'm not tired," His eyes were aching from how widened they were; the man's gaze on him was far too knowing for any of his syllables to be wise. *Mori would burn him alive*, he thought — but he wasn't sure *why*. "He's not — he said he'd keep me a spot in his urn. Stupid."

"That's nice," Hirotsu said, calmly.

He was too high again — the ruined fabric of the medical stretcher was curling underneath him like a buzzing, crawling, ants infestation. All very uncomfortable. The sound of wheels on the concrete was scratching his ears like a shriek — he looked for Chuuya, and couldn't find him, and then he saw him — being hosted onto another stretcher, his gloveless hand dangling from the edge.

*Nullify him*, his brain reminded him. But there had been no *Corruption*, Dazai was sure of it.

"It's not *too much*," he insisted, a bit frantic. Hirotsu had to understand — they all had to. No one could know. Dazai wanted it and Dazai would lose it — just because of it. He reached so far forward the paramedics had to hold him back before he fell — no *Corruption*, but no risk worth taking. Dazai grasped Chuuya's dangling fingers, and squeezed once, twice, thrice — fighting against the hands pushing him back. Chuuya stayed a being made to bleed, and Dazai stayed wanting.

*At least it isn't lab coats*, Chuuya had told him — Dazai set his eyes on the white sleeves touching his bleeding skin, and felt every inch of himself *reach*.

Their stretchers were rolled in different directions. Chuuya's hand fell from his own, and a needle was buried in his neck — Hirotsu blocked his view. "It's not tiring —"

"I know," the Commander promised.

"— how could it be tiring, it's *Chuuya* —"

Hirotsu's eyes darted over him.

Another needle. Dazai felt it flame and felt it burn — he sunk into darkness again, unwilling and *hating*, kicking his feet like a stubborn child. He closed his cursed eye as it laid, selfishly, on Chuuya's twitching little finger.

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Akutagawa sat straight and guarding on the guest chair of Dazai's Hospital room — only, he had turned it to entirely face the door, offering his bed nothing but his shoulders.

His throat was drier than the humorless sigh he let out, attempting to sit up against the sheer number of pillows behind his back. "Could you spare me the *I'm grounded* act?"

The boy jumped, startled. "Sir!"

The room wasn't much to see — the usual white walls, the usual pointless furniture, the usual smell of antiseptics and old people. There weren't flowers on his nightstand; someone, though, had left the golden pin of his tie next to a silver remote. Straining against the aching stillness of his limbs, and the casts around his shoulder and leg, Dazai reached for the remote, amusing himself with straightening and dropping the bed.

It made a metallic, buzzing sound — from the corner of his unbothered gaze, he watched it curl Akutagawa's nonexistent eyebrows, irritated.

"Sir," Akutagawa tried again.

"*Shh*," Dazai ordered. He pressed on a blue button, letting out an, *aaah!* — when the backrest was lowered flat to the ground. "How ingenious. We should get these for the chairs in the meeting room. Talk about uncomfortable furniture."

“*Sir*,” he insisted. He’d stood up from the chair, but he was holding it between them — an incredibly controlled reaction, given the swarm of *something* in his dark eyes. “You’ve been comatose for three days. How are you feeling?”

“*Three days?*” He huffed. “Did you pump me with *opium?*”

“I — no. You were gravely hurt.”

“Yes, yes,” Distracted, he squinted at the old remote. “I’m assuming you were busy digging through the rubble for a bit, *mmh?*”

Akutagawa straightened.

*Thank you*, Dazai imagined saying. *I’m very grateful*. Mori had said it to him a few times — it had mostly been sarcastic, even if not dishonest. Educating Akutagawa was a matter of figuring out which twists and pulls would both keep him out of Mori’s visual field and inside his bigger plans. But that old method was clearly unreliable, given he’d managed to get himself trapped against a —

A twitch had the remote almost fall from his fingers.

“I did beat that slimy slug at the *waking up race*, though,” Dazai questioned, vacantly. Had it been Kouyou — or, God forbid, *Hirotsu* — they would have probably seen through the disinterest. He didn’t think Akutagawa expected any humanity from him, though. “Didn’t I?”

He nodded, once. “Vice-Executive Chuuya hasn’t woken up yet.”

Dazai swung his legs out of the blankets, grunting. How he *hated* pain. Had they softened his morphine? Mori was annoying enough to do something like that. He’d have to steal some. “You can start dropping the *Vice-Executive*,” he ordered, with a flick of his fingers. His head was pounding; he laid it back on the pillow, wincing. “Mori will make the worst choice possible for the syndicate in no time. We should throw the Hatrack a party, don’t you think? Last one I threw him didn’t end up well, but, well —“

“Sir,” Akutagawa interrupted — which was a brave choice in itself, if extremely stupid.

He massaged his temples. “Yes?”

“Are you —“ His entire face scrunched up. “Are you okay?”

Dazai’s eyebrows brushed his hairline. He had his bandages on again — probably courtesy of Mori. An itch crawled across his guts, where he knew the pole had breached through — the urge to check the scar left from that misfortune almost choked him, for a moment. “The awkwardness is killing you. Why would you kill both of us?”

“You were under there for more than a day —“

“That slug of my partner and I played *tic tac toe* on the concrete,” Dazai assured. “I won, of course. News on Suribachi City? You better have a report on that, yes? Or have you just been playing guard dog for the past three days?”

“There are guards in front of both your rooms,” Akutagawa replied, nostrils flaring.

“Probably so Chuuya won’t sneak out and I won’t overdose on morphine,” he mused. The boy’s shoulders stayed set. “Well? The reports?”

Suribachi City had, easily enough, been — *broken in two*. The paper reported that description in a blank, exhausted way that smelled of Ango’s favorite ink. Dazai caressed the *kanjis* with his good finger, longing and fond, wondering if they would come visit. Chuuya’s last effort not to have the bridge-piece fall onto Yokohama itself had hit the edge of settlement — no one had been hurt in the crater itself, and the escaping mafiosi had been recovered across the course of the day. The fact still remained that they’d have to remove the bridge before the artificial island started sinking.

*Chuuya could do it*, he scoffed, annoyed. And the *money* it would take — rebuilding the bridge, figuring out if Mori wanted *The Sheepdog* to be put up again, silencing the News —

He whined, landing on his pillows to cover his face with the reports.

“Akutagawa,” he called. “Would you mind getting better quicker? I’m aiming for you to figure out a way to have *Rashomon* kill me.”

Very boringly, the boy didn’t respond.

“The next financial meeting will be Hell,” Dazai huffed, closing the dossier. He tapped the cast on his leg, cleaning his dirty nails against it — despite being washed, he still felt remains of rubble dust all the way to his skull. Trying to focus on any specific moment from his time underground felt like trying to recall a dream — something that had happened to someone else. And then ambulances, lights, and gunshots — Chuuya’s hand, dangling from a stretcher.

He studied his palm. No neon paint — no blood. But he knew he’d touched him.

“*The theory of interchangeability*,” Dazai recited.

Akutagawa had managed to step away from the chair, at last. Unsure of where to put his hands, he gingerly laid them at the end of his bed. “Sorry, sir?”

“*The theory of interchangeability*. Edmond Locard,” he insisted, snapping his fingers. “He was a criminologist. According to his studies, every criminal that enters a room takes something *from* it and leaves something *in* it. Interchangeability. The principle behind it is that of, *no gain without automatic self-incrimination*,” He shrugged. “Mori once told me it’s easily applicable to people as well. People are unanalyzed crime scenes.”

Clearly, the kid wasn’t sure of where he was going with this. Or perhaps he was surprised by Dazai’s willingness to converse with him without prompting. Hesitantly, he offered: “But the Mafia never leaves traces behind.”

He sighed. “Of course we do.”

“But —“



“Convincing the police to permanently blind one of their eyes hardly means we’re good enough to clean up our own messes,” Dazai tapped his own bandages. “*Ha*. Funny. The point stands — nothing erases itself. It’s always someone else who picks up the knife and scrubs blood off the ground,” He curled an eyebrow. “With how many times I’ve sent you on cleaning duties you should definitely know this.”

Akutagawa munched on his cheek, blank. “I’m not good with metaphors.”

“Who said this was a metaphor?”

He frowned.

“What,” Dazai taunted, leaning forward on bruised elbows. “Is talking with dear old me hard?”

“No, sir.”

“Liar. Anyway,” He threw the dossier in his hands, half surprised when he actually managed to grasp it. It was a bit hard to believe Akutagawa was even *aware* of possessing hands, given how often he used *Rashomon* where they were needed. “You have a question, clearly. Ask it, so I can go back to sleep. I was six feet under for more than a *day*, and you’re still bothering me?” He clicked his tongue.

“I don’t —” He blinked. He was sixteen, he was pretty sure. Dazai had been made Executive at his age. *He probably looked older*, he considered — imagining someone as frail as Akutagawa in one of the meeting rooms was strangely uncomfortable. “I don’t have a question.”

“You’ve had it for a bit,” he insisted, bored. “You keep aborting at the last minute. Just ask.”

Understanding lit Akutagawa’s thin eyes. It subjected him to another wave of hesitation, as he laid back down and covered his eyes with the back of his hand; the nervous tics he’d somehow learned — as familiar as the twist of his neck handkerchief between pale fingers.

“Madame Tanaki,” Akutagawa asked, very slowly, eventually. Dazai hid startlement in a body that didn’t flinch at all. *Unexpected*. “Nobody has been very forthcoming about what happened.”

“She was a traitor,” Dazai offered, vacantly. “We set her on fire for it. Do you need pictures?”

“What happens to traitors?”

“We set them on fire.”

“No,” Akutagawa insisted, stubborn. “It’s — they’re whispering about. Something else.”

*Ah*, he understood.

Sighing deeply, Dazai sat up again. The sole motion almost sent the boy a step back — but he stood his ground, because he wanted all Dazai had to offer more than he feared it. *The blind leading the blind*, he thought. Leaning on his crossed legs, he neared his face to the boy's, mockingly putting one hand to the side of his mouth.

Like a stage-whisper, he offered: “Here’s a secret for you. If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

Akutagawa eyes’ twitched, unsure.

“Betraying the Mafia is a serious deal,” he explained, as dramatic as his aching limbs allowed, eyes wide. “Very serious. Serious enough to deserve something more than a flimsy death, followed by that pathetic ritual mafiosi call a funeral. The Bay is already polluted as it is. Nobody expects us to throw the ashes of those who sold us out along to the ashes of the Mafia’s good, loyal, little soldiers,” Dazai’s lips trembled. He wasn’t sure if he was still smiling, or if he’d ever started at all. *Betrayal*, as a concept, *seemed rather easy*. He couldn’t figure out how everyone always got it wrong.

*How would you escape?*, he’d asked Tanaki.

“The corpses of our traitors don’t go to the *Under Port*,” Dazai concluded, leaning back. “Or, well — they get burned there, yes. Then we take their ashes, and we mix them with wet cement and unfinished marble and some poison — just to be spiteful — and we demand they sacrifice to help us renovate the stairs to the dungeons.”

Every motion in Akutagawa’s body stilled.

He stretched numb joints, groaning a bit. “A nasty affair. The poetry of it all is a bit tacky, but Mori tells me the old Boss was a strange man. He saw value in damning men to a life of being stepped upon,” Dazai smiled a bit. “And you can *hear it* too, you know? When you know. Your steps seem to creak. When I’m bored, I imagine them to be screaming. It really does fill that infinite bother of a journey.”

“Oh,” the boy offered. “So, Tanaki —“

“Up and down the stairs, yes.”

“Because she was a traitor.”

“Since long before your ugly bangs saw the world,” Dazai confirmed. He flopped back onto the pillows. “Would you leave me alone, now? I’m still far too in pain to enhance your masochism. You can go study, or something. That *Mimic* thing might become a bother soon. You might just get a bit of training, isn’t that exciting?”

Akutagawa didn’t say anything.

Eventually, he offered: “May you get up and be able to fight again soon.”

*Fight and fight and fight*, Dazai echoed, bored. He held back a retch. “Did you read that in one of Kouyou’s poems? I’ll talk to her about your curriculum. We don’t want you to terrify our enemies with perfect diction.”

The door closed behind him before Dazai could find out.

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Odasaku came with a bouquet and a deck of cards.

“Ango sends his regards,” he informed him, once Dazai had shuffled back into his pillow — motioning for him to hop on at the end of the bed. Without a inch of hesitation, the man climbed on, crossing his legs through the messy blankets and abandoning the flowers on the nightstand. Then, he spread the cards between them. “He wanted to come, but the accident has had him holed up in his office since yesterday.”

Dazai sighed, leaning his cheek on his hand. “It’s the only positive outcome of this dull deal,” he admitted, fond. “Some irritation to wrinkle up his forehead.”

“I wouldn’t have known about any of this if he hadn’t told me,” Odasaku admitted. He had a curious way of delivering cards — facing upwards. A man who could see in the future didn’t much care for anything less than transparency. Or maybe he knew Dazai wouldn’t cheat. “They kept it all under wraps. The few people who knew about *The Sheepdog*’s inauguration muttered about a possible annihilation.”

“Of course, the news didn’t get out — with how incompetently they acted to get us out. It took them a whole day!” he huffed, scratching his leg cast. “Had you been there —“

The former assassin tilted his head. “I do have some experience in similar accidents.”

He felt himself smile. “I was sure you did.”

“Did you have time to think about it?”

“Oh, plenty, my friend. Say, do you know how to calculate a tree’s age?”

Owlishly, Odasaku blinked. “You have to — cut it open and count the circles carved inside, right?”

Cheeks aching, he grabbed a pen from one of doctors’ forgotten dossiers on the nightstand — and ordered the man to sign his cast.

*I have cared for you mercilessly for half of my life in this place,* Dazai dreamed of telling him, at times. *Is that enough to grant me a lifetime of this?*

Bar Lupin was only open at night — but they could do something else during the day. There would have been no worries about urns or bank accounts or underground tunnels — Dazai would have killed himself, one day of that nicer life, and he would have died in the arms of someone who'd dared to call him a friend.

“Are you okay?” Odasaku questioned.

“I’m so tired I can’t sleep,” he offered, with his gentlest gaze. “But I’m fine, now.”

He knew better than to dare. Touch was more than physicality — and both Odasaku and Ango were covered in his handprints. *What you’re holding on*, the former assassin had once told him, *is less important than holding on at all*.

“Odasaku, do you think death by crushing would have been a good pick?”

The man squinted at his cards, absently blowing on the cartoonish crab he had drawn on his cast, on Dazai’s request. “I think it would have been a bit painful, to be honest.”

“Oh, yes, the shattered bones,” He pressed his cards against his chin, pensive. “I really am running out of ideas here, though. Maybe I should re read my *Suicide Guide*. I might have just missed something.”

Odasaku looked at him.

He looked at him *weird* — something in his gaze wasn’t quite *tentative*, but almost. Perhaps, the determination of someone who already knew they wouldn’t commit to their own propositions. *Sometimes*, Dazai thought, *he looked at him as if he saw a wall*. As if he wanted to knock. He never did — but the twitch of his knuckles always made him feel a bit hopeful. *Maybe he would understand*.

“Have you talked to Boss, yet?”

“Not yet,” He clicked his tongue. “I’m sure he’s busy directing our police informants on what they’re allowed to let the public know. It shouldn’t be too hard. Nobody cares about Suribachi City.”

The man conceded. “He must have been worried about you.”

“Mori doesn’t get worried,” Dazai whined. “He just gets *annoying*. Words over words about how I should be more mindful with my suicide attempts, and be more mindful in general, and *blah, blah*. He wants to play scary Boss so badly, and then he always ruins it with all that blabbering.”

“Talking usually distracts people,” Odasaku considered. “It can be a good tactic.”

He was skeptical. “Have *you* ever used it?”

He blinked, very slow. “No?”

Dazai sighed. “That’s what I thought.”

“Do you not think Boss is tactical?”

“He’s more tactical than anything else,” he corrected him, almost amused. “It’s not about fixing the broken, not for him — it’s about finding the cracks and deciding the house cannot stand on all of them. And people — people are the easiest to find cracks on. That’s why he talks. Wind widens the chasms,” He grinned. “I was way deep under the rubble until a bit ago. I know all about cracks. Is *cracks* tragic or —“

“Tragic, I think,” He gathered his victory with one hand, accidentally cutting himself with the edge of one of the cards. Startled, Odasaku studied the single drop of blood blooming on his finger tip, with unexplainable wonder — as if he’d forgotten, just a bit, that he *could* bleed. Odasaku never really seemed interested in blood matters. “Where did you even get the idea for this game from, anyway?”

“Life is either comic or tragic,” Tilting his head, Dazai watched him suck his finger in his mouth; a strangely childish reaction. “So everything must fit.”

“That makes sense.”

“Does it?”

“More than some things you say,” Odasaku admitted. It probably wasn’t meant to be funny, but Dazai laughed anyway.

“You know,” he started, inspired for no real reason, “I’ve been building underground tunnels.”

The man curled an eyebrow — behind his cards, behind the scar on his hand; behind stories he had never told Dazai, and the idea of what it meant to be *listened* to. “What for?”

*How would you escape?*, he’s asked Tanaki.

“It was funny,” Dazai offered, putting his own finger between his lips. There was no blood to clean. There was always blood to clean. “Or tragic. I’m not sure yet.”

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After the three days it took him to sneak out of the Mafia Hospital room, Dazai stumbled on one leg, ripping his IV off, and did rounds to steal morphine from the other rooms.

There was quite the number of floors to visit — to be generous and fair, he only attached his arm to the strangers' IVs for thirteen seconds each, before moving on to someone else. Dazai saw wounded fools from *The Sheepdog's* opening night, and saw mafiosi whose names he didn't remember, and saw people who had nothing to do with the Port Mafia at all.

*A hospital is a hospital*, Mori had once said.

The Boss was waiting for him in front of Chuuya's room.

Dazai knew it was his — receptionists were awfully easy to fool, especially on a tired night; and Dazai had let the pretty black-haired nurse kiss him right on the lips with glee, for information. She'd wanted to be given head too, but Dazai was in a bit of a hurry — he'd promised to come back later. She had smiled. Dazai's wound was still aching.

He dropped on the blue plastic chairs in front of the door, goosebumps rising from the cold the flimsy Hospital vest couldn't hide. He waited — throwing an uninterested glance at the dossier the man had abandoned on the other seat.

Then, he changed his mind: "No scar?"

Mori hummed. "I never did like it much when other doctors could get a look at you."

He hated the sound of those words — they made him smile, all the same.

Mori knew how to make things sound horrible. As if he'd ever been brave enough to brush him with two fingers. In the liquid cobalt light of the corridors — some curious LEDs that had rejected yellow as a concept — the man was the same as he'd always been. If he'd been injured in any way, when he had been buried underneath the earth, it didn't show. His scarf was brushing the ground.

Behind him — his leaning spot — the door to Chuuya's room was shut.

"I know you performed the surgery," Dazai insisted, blinking. He tapped two fingers on the spot under his ribs that had been nothing but ache and *flames* until a few days ago — now, with the mixture of morphines, tylenol and healing, it was an itchy spot of normal flesh. "But you did it so it wouldn't scar. That's not your usual procedure."

Dazai had to keep *all* his scars. That had always been the man's condition — *if you hurt yourself, you keep the lesson*. He'd woken up and touched his skin, and learned he'd have no reminder.

The doctor shrugged. It would have looked more casual on a less guilty mastermind. "There's nothing you need to learn from this."

It landed like another gunshot. But Dazai wouldn't be sure — his ears had been replaying the sound since he'd woken up. His arm and leg had been in a cast — he'd shrugged them out, bored, just to have something to whine about. He'd have to kneel for the nurse, anyway.

*Nothing I want you to learn from this.*

He recalled, suddenly, reaching out to hold Chuuya's hand. Recalled, in a corner he'd had no time to look at — Mori, watching.

*Mori couldn't know*, he reminded himself.

*I asked Mori if you needed me*, Chuuya had told him, on phone call. *He said no.*

*"The Sheepdog will need so much work,"* he whined, leaning his head against the wall. The man had been nice enough to put his bandages back in place; he scratched his covered eye, and insisted: "I saw the News in my room — how long will the reconstruction of the Island even take? *Eons*. That brute you all call an asset couldn't even spare his old home a second time. I *told you* we should have used our money for the settlement only, but *no* — you wanted a bar. Look how much money this will cost us! Poor Ango will have to renew all of his —"

"He didn't even come look for me."

Dazai cracked one eye open.

"It surprised me, I must admit," the doctor continued, rattling three gloved knuckles on the Hospital door. "Oh, they got me out rather fast — I was closer to the surface. But Ozaki told me he had been informed about my state," Mori tilted his head to the side, fakely, innocently confused. "And yet he threw himself at the one person who wouldn't allow him to use his Ability, and saved him."

He paused. "Saved *you*," Mori corrected, with the tone of his more philosophical questions. *How would you kill them, Dazai?*

There had been no time to think when he had felt Chuuya's arms pierce the air — they had sank and they had sank and they had been buried. *He did say we could share an urn*, he thought, with all the mock of a smarter being — a smart being who should have been smarter. Dazai was more than the devoted, blinded fools offering lighters to Chuuya's hands. Dazai knew that, if he had it his way — he wouldn't leave ashes behind at all.

*Truly, Chuuya*, he mused, studying Mori's hands. Dazai had met the boy's mismatched eyes as grasped him and *held* on. He could have sworn he hadn't thought about letting him fall for a moment. *You'll get yourself killed.*

Crossing and uncrossing his ankles, he offered: "It's because I blew my dog whistle."

The man seemed amused. He knew better than to believe it. "Rather loudly, I'm assuming."

"He almost took bullets for you last year," Dazai widened his sole eye, obnoxious. "What is enough for you, Mori? Do you want him to *actually* die? Would that be devoted enough? I'm all for that plan. Have been since I was fifteen. You never let me."

Mori tilted his head to the side. "You know I dislike it when you play dense, Dazai."

For some reason, he couldn't answer.

The man sometimes made for a picture of sorts — like his tense shoulders should have been in a stained-windows room, holding a bloodied scalpel over a dead man. Watching Dazai with a smile that was half man and half death and entirely too warm for that freezing room. The blood had splattered on the wall like a child's finger paint, and Dazai had been fourteen years old and damned.

*If Mori had wanted him dead, he realized, a bit more everyday, he would have killed him then.*

*Then what was it for?*, he begged.

“What’s the issue?” he questioned, with a sigh. His fingers tapped his thigh rhythmically, as he went through the options with urgency. There was something he had been missing for too long — an understanding Mori had reached about his precious, priceless *Double Black* that Dazai hadn’t seen. He’d always been scared of Dazai. He’d never feared Chuuya for a moment. “Do you think we’re passing notes, detailing plans to kill you? We can’t. The Hatrack could tell you. I eat all the notes he passes me during the meetings.”

There was *something* Dazai was missing. It wasn’t on him — Mori had been talking circles around the way Dazai had settled a clear boundary around Chuuya for years. *My dog*, he always made sure to say. He’d given him a collar when Mori had given him his brother’s hat; he hadn’t touched the files Mori hadn’t let Chuuya call his own.

It wasn’t him. So *Chuuya* had to have done something.

He looked up at him. “Not even I can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Mori hummed. “Maybe not,” He stepped away from the door, hands crossed at the small of his back. Regal and untouchable, and the offer of death Dazai hadn’t been able to refuse. All of the sudden, he longed to see Odasaku. “Maybe he can teach them to himself, though.”

“He’s not that stupid.”

“Neither are you,” the man conceded.

Some whispering nurses passed by them, hurrying towards one of the rooms with a bundle of saline bags in their arms. Mori walked the last steps between them, stood in front of his curved, seated body — then he put a hand on his nape, and he hugged his head against his ribs.

Dazai was too exhausted to even stiffen.

“How was it, under the dirt?” Mori asked.

Gloved fingers traced the Port Mafia tattoo over the bandages around his neck — a memorized pattern. He didn’t think he’d ever let Mori touch him there. The nurses returned — even staring at the floor, he heard their cooing murmurs. *Fatherly*, Dazai thought. That was probably all they saw.

*They’re going to make me leave again*, he vaguely recalled Chuuya saying. *If you come —*



“Nothing much,” he admitted.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid* Chuuya, who bared his teeth at the sole mention of dogs and devotion and partnership, and who had given him keys he could never forget the shape of. Stupid, stupid, *stupid* Chuuya, who would have done it all for him.

Dazai waited for the usual disgust at that realization. All he felt was the closest he had ever come to numb, irrelevant grief.

“I didn’t even get to die.”

“You wouldn’t die with him,” For some reason, it sounded like an order. Mori let out a half chuckle; it rumbled against Dazai’s forehead. His coat was rough on bruised skin, and his hand was almost *not* on his skull — was everywhere, and was a half dream. Dazai kept his eyes on the floor, and didn’t fool himself. “You knew we’d find you.”

“As if you’d ever let me die,” Dazai said.

“I really was scared for you.”

“For *me*?”

Mori finished tracing the tattoo. He tapped once on its ending dot, as if to highlight it. Elise would have made a game out of it — who between them was quicker. Except she couldn’t touch him at all anymore. “The Mafia comes first, Dazai.”

He studied his naked feet. Wiggled his toes, and munched on the distant sensation of pain in his broken leg. “And you are the Mafia?”

“So are you. We all are,” He shrugged. “It is the beauty and the curse of belonging. It’s not about the individual. It’s about the survival of all we represent,” Mori patted his head. “Some things are worth losing, if it’s in its name. Some things are of no use. And some things are assets, and should stay as such.”

Dazai’s lips itched. He felt them curl before he felt himself hold back laughter; traced the spot where he wouldn’t get a scar with numb nails.

“Mori,” he teased, suicidal but *clever*; at the very least. He settled his eyes on the Hospital room door — through the slot of the curve of the fake embrace. “You were always such a coward.”

The man had made the mistake of pressing him against his chest. Dazai heard his hesitation in the flow of blood vases, and he pulled his own little finger with the humming, assured tranquility that always got on the man’s nerves. *Beeps* and coughs filled the silence, framing the buzz of the lights. He felt a vague longing for vending machine snacks — but he had no will to munch, and to swallow, and to feel *things* inside his body. Almost dying always helped the rush. Always made it worse.

*You truly think you will be my tomb, don’t you?*, Dazai didn’t ask.

“The files on Chuuya’s past,” He didn’t see Mori nod towards the dossier; he knew he did it all the same. “Read them and give them back to me by tomorrow.”

*I don’t want to.* He knew it was an order.

“I’m bored,” Dazai concluded, extracting himself from his grip. Mori let him, because he always did. He stretched his pained arms as high as possible, feeling the pull of all his stitches and his recently relocated shoulder — offered the man his most lopsided smile. “Do you want a snack?”

“Do *you* want it?” Mori replied, because he knew him too well.

“Ah, not really,” He stumbled to his feet, and didn’t offer Chuuya’s room a single gaze, as he made his way to the closest of the other doors. His knuckles turned white around the file. Some more stolen morphine would help with the headaches. Some distance would soothe the need to tear Mori’s jugular out with his nails. “But I can buy you some *Crunchy Cookies*. I owe you one for your extremely slow rescuing service.”

Mori half smiled. “You know things work better around here when you’re directing them.”

“I do,” Dazai agreed. He played Hopscotch on one foot only, the slap of his naked sole against the floor annoying and deadly. “Do you?”

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The floor of Chuuya’s room was colder.

It made logically no sense. Nonetheless, Dazai felt it from the first, startling jump echoing across the bundle of nerves on his feet. He closed the door with no real mind to be quiet, because irritation was still at the base of it all — ranked his eyes over guest seats and too luxurious furniture, as if Hospitals deserved suites. Kouyou’s favorite flowers adorned the nightstand, bathed only in moonlight.

Chuuya slept.

“How are you always passed out,” Dazai complained, skipping on his good leg. “You truly are an exceptional example of a thick skull. That thing should have split in two by now, with all the empty space.”

He almost slipped as he reached the bed — he held onto the metal railing, rattling it as he did.

It only shook Chuuya *so*, making his breath fog up his oxygen mask all at once. The blankets reached the middle of his chest, where somebody had had the idea to cross his hands like a corpse's. The sheer number of cables connected to his body reminded him of *Thread Mazes* at those playtime locations Elise adored. His hair, splattered on the pillow — like a blood halo, after a gunshot to the forehead — had grown longer than he'd noticed.

Dazai lowered the railing and climbed on.

His elbow held him up — his legs were cement on glass, doing their best not to touch the boy's own. His skin was just another weapon, and Chuuya always woke up when it got quiet.

When he settled on his side, nose almost brushing his surgery-pale cheek, he fixed the railing back in place.

"Mori's being aggravating," Dazai informed him, pulling most of the blankets for himself. It was easier than saying, *I read your life start to finish, and he told me to*. He hated the texture of the Hospital vests — they felt like a scratch that never quite soothed the itch. The curve of the oxygen mask should have made Chuuya a bit unrecognizable, but it somewhat fit him — with his bandaged shoulder and bandaged middle and permanently scarred skin. The wound under his ribs pulsed. *Nothing for you to learn*. "My only question is *what* you could have messed up in such secrecy that I wouldn't be aware of it."

The heart monitor beeped louder than he dared to breathe, rhythmic and stable — under the sole moonlight, Chuuya was silver and snow even where he had only been blood crimson.

*Truly*, he taunted himself. *Don't you know he won't die, by now?* A shame, certainly — but a truth nonetheless.

He huddled up against the pillow, stealing body warmth. Could half-comatose people snore? He expected Chuuya to start at any moment, if so. His wrist felt naked — he'd lost Hirotsu's watch and he'd lost his phone and he'd lost most of his enthusiasm for the winter season. Dazai threw a look at the bubbling morphine in Chuuya's IV, and reached over his body to grasp it.

Stopped.

"Ah," he considered. "You'll get mad about that, won't you," It didn't really matter. Dazai had stolen plenty from him. Him getting mad was just more reason to take. *I read your file start to finish*.

But moving was a crime, and his bones were too tired for cell floors. He exhaled quietly, keeping his crooked fingers for himself — *you either save it or you touch it*, she'd promised — and tried to convince his deeper urges not to dangle like a hangman from his sanity.

He fell back onto his pillow. Left his hand where it was — tapping two fingers where Chuuya's heart did the same. When he got bored of that too, Dazai curled up onto himself, as

tight as possible, and squeezed his eyes shut.

“I really am tired,” he offered. “You know I hate pain. This hasn’t been fun in the least.”

Chuuya didn’t answer.

Over bandages and gunpowder, Dazai was a nonbeliever — was a killer and was eighteen years old. He held that burning silence between them with the care of grasshoppers and occasional scars he didn’t mind quite as much. *Alive*, he thought. *Alive*. He hated the taste with passion. He didn’t care. Good or bad made no difference; Dazai had no space for guilt and no care for consequences.

Chuuya was asleep. He wasn’t blaming him either; he never had. Only Mori, maybe — but Mori was terrified and a coward, and that was never a good combination.

“You’re the one who up and left, anyway,” Dazai muttered.

Moving was a crime, and his chest didn’t dare to rise over a scar he had not been granted. *Nothing for you to learn from this*. From what? Sacrifice, maybe. What Chuuya had said — *Mori told me I should be loyal to the Mafia, and not to its people*.

*I don’t know how*.

Greedier than a thief, Dazai longed to take apart *his* scar — draw it in his mind and torture some painter until they remade it acceptably. He had never cared about marks on his skin, but the idea of being deprived of one seemed petty. *He saved me*, he thought about whining. Mori would have been left speechless. Mori had looked at them — at *him*, as he reached for Chuuya and held on with more vitality than he’d ever offered the Mafia, and Dazai *knew* he was missing something. *He saved me and not you and he’s my dog. Not yours*.

“I’m going to kill you, one of these days,” he said, conversationally. “I’ll pretend a foolish plan could work, or — or I’ll tell you to jump out of an airplane without your Ability. You’ll do it. You’ll bark about it — but you’ll do it.”

He curled two fingers on the spare fabric of the vest, near Chuuya’s elbow. It was too large on him. Dazai didn’t know what to do with his hands that would not bleed the two of them out. Dazai didn’t know what to do with his eyes that wouldn’t carve the sight of his body convulsing on the concrete under his eyelids. Bullet after bullet and *bullet after bullet* —

“No, you won’t.” Dazai sighed, annoyed. “Mori’s just stupid. But I’m not sure if I want him to know that yet.”

Chuuya’s breathing made a strange noise underneath the oxygen mask — raspy and metallic, enclosed by that cheap plastic. He thought about finding a pen and scribbling on him, but the idea bored him.

*The Mafia*, he thought, *had been somewhat funnier, once*. Entertaining, at the very least. All the blood had been less boring, and all the pranks had been less boring, and waking up had been a chore — but he’d been *convinced* he’d find something. *What the fuck did they put in*

*your baby formula*, Chuuya has scoffed, delirious, *that you're that fucking allergic to being a good person?*

"That was stupid, by the way," Dazai let him know. Chuuya probably couldn't follow his train of thought — being comatose and all — but he was Dazai's partner. He was obliged to try. "I'm sure you would hate me if I was good."

*I already hate you*, he imagined him saying, promptly.

"Of course," he conceded, fakely. "But you would," He pressed his spine against the railing, feeling the cold metal across his spine. Dazai hadn't realized just how *suffocating* being underground had been, until he had breathed cleaner air. "You," He yawned, "You need someone to crash against. This is all this is. Something ruined. Someone who will look worse in comparison. That's why you're — attached," He nodded to himself. "You'd hate me if I found that humanity you go on and on about. In what wild universe is your minuscule self worse than me?"

Still, Chuuya didn't answer. Dazai thought it better, perhaps — he didn't think the boy would have liked that thesis. He didn't even know if he believed it himself — if the morphine was getting to his brain. Dazai only knew he despised him.

He feared losing that hatred, at times — that bitter, scarred vitriol that connected them like hooks to gaping fish. He wasn't sure they would have had anything left, were it to disappear. He feared waking up without an ounce of that contempt — for every freckle and every sacrifice and every word out of Chuuya's mouth. What had they ever had before, *beyond*, that violence?

"Adrenaline junkie," he insisted. "As long as you can save someone, you'll be fine."

Dazai flicked his oxygen mask. It dropped Chuuya's cheek on the pillow, landing him nose to nose with him. He let his finger trace the plastic until it found warm, beating skin — he traced the tender skin underneath his chin, where his heart hammered the loudest, and thought vaguely about sticking a knife up there.

He didn't quite want to do it. He could have, though. Chuuya was never careful enough.

"You can't save *me*, though," he informed him. Something like bone deep curiosity was stuck in his throat. It burned a bit; blocked his airways. "Truly, Chuuya — don't you know better?"

Boring, boring Chuuya didn't reply. *Mori would never kill him*, Dazai considered, vaguely. For the first time, he began to consider his own possible hysteria. *He wants to make him an Executive*.

He couldn't even recall how they'd been separated from the metal pole — if the floor had fallen again and they'd fallen with it; if Chuuya had managed to get himself out. Dazai didn't know. Dazai hated pain. He missed that blood-sticky, rusty point of connection — just a bit.

*Just for the chance to annoy him where he couldn't run*, he reminded himself. Give life a taste of *something*.

*We breathe*, he remembered saying. He picked up Chuuya's lifeless wrist, and raised it to eye level — studied a black dot in the middle of it, cutting the path of a bluish vein in two. He rubbed his thumb over that old scar, and thought of a little boy described in a stolen dossier — someone who had started a fight over his mother. There was no point in lingering on the obvious. It was a waste of time. It had all been a waste of a life. *We eat*.

"I'm not in love with you," Dazai offered, matter-of-factly, with no real intention. He pressed his lips to the ink-stained skin, and kissed it until it tasted like truth. "The Mafia has no place for it."

Boring, stupid Chuuya didn't hear a thing.

He curled his hands close to his chest, and didn't push closer. Some auburn hair ended up in his eye as he closed them, trying to carve his heart to the rhythm of the monitor; a gentle, swirling hum. *We die*.

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He woke to sun rays hammering his closed eyelids, enhancing a whine out of his dry throat.

Hospital rooms had another charm during the day — something less gloomy, and more still in time. The flowers Kouyou had left seemed a bit warmer, even if they were *her* favorites — one of the nurses had given them water, and drops of it stuck to the pink petals. Dazai watched one of them trail all the way to the edge of that fake floor, and didn't blink when it landed on the nightstand.

Doctors and patients were a low hum from behind the walls. The silence inside the room was overwhelming. Dazai rubbed his eyes with one hand, wincing against the skin-marks all the bandages had left, pressed against the pillow.

He stretched. Patted the warm sheets next to him, searching blankets that had been tossed aside carelessly. Empty.

He opened his eyes.

"What are you doing up?" Dazai muttered, studying the back of Chuuya's Hospital vest — still and somewhat rigid by the door. His hair was a scarlet bird nest, half tucked in the back of those makeshift clothes of theirs; his naked feet were on the ground without a care for the cold. "I'm not catching you when you pass out. The nurses will start chiding about *treat your injured friend nicely*, and I'll have to jump out of the window —"

“What happened to Tanaki?”

Dazai shut up.

*The point, Mori had once said, of it all, is to always have an answer. That's how you hold it all up. It doesn't even have to be a good answer. All that most people want — all that most people come here to search for — is words to fill the distance.*

He had been uninterested, as he always was. But his fingers had stolen all the same. *And what's a good answer?*

Mori had thought about it. Ironically, Dazai had a half certainty that he'd never answered.

“No, I'll do you one better,” Turning on unstable feet, Chuuya directed him a glance, blank to the point of resembling a void. In his hand was a handwritten letter — he'd torn out a corner from how hard his hands were clenched around it. “Why has Paul Verlaine written me a letter about it from our *Ivy Dungeons*?”

## Chapter End Notes

mori: these homosexuals they're trying to kill me

dazai, a bit stupid but also intuitive: omfg what did chuuya do

...apologies for the cliffhanger? is all i can say? i'm sorry. this is also something i've been waiting for since chapter one, so you'll forgive me the excitement. and omg! fellas is it gay to be impaled with your partner. i'm sure not but whatever they did after that kinda is.

mori and dazai's convo is also something that goes a looong way back — part of this fic did start from a question of how mori would have felt about chuuya's unwavering loyalty to dazai, and if he would have feared it in some capacity. in the fic, something happened that heightened that fear — you'll find out soon enough. excited for it ;))

AND. L WORD DROPPED. AT LAST. HE DROPPED THE L(ove) WORD. some of you have been waiting for 600k words and this is the most romanticism i can allow in my blood bend camellias server. i mean we'll get some... things. but. well. you heard the guy. the mafia's no place to be in love.

anyway!! i hope you enjoyed the chapter, and thank you so so much for all the love you've shown until now. i'll see you soon, and i hope you'll like the rest just as much <3333333

stay warm!!



# BE

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

## interlude.

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“Are you sure you don’t want us to wait?”

Leaning against the hood of his car, Ango was a gold-framed silhouette. The warm glint in his glasses blinded Dazai whenever it hit the new wristwatch he had stolen from Hirotsu — as the Commander’s old one had cracked beyond repair in the rubble. *It’s my birthday present*, he’d told him. *I’m just getting it back.*

The man had worn his blankest expression — but it hadn’t been unkind. *Of course, Executive.*

“I told you, I want to hitchhike my way back!” he insisted, as he jogged in place — far too frantic for his two friends’ eyes to follow. “I haven’t done that in *so long*, what with Mori’s paranoia. It’ll be fun! A great opportunity to meet beautiful women with a penchant for suicide.”

Odasaku’s skeptical glance to the lonely road they’d come from didn’t look particularly different from his every other look. “Do you think many cars will pass by?”

White steam framed plains of green and flowered juniper trees, with wooden roofs poking out of the earth as if they’d been born along with it. Bridges connected the buildings, crossing over the natural pools of the *onsen village*, turning the seaside location in something straight out of some postcard he might have bought for Odasaku and his kids, during his international missions. There was a quietness to the valley that weighed less than a feather; the air was fresher than Yokohama had ever allowed for.

He studied the sky. It was going to rain.

Dazai inhaled. He wondered — for the uptempth time — what mourning felt like.

“I’m sure someone will be around,” Dazai concluded, halting his jogging. “I don’t know how long this will take, but I don’t want you to have to wait for me.”

“What kind of business do you even have here?” Ango frowned, batting a bee away. Clearly, the little town wasn’t quite for him. “This is way outside Mafia borders.”

“A little order from Mori’s own whispers,” he lied, easily. It was easier than admitting that the man would find a thousand reasons for that trip of his — when Dazai himself had found none — and smile at every single one of them. *Dazai*, he would insist, beating the final verdict, *tends to linger*. “You don’t worry about it! I’ll get you some *onsen* water in a pretty ceramic container. I hear it’s blessed.”

“*Used* water?”

“It’s a natural system,” Odasaku reminded him. “Technically, it’s always new.”

Ango spluttered at him. “He’s gonna fill a container with shower water and tell us it grants miracles, *Odasaku*, don’t be fooled —“

“Come on, come on, don’t fight,” Dazai called them to order, clapping his hands. Rolling his gun between two fingers, he dangled it between the two men like a prize, sighing. “Who wants to do the honors for the last part?”

Silent, but impossible to misunderstand, it took a mere quirk of Odasaku’s eyebrow to clarify he wouldn’t touch the revolver. Ango’s eyes ran from him to Dazai’s too wide, untrustable grin — he let out something like a *squeak*, and snapped: “Why *me*?”

“Because our dear Odasaku has somehow maintained a moral code in the Port Mafia.”

“Because you need to train your aim,” the man added, belatedly.

“My *aim* is — I’m an Archivist, not a —“

Dazai threw the gun at him. Instinctively, he caught it.

“I’ll wait in the car,” Odasaku concluded, a little bit louder than Ango’s continued protests, as he stared at the weapon with distinctively *offended* eyes. The man looked at Dazai in a way that meant something — he basked in the understanding that there was no hurry to figure out what. November was just at its cold start, and Dazai would die in the Port Mafia, and Odasaku still owed him something better than Bar Lupin.

*Look at me*, he yearned to say. *Look at me. You almost see me. Try just a bit more.*

“Just like how we met?” he asked, simply.

Dazai didn't think there was much to beam about, given his distaste for the upcoming pain — but the shared memory warmed him up anyway.

“Perhaps something similar. But no,” he promised. “Only you, Odasaku.”

If he was pleased by the notion, nothing about him showed it. He nodded at him, equal and with no fear, and went to sit on the passenger seat.

“Come on,” Dazai grabbed Ango's elbow, leading him to a juniper just a few steps from his car. The man continued to splutter his protests. “No, no, you won't get fired. *No*, I promise. I'll even do you the favor of not dirtying your car, aren't you happy? Come on, come on .”

Only once they arrived and Ango's fingers stopped nervously twitching — pushing his glasses up his fuming face every few seconds — did the man dare to clear his throat.

He said: “I do know why you're here, Dazai.”

“The wonders of *onsen* baths,” he sighed, as he lowered himself onto a makeshift seat, made out of particularly sturdy roots. He set to moving his coat to the side, freeing his leg. He didn't trust his friend's aim completely, but he supposed it worked in his favor — pity was born from ugly things more often than from precise ones. “I'm hoping it will help with the sun rashes I've got left from the summer. And with, *ah* — what do they call it in those old novels? *Womanly hysteria*?”

“You aren't a woman,” Ango reminded him, sighing. “You aren't hysterical. And *womanly hysteria* isn't a thing.”

Dazai played dumb just for the fun of it. “You never know.”

“Would Boss approve of you being here?”

“I sure hope not.”

“Would Vice-Executive —”

“Ango,” he sing-sang. He knew his smile wasn't cruel. Despite it all, not even his traitorous body would have dared that betrayal. There was no place for that kind of treacherousness between the three of them. “Knowing too much is never a good thing. That, at the very least, I've learned.”

The man shut his mouth. He studied him for a few seconds more; cocked his gun.

“I know,” Ango concluded, devastatingly honest. Behind his merciless frame, gray clouds turned the sky plump, promising an upcoming storm. “I've learned it too.”

Then he closed his eyes, and buried two bullets in Dazai's thigh.

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Eyes blurred and nails sunk in the raw skin in his wound, Dazai stumbled down the paved road until the patio of a Western-style one-story wooden building appeared in front of him.

One particularly wide juniper decorated the garden in front of it, drawing squares of shades on the traces of blood Dazai was leaving behind. He had to lean on a decrepit sign, catching his breath as his recently healed, fractured leg throbbed. He tried to reach for the closest wooden bench, but he received no further collaboration. The red *kanjis* under his nails swarmed across his hazed vision, until he managed to settle on: *CLINIC*.

*A physician, the file had recited, with the casual ink strokes of someone who would write and would forget. Another name in a list of names — another missing kid in a list of sins. His wife helps him out, but she isn't a doctor. The man has a post on the town council. The woman directs the guards of the town.*

Dazai dragged himself forward by the blood between his teeth, and collapsed in front of the doors right as it started to rain.

It seemed hours before the wood creaked — months before the rush of blood steadfastly trailing down his skin was no longer the loudest thing around, scratching his ears to rawness; eons before a foot almost stepped on his thigh.

Traditional sandals knocked back against the porch, as a female voice sucked in a breath — he set his blinking eyes on the rope around her feet, woven to resemble braids.

“Kansuke,” the woman shouted, turning back inside the clinic. “*Kansuke!*”

He passed out to callused, elegant hands touching his face, and the electrifying blink of red hair brushing raindrops off his forehead.

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The smell of a clinic was utterly familiar. Just enough— Dazai noted, displeased — to immediately exhale some distant, stuck breath from his lungs, settling him more comfortably against the pillows.

Mori had never been a synonym to a word that vaguely resembled *comfort*, but the devil one knew was always the better choice. It would have been somewhat funny, though, he considered — in a rather humorless way — if the man had managed to condition him to the point of reassurance from his smelly antiseptics and hygienic procedures.

“ — waking up, I think,” a male voice was saying, somewhere over the wall of his haze.

“ — would do something like — a boy?” a female voice replayed, close enough for Dazai to confidently assume she owned the hand pressing a wet cloth on his cheeks. “So far away from the city — think he’s — any cell phone or anything —“

For a terrible, delirious moment, Dazai was hit by a wave of mourning for his lost old phone — the dog phone charm hanging from it.

Deep down, he was a man of cruel humor — he knew, with uninspiring confidence, that he would have put it in that woman’s warm hands, and watched her dangle over her own ignorance.

*What for?*, he wondered.

Of all the letters he had never responded to, one of them had questioned — *but do you view stupidity as any other lack we admire in others? I do not. I keep my admiration for rarer things.*

He forced his eyelids apart with a whine — reshaped his vocal chords and his very soul, so that they would mimic something worthy of being pitied and being recognized as *similar*; bathing in a purposeful childishness that got on the Mafia’s nerves and fearing instincts, and that Dazai knew most people only thought normal.

A middle-aged man’s face slowly faded into shape, carving smiles and tribulation wrinkles on freckled traits. His lab coat was a few shades dirtier than Mori’s had ever been.

“Hey, there,” His voice was kind hearted to the bone. Dazai assumed so — it sounded awfully unfamiliar. “You should stay put. We didn’t take the bandages off, but we had no clothes your size — you really don’t want to walk around the room in this cold.”

“And your leg has a hole in it,” the woman on his other side added, directing a squinting look to her husband. “How’s that not more relevant?”

“I wanted to break the news slowly, dear.”

She set her eyes on him.

Dazai only held back his flinch thanks to sheer curiosity — his spine requested he didn’t scare her away. The red camellias sewn in her kimono were the same shade of the hair curled

up on her shoulder, pinned with a butterfly hairpin that was far too luxurious for a small town doctor's family. Her eyes were a shade of blue he would have recognized blind.

All the curves of her cheeks traced paths he had wrecked himself against, sleepless night after sleepless night.

*She would recognize him at a first look*, he decided, uncertain of whether it was a good thing or not. *Perhaps, though* — he mused — *she hadn't looked in a mirror since losing him*.

"You've been shot," the woman said, rather slowly. Then, even slower: "In your leg. Petal."

Her husband sighed.

"I'm sorry," Dazai offered, snapping both their gazes back on him. His throat was sore from the fever that rain stunt would surely grant him — he didn't have to put much effort into sounding timid. "I didn't mean to bother you."

"What *bother*, for God's sake? Getting shot, who knows how?" the doctor half-laughed.

His wife — clearly the more skeptical of the duo — insisted: "*How* did that even happen, by the way?"

He had crafted his story between the fight Ango and Odasaku had gotten in about the music and the family of squirrels they'd almost ran over — lowering his eyes to the azure blankets over his mostly naked, bandaged body, he murmured: "My father was hunting, and I — I moved too slowly while setting the trap."

The woman stilled.

"And he just *left you* there?" she hissed.

"It's not his fault," he hurried to say, lower lip wobbling. The two exchanged a glance over his frame, as the man's hands clenched around the stitching set he'd used on him. "He had to chase after the fox before it could escape, and I passed out — I lost him in the rain. I walked until I saw the smoke from the *onsen* town. I thought —"

He trailed off. Alarmed, the doctor hurried to say: "You're more than welcome. We wanted to wait for you to wake up to alert the guards, but —"

"His father *shot him*," the woman said. The mistrust she had directed his way was now entirely pointed to some invisible target; she disentangled a knot from the hair on his forehead, insisting: "And he ran off? We need to alert the guards."

"*No!*" Dazai shook his head. "Seriously, he — he didn't do it on purpose. He must be out of his mind with worry, by now — I should have tried to let him know I couldn't follow."

"After being *shot*?"

"I've got a whistle for that," he said, weakly.

The woman fumed. Her husband directed her a *look*; after a few more seconds, she stood.

“I’ll go refill the basin,” she offered. After a beat of hesitation, she forcibly softened her traits — bathing Dazai with the gentlest eyes he had ever been offered. Even leaving Yokohama had never granted him such unrecognizable-ness; for a blink, he was taken aback. “We need to keep you here for the night, petal. You were lucky the bullet didn’t go through — but unless your father stops by the City Hall and my husband’s colleagues inform us, he’ll have to wait.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Dazai swore.

“I have a tendency to make enough food to satiate an army,” The man waved the matter away. “It’s an old habit from military turnations. And this guest room is already prepared for you. Don’t offend my craft by getting your wound infected.”

It was then that he noted his mistake — the room did *smell* like a clinic, but it wasn’t one. The back of the building had to function as a house; the walls surrounding the bed were a warm yellow, undecorated but rendered more cozy by the wide windows on three out of four of them. There were flowers on the frames, and a collection of planet shaped glass souvenirs on a desk. Dazai had the fleeting thought to steal one — to watch Chuuya seethe at the envy of not owning it — and then almost choked on the irony of it.

“Alright,” he conceded. “But I’ll be out by the morning. My father must be worried.”

“The least he could do,” the woman let him know, clearly still unsatisfied. Now that she was standing, there was a regality to her that couldn’t go unnoticed. The file had named her as the child of a long line of warriors; every inch of her proved it. “Kansuke, don’t stress him out. We can talk at dinner. He needs to rest.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” He raised his hands. A wink in Dazai direction was followed with: “That marvelous flower you see is called Fuku. You are more than welcome to feel at home.”

“Tsushima,” Dazai offered. “Shuuji.”

“Kashimura,” the woman bowed her head. *Nakahara Chuuya*, Mori’s file recited, as its very first lines, *formerly Kashimura Chuuya* — “Please, excuse me. Do make yourself comfortable.”

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Chuuya hadn't said a word to him since the Hospital fiasco. When Kashimura Kensuke helped him to his feet — conceding to show him his office and explain his latest medical cases, after Dazai had shown unbridled interest — he thought, with a sort of resigned vacancy, that he would never speak a word to him again.

"Apologies for the mess," the doctor told him, bending to pick up some fallen dossiers from the floor. "It's sickness season."

He nodded, absently, still walking a slow march through the hallway. He didn't know what made a house haunted. There were pictures on the walls and dust in the corners; the smell of cooking from some unclear direction. He imagined a child tripping on the wood, studied the tranquility on the doctor's face, and still didn't know.

Perhaps it was the awareness of it — a room with something missing was a room that still held *something* of that thing. He tried to imagine the sight Chuuya would have made against the yellow walls, and blinked when his mind pictured blood shattered behind his stiffened back.

*Why are you here*, he wondered — merely curious. He recalled Chuuya leaving the Hospital room; being transferred somewhere Dazai hadn't asked for. *What kind of spite burns?*

The town didn't have many injuries to talk about, but Kashimura spoke about them with the glee of someone who'd get excited about a fever.

"Old man Katsuki has yet to spend a single Autumn without having an allergic reaction," he narrated to him, sitting crookedly on his chair. He had situated Dazai on the medical bed, and he kept throwing amazed glances at his dangling feet over the edge. "He cannot resist the cuisine of this time of the year. You have amazing pain tolerance!"

"Built it over time," Dazai offered. Then, realizing how it could be taken, he added: "I was a rowdy child. Always got in fights."

"Oh, we have that type here," he chuckled. He tapped on another file, scratching a shadow of beard — with thin, elegant fingers that Dazai knew the shape of. "Here, see — Matsuo Kiyoshi. He's about your age, I think. He's calmed down since he was a brat, but the troubles he used to get in were astonishing. I think he got suspended from school for fighting at least fifty times."

The name tickled. "Fights over what?"

"You name it," Kashimura huffed. "One time, my wife made the mistake of greeting him on a bad day, and he spent the rest of the week bad mouthing her to anyone who would listen."

Dazai watched him dig through an old cardboard box under the desk — something that contained more pictures than it did medical files. "That's not nice."

"Kids are kids. My son, though — he didn't take it well at all. Roughoused for twenty minutes straight, until the brat bowed in front of her."



*Words are sounds*, Tanaki had once said. He imagined her holding those two melodies — *my son; my son; my, my, my son* — in two wrinkled hands. She would have known the way they turned into whispers at the start and at the end like a brand. She would have asked Dazai to be less mean about it. *And sounds are choices. Unconsciously or not, we only ever say what we mean.*

But Tanaki was a traitor, so it didn't matter much at all.

Dazai kept his eyes on the nearest window — the rain-wet juniper in the garden, swaying with the water like misplaced seaweed. “Oh,” he replied, very polite. “You have a son?”

The man's smile turned tight. It made him look a bit older. “Not anymore, no.”

*Odasaku would drop it*, he considered. No one had ever told him to emulate the man — with that *no-killing* spiel, Mori would have abhorred the idea. But still, Odasaku would have dropped it — so, Dazai dropped it too.

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Kashimura was interested in what life in the big city was like for a teenager, so he sat him by the bench outside to watch the faded rain wet the street — and asked for tales, as he pretended not to check for old scars on Dazai's skin.

On a whim, Dazai turned thieving.

“I'm doing an apprenticeship in this one Detective Agency in Yokohama,” he explained, as sincere as he knew how, watching a few kids chase each other by the cobblestoned road behind the picket fence. “It's mostly Ability Users. They're a bit of a secondary police force, specifically for the criminals with Abilities.”

“That's clever,” the man commented. “Not a whole lot that normal men can do against those kinds of soldiers.”

When he offered him a curious eyebrow, the man cleared his throat.

“Regiment 134th,” Kashimura offered. “I was a military doctor for most of my youth. I only settled down after meeting Fuku — she was part of a special squadron the Government was about to deploy, mere weeks before the *Great War* ended. I saw,” His eyes blurred, for a moment. “I saw a lot of Abilities. I saw what they can do.”

Mori never talked about the *War*. With a bit of sincere interest, Dazai questioned: “Was it that nobody knew how to use the Ability Users, or that they were all too scared to?”

The man thought about it.

“Neither,” he concluded. He’d gotten one of the peaches from the ceramic container Dazai had spied in the kitchen. He peeled it with meticulous motions — awfully familiar. Dazai didn’t care all that much. Did he? There was fascination in theft. There was fascination in knowing something more than his interlocuer did. He didn’t know when it became an inhuman thing to feel.

“Neither?” Dazai echoed.

“Neither,” Kashimura gulped down a slice. “I hate to blame — hate to make it about factions — but it was mostly the Users’ fault. They’d been either freaks, legally regulated fools, or secrets for far too long — they didn’t know how to deal with orders to make themselves useful. The war wasn’t the best context to start with,” He shrugged. “But it would have happened anyway. You can’t put a thirsty man in the desert and expect him not to build a well. Even if he dies in the process.”

Dazai blinked. “At least the next person to pass by will have a well.”

The doctor’s expression turned a bit grim. There was nothing but politeness in the glance he offered him, though — an affection vague enough that he knew the man had enough to satiate all the playing children beyond the picket fence.

“Spoken like a true war leader,” Kashimura complimented. It didn’t sound particularly like a compliment. “But that mentality gets hard to keep up with when the means to an end are bleeding out in your hands. At that moment, they become nothing but men.”

“Weren’t they always?”

“Not when the cause demanded something else,” he corrected. “It’s all about the well, until you realize you might never see any water at all. But you endure,” He ripped the peel off his peach, nails blunt and as clean as Mori’s always were under the gloves. Dazai didn’t think he would have approved of the doctor’s ideas. Perhaps that was why he never talked about the *Great War* — Dazai had a stubborn tendency to go against his thoughts.

“Although,” Kashimura commented, after a bit. Some people passed by the house in a hurry — they *all* halted to bow to the doctor first, though. “Sometimes the water isn’t worth it.”

“No?”

“No,” He tilted his head. His eyes were lost somewhere unclear — past the playing kids, or just a tad before their jumping steps. “Not when you have no one to build a well for.”

Dazai hummed.

The man slipped something out of his lab coat’s pocket — it was the butterfly pin that had held his wife’s hair. Kashimura turned it between peach-stained fingers, smiling a bit, as if

picturing the fit she would throw over the dirt. He caressed the gemstones engraved in the wings with a touch so intimate Dazai felt the awkward, inevitable pull of unbelonging divide.

*Intimacy is in the smaller acts*, one of the framed inspirational quotes in the man's office had said.

He had never managed to make it a casual thing. He'd been purposeful with it — knowing the number of turns Ango's key needed in that old engine of his; knowing how it felt to scratch the hair at the back of Chuuya's skull; the exact smell of Odasaku's skin after he spent the night at the kids'; the exact shape of Hirotsu's indent on Dazai's office couch, when Mori demanded he kept an eye on him.

Dazai had whined and stolen. Kashimura caressed his wife's memory like he knew she would have built that well just for him, and survived just not to see him grieve as he drank.

"Maybe men should just stop venturing in the desert," he concluded.

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The Kashimura household's kitchen was the messiest room of the house, and the only one with bleeding *kanjis* spelling out *impostor* on its walls.

There had been pictures in the hallways — there were entire photo albums hung around in that room, though, both framed and held by cute fridge magnets from their frayed edges. Some of them were from Kashimura's time in the army; some of them from when his wife had been young, training with *samurai* from her family; most of them pictured the panorama outside the window, and people Dazai could only assume had lived in that town their entire life.

"We've been here for so long it feels like we have roots sturdier than the trees'," Fuku joked — after she refilled Dazai's plate for the second time, deaf to his protests. She seemed to have relented from her initial frustration — she'd made Dazai kneel next to her, touching his bandaged leg every few minutes, as if to check. "We were both born here, you know? We left when the *War* started, and we came back as soon as it was over. It's the same for most people in town."

"That sounds idyllic," he offered.

"When you get used to Old Man Tanaka singing the national anthem at four A.M. sharp every day," her husband huffed.

She smiled around her chopsticks. “What about you? City boy born and raised?”

*When, exactly, do you practice honesty, you bastard?*, Chuuya had once rebutted, after Dazai had declared himself *a sincere man*.

*When it's funny*, Dazai had offered.

He abandoned his chopsticks in his rice, and played with the hardened hems of his shirt. His clothes had dried in the sun; his guests had been weirded out by his insistence that hunting in suit and tie wasn't all that rare — but after a while, they'd given up.

“I'm not actually,” he admitted.

Kashimura Fuku curled an eyebrow. “You won't convince me a tidy thing like you was raised in a small town, petal.”

“My parents are the wealthy kind,” Dazai admitted, with the quiet shame he thought people tended to wear when that was the case. “All their business is in Yokohama, but they both agreed that the city wasn't — *distinguished* enough for their tastes. They built a mansion somewhere in the woods, and now they play townsmen.”

“Well, that's one type of rich,” her husband commented, amused. “What do they do?”

He squeezed a spoonful of rice between two fingers — studied, a bit absently, the circle the woman was tracing over a wound he wasn't quite feeling anymore. “They have a Corporation,” he offered, with a half smile. “But they were butchers, originally. Decades ago.”

“Oh, we have two families of butchers in town,” she told him, biting down a grin. “I must say, neither of them are specimens of stability. At least it explains your father's despicable aim.”

Kashimura's demeanor turned sour at the sole reminder — Dazai placated her by pouring her some more tea, wearing his best smile. It wouldn't matter much if they decided to call their guards or the actual police — his name would grant them nothing but a boy long dead, and crimes that had never been registered.

*They used to let me wander in the freezer room*, he thought about telling her. *They'd ask me to guess which ones were animals and which one were people*.

“We all have lacks,” Dazai concluded.

The woman tucked his hair behind his ear, offering him a tight smile. “We do, don't we?”

One after the other, the couple filled the silence effortlessly — enamored with the sound of each other's chuckles in between words, and with never ending tales about monotone days in a town that sounded frozen in time. Dazai munched on his food with his most innocent eyes, and let all the information fly out of one ear. There was no space anywhere for lost possibilities.

He was studying the pictures on the nearest wall — some of the oldest ones; yellow across the colors and slightly ripped by constant touch — when the food in his mouth turned to sand.

The kid was tall for his age.

It was clear even as he was crouched down, hands splashing inside a little pond Dazai recognized from the park behind the clinic. He wore a strange assortment of clothes — a dark school uniform, covered by a *yukata* of a green shade that made his cobalt eyes seem wider, partly hanging off his shoulder. A familiar hand was reaching to fix it in place, wiping mud from his cheek. He smiled at the camera with a cheerfulness that would have lit Yokohama for days. His auburn hair was held back with a sheep patterned headband, and the humorless, poignant *irony* of it had him choke on blood from a tongue he didn't feel enough to bite.

*Dazai, he considered, didn't know what made a house haunted.*

“Chuuya.”

For a moment, Dazai thought he'd slipped and opened his mouth.

Kashimura Fuku's lips didn't bleed into her plate — the sharpness of each letter left a mark on the skin, though, rolling down with a desperately *knowing* carefulness that had Dazai feel unfit for each time he'd said that name. She didn't follow his life of vision — she seemed to know exactly *what* his eye had found; to be keeping it there only with the sheer intensity of her gaze on the side of Dazai's face.

“His name was Chuuya,” she offered, with a strange determination. “I spent months picking it. *Chuuya*. Like the *kanji* for *loyalty*, yes?”

It was the only photo of him in the house.

“That's a good name,” Dazai offered. Then, he asked: “What happened to him?”

She didn't even flinch. “It's a long story.”

“Fuku.”

Her husband had stiffened, on the other side of the table — he kept eating, eyes on his bowls and nowhere else; but the finality in his tone was difficult to misunderstand.

“Oh, don't you start,” Kashimura replied, chin high. There was untouchability to her that reminded him of Kouyou; when she settled hard eyes on him, Dazai almost expected to meet a mismatched pair — a burned iris that did not need thief scientists to be explained.

“I'm not,” the man said. “Are you?”

She clenched her jaw. It was an unbearably kind gesture — there was no blame in the gaze she laid over the doctor. Only a grief so fragile it was a ripple in the water.

“His name is Chuuya,” Kashimura offered, as she turned a tight smile to Dazai, again.  
“That’s the whole story.”

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“What’s with the bandages, anyway?” the woman asked him, when eleven P.M. hit the clock, and the forget-me-nots she was watering started oozing off a pleasant smell. “We didn’t check under them — don’t worry. But are you hurt?”

“I get hurt quite often,” Dazai admitted, as he kicked his sock-clad feet from the height of the wooden bench. “I decided it was more convenient to just be prepared.”

Kashimura Fuku sent him a funny look from over her shoulder.

It had stopped raining only two hours ago; the bench was still wet, and occasional rain drops trailed from the longer branches of the juniper framing that little garden. She’d asked if he wanted to join her for her gardening hours, as if the moon wasn’t high in the sky — *I prefer to tend to them under the stars*, she’d explained, kindly.

*Who knows, maybe I’ll get a falling one to wish on.*

“I wanted to apologize for Kansuke’s...” She wiped the dirt on her hands on her kimono, kneeling a bit more comfortably among the bluish flowers. She’d tied up her hair with the butterfly pin — Dazai kept his eyes on the swirling knot of red strands, and thought of a boy turning to look at him, asking — *what did you do?* “Behavior. He gets terribly closed off when the topic arises.”

“No offense taken,” Dazai promised.

“I love him more than the stars,” she added, frowning. “But he’s the kind of man who locks up pictures and never stops moving. He’s always been like that.”

*So is your son*, he wanted to say. It wasn’t quite right, he thought — Chuuya mourned loud and destructively, but it stayed where his body alone would wound up with the scars. Dazai still recalled the mess at the parking lot, back when he’d returned to France — recalled how he’d personally paid for the reconstruction, and sunk his nails in his palms to never dare again.

“That must be hard to grieve next to,” he said, eventually.

“My Chuuya’s not dead,” Kashimura said, with an ease that managed to look regal on her — where it would have felt slightly unstable on a set of less straight shoulders. “He’s just lost,” Turning again, she studied the bruise he knew had turned a gentle purple on his chin. “He would have been your age, if I had managed to find him. Perhaps that’s why it seems easy to talk to you.”

“Perhaps I’m just good at sweet talking beautiful women,” Dazai told her, preening.

“Don’t be coy.”

“I’m not!”

Her smile was amused; she gathered some fallen petals from a flower the rain had destroyed, and faded along to their disappearing fragrance. “We never had any other children,” Kashimura said, like a secret. “It was always too soon. It felt wrong — filling his vacancy.”

Dazai tilted his head. The stars were more and brighter there than they ever were in the city. He offered: “I don’t think it would have been that.”

“Me neither,” she admitted. “Not always. I just —“ The flower was thrown in an old basket for weeds. She leaned back on her hands, studying the sky with something like resignation. “I used to come here every night, and imagine he’d come back — out of nowhere. Show up at our door. And I’d know him on sight. I’d know,” Dazai thought of the way Chuuya smiled, these days — that it didn’t look much like the toothless grin from that picture at all. *Perhaps a mother*, he mused. Except Chuuya wouldn’t have known at all. “He’d lower his eye to this bundle in arms, and he’d be so happy — of course he would be. He was *so* kind. He was never jealous. But his eyes — even for a blink, they’d be —“ Kashimura cleared her throat. “He’s been lost for so long. I couldn’t let him think he hadn’t been looked for.”

He kept his eyes on the constellations.

“My husband mourns by holding on to the little we have,” the woman said, quietly. “I mourn by letting myself imagine what he could have been. Maybe he likes cooking. Maybe green is his favorite color. Maybe he ties his shoes with two fingers only. Maybe he’s happy, and that’s all.”

*He sleeps on his stomach*, Dazai imagined saying. She would look at him and — do what? *He drinks milk every morning, even if I’m pretty sure he’s intolerant. He has bled so profusely his skin is a shade redder. He does not know your face.*

“Maybe,” Dazai conceded.

Kashimura smiled, as if it was truly enough. She turned back to her forget-me-nots, and set to work without a care for the murderer behind her. When the moon reached the middle of the sky, she began humming a melody so familiar, his fingers twitched in his lap.

*Ah*, he imagined telling. *He does not know you, but he sings that too.*

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The moment he — stupidly and a bit late — realized that the bed he slept on could have been Chuuya's old one, Dazai was out of the room.

His sock-clad feet made no sound against the floors. The Kashimura's bedroom was closed — he stole a glass of water and a peach from the dark kitchen, despite being allergic, and vaguely thought about dying right in that room. *They'd have to come for me*, Dazai noted. *He'd have to come. He'd never forgive me at all.*

Dazai really didn't care much. He only put the peach down to let Doctor Kashimura have a work-free weekend.

*Favors are to be repaid*, the Mafia swore.

Instead of dying, he went to snoop around the man's office.

There were boxes upon boxes of medical files hidden underneath his overly long desk — the cardboard had started coming apart at the corners, and the dossiers had lost their original color to be nothing but a sick yellow. Documents from the Town Hall were the most recent papers around; a few trinkets, and a pair of boxes signed as *GREAT WAR* were the oldest.

Immediately, as silent as he'd learn how to be, Dazai sat cross legged underneath the desk, and set to studying the files from the *War*.

Mori never talked about the *War*; it had to be for a good number of reasons, but he'd never cared for a coward's justifications. The pictures showed a panorama he couldn't imagine the man wanting to linger on, though — their sepia shade turned the ships into sandcastles, and the carved-in eyes of soldiers and nurses alike into mummified bodies. Most of the pictures Kashimura had saved tried to be more cheerful — men with their arms around each other's shoulders; healed patients with their thumbs up; children from visited cities with a smile that spoke of being forced to endure.

*Mori never talked about the War.* But he had that picture, the one with a grown up Elise and a little girl with a butterfly pin — he had the way he sometimes looked at Yokohama, and told Dazai — *how could this not be worth it?* Mori —

He stilled.

The picture was more official — an end of the year shot of the medical force across some of the regiments, with more detailed information scribbled in an elegant handwriting at the base of the thick paper. The doctors stood in three lines, lab coats on and exhausted, serious



expression on their young faces — the wooden chairs the first row sat on were stained with what Dazai knew was dried blood. Kashimura rested on the left of that same line, younger and more freckled.

Two seats from him, on the middle row, was Mori.

“That’s a stupid ponytail,” he said, quietly.

It really was stupid — it kept being stupid the more pictures Dazai’s found, at least one for every year the *Great War* had lasted. At first only official photographs; then, after some albums, the sight of Kashimura and Mori operating on the same patient had a cruel pull wrinkle Dazai’s lips. He put his hand over them to hide them; sunk his nails into his skin with the same distant curiosity he traced Mori’s younger traits with.

*Mori never talked about the War*, Dazai thought. Mori never talked about any of it. Not the *War* — not the *Maihime Project*, and why it had hooked the Government to his sharp, serene fingers.

*The Maihime Project*, Chuuya had asked. *Does it have something to with —*

Abruptly, Dazai couldn’t be there.

He put the pictures back in the boxes with childish indulgence, as tidy as he’d been taught and as quiet as he’d learned — he kept his eyes on the real world, and his mind on the picture that had Mori’s hand on Kashimura’s shoulder. *Sometimes*, the man had said, *water isn’t worth it* — and Dazai needed to leave that room, and to put those photos down, and to never find out, and to never forget, and to *forget*, to never even *consider* that —

“*Nakahara Chuuya*,” His new cell phone, pressed against his ear, spoke. “*Who is it?*”

Dazai was on the too large root of a tree.

It still carried dried blood from how Ango had shot him — always a bit messy, always enough of a stuck-up to not disobey orders. Dazai had left the house in his socks. It would be awkward for the hitchhike — but he imagined going back inside that house, and knew he’d never be able to do it again.

The phone was cold and metallic against his cheek. Dazai didn’t quite remember typing the boy’s number. He didn’t remember leaving at all.

“*Oi*,” Chuuya insisted. “*I’ve got no time for pranks, seriously. What do you want?*”

Dazai didn’t dare breathe. He knew the boy would recognize it. He thought about saying — *she looks like you*, and, *I knew Verlaine was there and I thought it was funny*, and, *Tanaki wanted you dead*, and he tried his hardest to figure out a human reason not to. He couldn’t. He just knew it wouldn’t be taken well — knew it from learned mistakes and unwanted lessons; knew it because he had seen the actual beating hearts around him feel it. *She looks like you and I thought it was funny and I need you to know it was never on you.*

*What do you want?*

What did he want? He wanted to argue about the Arcade, or to talk about the weather, or to rate the episodes from all the shows Tanaki had ever liked. But they couldn't talk about Madame Tanaki, and they couldn't talk at all, and he wanted Chuuya to look him in the eyes and say, *I know you're dying*.

*It will hurt*, he thought. Odasaku had gotten inside Ango's car because Dazai had told him so; uncomfortably, he now wished he hadn't listened. *It'll hurt. But he'll grow ice over the cracks, and it won't.*

He closed the call before Chuuya could get to it.

"Took you long enough."

It wasn't raining anymore. The umbrella Odasaku was holding didn't make much sense — but it cut a fascinating silhouette, against the car lights framing him from a few bushes away. Ango didn't dare honk, but Dazai thought he saw him tap an impatient rhythm on the wheel anyway.

Odasaku had leftover curry on the side of his mouth. He was offering Dazai his hand like it didn't matter at all.

"Oh," Dazai said. "You waited?"

"We guessed it wouldn't take you more than a day," the man corrected him. "We arrived just in time. Bar Lupin is having a poetry reading night. We couldn't let you miss the excitement," He sounded awfully serious about it, too.

He stared.

"Oh," he echoed. His face ached. He didn't think he was smiling; *but I would, if I could*, Dazai begged him to understand. He took Odasaku's hand and let himself be pulled up — he begged, *I know I'm dying*. "Alright. Let's go home, then."

Against the starry sky, smoke rose from the roofs of the *onsen* town. Dazai didn't know what made a house haunted — when it disappeared from the fogged up window of his passenger seat, he thought it didn't quite matter. Ghosts, maybe. Dead wishes for something unknowingly alive.

The Port Mafia, in any case, did not allow for tombstones. Only traitors got graves.



### **Somewhere in November.**

Ango came through the window, because Dazai had put hot glue in the door lock.

“You need to leave,” he said, only, dropping a brown package on the empty floor. *Food*, his nose told him, through the numbness of a fever. There were no windows in that safehouse — there was only him, sat on the floor, and the traitor climbing through the window; because there was glue in the door, and Dazai knew, *spines benefit from standing straight*. “They were about to find you, last night. We need to relocate you. The data erasure will take *years*, and I doubt Boss —” A beat. Ango cleared his throat. “I doubt Mori will be that patient.”

*Mori*, he mouthed. *Mori*. A death rattle breathing. His fingers clenched around nothing. *Mori*. *Mori*. His hand clenched around a gun.

Odasaku’s blood filled his mouth.

*Sorry*. He unclenched his fingers. Ango was checking the files in his hands. His suit was soaked with rain. *Sorry. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, I can’t. I will but I can’t. I will because you said it but I can’t. Sorry, look at what I did.*

“I will kill you,” Dazai let him know, numb.

The friend he had lost but not buried did not spare him a glance. *Sorry*, Dazai thought, to the blood in his mouth — as he imagined Ango’s viscera on that empty floor and Mori’s eyes blown into a squelching bundle. He had buried Odasaku near his kids, and when he’d tried to fit himself in one of the graves, it had all been too tight — the mud and the earth and his rib cage and his jacket around his shoulders. The Mafia didn’t bury its dead — and Dazai was no Mafia and no friend and no anything at all anymore.

*If you yearn for something*, Ango had said, *you’ve got to do it before they burn you.*

*I'll burn you*, Dazai thought, dazed. He was a torturer at heart; Mori had sworn so. Hirotsu had said he was *good* at it. Dazai could have burned him alive, skinned and screaming, and left no traces but a Demon's handiwork — he could have left so many of them that nobody would have ever dared *exhaling* in Dazai's haunted vicinity again. He was a child when it came to killing — a fast learner and a whiny brat, never ready to leave the roundabout.

But Odasaku had *asked*, still — so Dazai had to gut that useless child from the inside out.

"I know," Ango said.

Dazai stared at him.

His fingers clenched. Unclenched. *Cry*, he thought. He wanted to see the face Ango would make. The thought made his lips tremble — he bit them to blood, clawing the expression out with his nails, and Ango still didn't look at him.

*Cry*, he thought, but Dazai was nothing at all anymore, and absence had no tears. He wanted to know what Ango's last words to Odasaku had been. He wanted to kill him for them.

*Look at what you've done*, Dazai wanted to say. His hands were crimson, bloodied the way the sky was cursed to barren permanence. His hands were clean. He hadn't washed Odasaku's blood off, because how could he have torn *him* off of himself too, after tearing the *rigor mortis* of his hand from his face — perhaps it had been all Ango, between one delirious fever and the other; climbing through the windows like Dazai wouldn't kill him for it, as soon as he was done being *better*.

But Dazai knew no self atonement for himself, and he'd promised Odasaku a lifetime of *better*.

He'd sworn it to his corpse, because Dazai was always late, and he hadn't been fast enough to say it to his last breath. *Be better*. In some way; in all ways; in all attempts that would grant him a ghost's haunting — even if Odasaku was too kind, too kind, far too kind and dead. The prayer had been stuck in his lungs, but Dazai had begged anyway — *I can still be better. I can be better. You only need to stay here and see it.*

*Look at what I've done.*

There were seven thousand, four hundred and seventy-five files in the Port Mafia database — detailing every single crime associated with every single one of its members.

Dazai knew all of them.

He knew his were never ending — knew no amount of promised time would make him someone Odasaku would have called *good*. But he was *out*, at last — *you will die in this place and rot in the ocean*, Ango had sworn, but Dazai was *out*. What was he standing under the sun for?

"What do I do?" Dazai asked, then.

A shape shifting, malleable prayer. But his friend — dead but not buried; alive, but only out of Odasaku's oath-stained blood — had a new pair of glasses and still believed in self-atonement. He looked at Dazai with the eyes of a mere planner — *you loved me*, he wanted to rattle him to say, *you loved us both*.

“You hide,” Ango concluded. He didn't look like Mori at all, but Dazai was betrayed and alone all the same — inside an office or a secret hideout. Betrayed and alone, alone, *alone again*. “After that —“

He waited. Ango looked at him, at last.

Dazai thought about ripping his eyes out. *Sorry*, he thought, blessedly torpid. He hadn't felt a thing since Odasaku's hand on his cheek. If Ango had tried to touch him, he would have killed him. *Sorry. Sorry*, he thought. He hadn't felt a thing since the floor of the Mimic base. He hoped he never did again. He hoped the counterfeit cells in his brains forced that bereft bundle of sensations to linger, and he hoped to die in a river the texture of which he wouldn't feel, still stuck on old tiles and the scars on Odasaku's palm — and Dazai hoped to die soon, Dazai hoped to be better, for a lifetime and two and three, and however would be enough to reach an inhale that would not have him doomed to Odasaku's demise and disappointment alike, *sorry*, he thought, *sorry, sorry, I still want to kill him*.

The man who had been his friend cleared his throat. He looked away from Dazai, and never looked him in the eyes again.

“We'll see about the after,” Ango offered, cursed to know them all like ink on paper, and nothing more. “The rest will come on its own.”

The floor was still empty.

Odasaku's hand settled on his cheek — his nails dug in his scalp, and he died, again and again, once for every word out of Ango's mouth, two for every breath out of Dazai's. *Sorry*, he begged, throat hoarse. *Come back. I'll be better this time*. He breathed out, and Odasaku was dead, and the floor was still empty.

“Get me a grave when I die,” Dazai ordered.

Ango didn't speak.

*This is not my place at all*, he'd told him. He wondered if he should have taken it as a prayer — *understand*. Wondered if he should have burned him alive in that car — get Odasaku to live the life he had left to his suicidal friend.

At last, Ango nodded.

## Chapter End Notes

kashimuras: i miss my son chuuya so much

dazai: quit telling people your son is dead

kashimuras: sometimes we can still hear his voice

hi again!! i'm kinda moved. this is the last interlude we'll get before the story is over. can't believe this... that's why i'm leaving you off with a) chuuya's family feels b) a little look in dazai's future after oda's death (don't worry, next chapter will start back from where we left off). dazai meeting chuuya's parents has always been something i wanted to explore (more so after we found out chuuya refused to even speak with them), mostly because it fits in both the "childish cruelty" and genuine curiosity i associate with him as a character. i hope you liked it!!

as always, thank you so so much for reading, and thank you for all the love on the last few chapters. i'll see you soon, keep warm <33333

see you!!

# MORE

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

### *act six*

*[well / the day you were born / i wasn't]*

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### **Before the fall of *The Sheepdog*.**

The Ability User had no name, but he wore Dazai's face.

"I stole it from the database of that cute android's of yours," his voice echoed, somewhere in the upper levels of the warehouse. London was a minefield of abandoned buildings; *statistically, it should solve the homelessness issue to a success rate of 250%*, Adam had once explained, stoic. He hadn't been lying — most of the deals Chuuya had been invited to had taken place in rusty depositories. It just so happened the last of them had been a trap. "I could do much more than this scrawny body, if you want me to."

"I do," Chuuya agreed, floating a few feet off the ground. "I'm currently taking a work break from that mackerel bastard's face."

The User laughed loudly and breathily. It didn't quite sound like Dazai — it grated on his Pavlovian nerves with too little aggressiveness. He followed the sound to a corner of the interior balcony, and hauled the car he was holding in his hands right into that half ceiling.

A scream filled the silence.

*Just some easy business*, he'd promised Adam and Eve, abandoning them in the middle of some unofficial *goodbye dinner* the woman had insisted to throw — before he and Adam set



off for a few weeks of Mafia missions in Europe. Chuuya would then continue on his own, and leave the android to the bliss of android-detective life. *I'll be back soon. Keep me a seat.*

*I will keep you a plate, too,* Adam had nodded.

Technically, the Mafia's European missions were solely Chuuya's business. Adam was as legal as a tin can of a man could be, given his Creator's association with the *Order of The Clock Tower* — but he'd found some strange loophole Chuuya had decided not to linger on, and insisted that his, *wise Master Chuuya would certainly not lead him down a path of dishonesty and crime*. Chuuya had spent an entire week trying to figure out whether the new body had erased his memories of what the Port Mafia *was* — but to no avail.

The perspective of that collaboration was almost excessively exciting. He had been looking forward to it since Adam's mail-sent android joke on, *should Master Chuuya want a "fan", I do have a function that will turn my fingers into vents*.

Then he'd been driven to the warehouse, and the doors had opened to Dazai's face tutting: "Missed me, partner?"

"And you didn't even let me flesh out my potential!" the User whined, somewhere through the rubbles that hadn't, somehow, killed him. He wasn't a real danger — but he was awfully quick, and Chuuya couldn't allow someone who had any access to Mafia's faces to live freely. "I'm *great* at imitations. It's my whole job. Have some respect! How much can you even hate this guy that you kicked my nose the moment you saw me?"

"More than your worst enemy," Chuuya let him know, promenading in the lit corners. There was only so long a rat could hide in the shadows — and clearly, the User wanted something. "And your imitations suck ass. I knew it wasn't him."

"What, so quickly?"

"You smelled weird."

"*Why* would you know how he —"

He sunk his heel in the ground, opening a chasm all the way to the direction of the voice. A familiar *crack!* echoed only a blink after the shriek out of the User's mouth, as his knees landed on the concrete and shattered on impact.

"I'm annoyed," Chuuya said, strolling his way to where the User was spitting blood and half panicked screams. "Couldn't you have picked — I don't know, Ane-san? I miss Ane-san."

"Who the *fuck* —" Dazai's mouth spat — as he looked up at him with a sincere, *tactile* ache the real deal had never shown. Dazai was a whiny, sore loser — but he had the pain tolerance of a piece of plastic. "Is *Ane-san* —"

He kicked him right in the side of the skull, landing his kneeled body onto the ground.

"Have some respect," he parroted.

The User threw up.

Chuuya crouched down, gripping the thick hair of that living imitation. He didn't really look like Dazai at all, but he had some issue figuring out *why* — the work itself was masterful. Bandages of the same texture Dazai would periodically lament being out of stock of — that scar he'd gotten near his good eye the one time a knife had flown too close. But there was nothing familiar in his gaze; there was no recognizable carving in the space in front of Chuuya, instinctively adjusting his shoulders to the knowledge of a covered front. Dazai wasn't *good* — but he *was* trustable.

The thing in front of him was a puppet.

“Your mistakes in logic are repugnant,” he informed him, rattling his head. The blood trailing down his chin was the same color as the rust of the support beams; Chuuya hadn't seen Dazai in more than a month, and that unfaithful imitation set his irritation off. “Why would he even be in London?”

“To —” The User attempted to smile. It was a wet, bruised sight. He'd forgotten to give Dazai eyebags. “— surprise you?”

Chuuya buried his fist in his ribs.

The User choked around it. It was never a particularly pleasant sensation, but he liked the finality of it — the abrupt fade of the light in the eyes set on him, and the twitch of fingers of a body resisting the breach. Chuuya pulled his hand out and stretched his fingers, studying the bundle of limbs Dazai's body turned into as it landed on the old concrete.

He wiped his hands on his pants. He made for a strange sight — and a bit stranger as Chuuya stood, towering over a lifeless eye in autumn shades and cheeks that had never quite lost the roundness of childness.

“You look like shit as a corpse,” he let the ghost in the air know. “Maybe that's why no chick wants to die with you.”

Dazai — who was in Yokohama — didn't answer.

He heard the buzz before he felt the brush — a bullet flew right by the side of his shoulders, almost grazing it. *Tainted* reacted quicker than he could ask it to, trapping the projectile in a crimson gravitational field. It caused a familiar voice to curse — somewhere in the other direction of the warehouse.

“You really *are* phenomenal, Nakahara!” Dazai's tone exclaimed, with a sincere admiration that set goosebumps free on Chuuya's skin — the sheer horror of it. “But you hold the same defects as most Japanese criminals. Us Europeans never assume the power we see is all the power there is.”

Chuuya spun faster than the rumble of a quick succession of projectiles, digging a road of bullet holes in the concrete.

He stuck to the nearest beam, squinting his eyes at the darkness. “You talk too much,” he let the User know, aiming the halo of bullets around his body. He let go with a scoff, drinking in the pained gasps out of the User’s body — then turned around just in time to stop another copy of him from grasping him by the neck.

“How much time do you have?” the User asked him — tilting his head in a way that *almost* resembled Dazai’s habits, at last. Chuuya tore a support beam out of the concrete, attempting to bat at him — the User jumped away. His grin had no blood between the teeth, and no confidence that Dazai would have worn. He preferred being underestimated until the last second. “I can do this all day. Surely until you get tired of trying to find the real me.”

Chuuya decapitated him with a swing. He turned again, and Dazai was laughing on one of the interior balconies — tie fluttering with wind coming from one of the holes in the roof.

“This is shittier than a horror movie,” he muttered, pushing his sleeves up.

“Aren’t you a bit curious about what I want?” The User climbed onto the railing with a child’s glee, putting his hands on his hips with clear self-satisfaction. It wasn’t a particularly new stance for that body — even less so, when Dazai’s grin widened, as he leaned dangerously forward. “I must have a reason to go through all of this.”

“You’re a low level grunt from *The Pigeons* who somebody convinced he could go against me,” Chuuya recited, unimpressed. “And now you’re letting me kill you. I don’t care that much about cargo information.”

The User’s smile turned playful. “Oh, I can do much more than let myself be killed.”

He let go of the railing with the quickness of a blink. Chuuya didn’t move — Chuuya didn’t find a good explanation for the strange *sound* that left his mouth when the body crashed against the concrete, brains splattering out of a shattered skull and bandaged arms turning sideways.

Whatever it was, he wasn’t fast enough to exhale it with the rest of his carelessness.

“Oh, I see.”

His forearm sunk like a blade across the next body, plastering Dazai’s taunting smile against one of the columns.

It was the most realistic expression it had worn since donning that clothed flesh. “And here I was starting to think I’d picked a body that had no effect on you,” the User commented, wide eyed. Up close, he could even see that small scar Dazai’s lower lip had been stained with in his braces days — a mark not from battle, that had had Chuuya laughing for days. “You know, the reaction is half of the fun. The clones are pretty fun themselves, but — it’s that look in your eyes that makes me win.”

“The look of loathing?” Chuuya wondered, very blankly.

The User reached forward — bumped their noses like a mischievous kid. “The look that tells me you don’t want this body dead.”

He dug *Tainted*-glowing nails on one side of his bandaged throat, and ripped his jugular out.

“You should have gathered more information on *Double Black*, given your Ability,” Chuuya let him know, stepping away from the fallen corpse. He kept his voice too loud, looking around for a glint of the User’s newest body — gritted his teeth against the squelching squeak of his shoes on the bloodied ground. He could feel specks of it across his face, too — not even the blood tasted like Dazai’s. “Not like gossip on us is lacking.”

He took another step — tripped.

Starfishing on the ground in front of him — seemingly untouched by the boot Chuuya had immediately pressed against his throat — Dazai’s mouth wheezed out: “What’s *Double Black*?”

Something like stupor had him pause.

He pressed his shoes deeper; leaned down, and offered a curled eyebrow. “Me.”

When he crashed his windpipe, the User’s eyeballs exploded out of their socket.

Chuuya didn’t remember much after.

*Abilities tend to have a limit*, Pianoman had once explained, watching him twirl glasses on the nonexistent tip of bracketed hands. *Some of it is a game of duress. Whoever convinces their Ability to last a tad longer than the other.* Chuuya — who had never not felt able to fly — hadn’t been all that convinced. But the User’s copies fell one after the other, torn apart by his hands or crushed skull first against a wall or imploded under the pressure of gravity or, or, or.

Eventually, surrounded by enough identical corpses to turn the world into nothing but black coats and bandages — Chuuya made his way to the kneeling, breathless Dazai at the end of the room.

“You really do work like a death machine,” the User panted. Dazai’s face was covered in sweat beads; Chuuya’s hands aborted the strange motion to wipe it off his cheek. “I’m not surprised this guy of yours isn’t here. I’d fear for my life.”

“You’re so not him,” Chuuya concluded.

He smiled. Dazai’s skin seemed to vibrate around a translucent skeleton — the User gritted his teeth in an effort to hold on, scrunching up the boy’s nose into an expression he’d only make in front of a lost Arcade game.

*I’ll be back*, he’d almost typed into the text bar of the *MACKEREL*’s contact, before leaving. The act had felt weird in itself, though. They had never accounted for each other’s *come-and-gos* — Chuuya had never cared to, and Dazai never cared about anything at all. Yokohama

was good and was warm and was *his*, and the putrid scent of blood had only been inside his mind — and Chuuya just needed to go far away enough to remember it.

He grabbed the User's chin. "Well?"

Defiance lasted only long enough to have Chuuya tighten gravity-soaked fingers around his bone jaw.

After some mostly unimportant info on a deal or two that Chuuya had already guessed to be a trap — *leverage for you to come reveal some secret of yours to my Boss*, the User admitted — and after the man had uselessly attempted to sweet talk his way with words not even Dazai would have been corny enough to say, Chuuya tapped two fingers on each side of the man's jugular, and contorted the bones of his neck inside out.

His landing *thud!* was the loudest sound around.

"What a bother," Chuuya concluded.

Gathering all the *Dazais* was harder than any of the killing had been; once they'd all been put in a makeshift pile, Chuuya texted a picture to Adam, demanding whether he could bring some gasoline along when he came to pick him up.

*I did not know Dazai Osamu had mastered the art of cloning*, Adam texted back.

It landed a bit sourly.

Chuuya sat by the pile — using it to shield his eyes from the May sun — crossed his legs, and tapped the lifeless palm of the closest of the bodies. That one specific corpse he'd ripped the heart out of — it was lying somewhere among that bundle of limbs, and all *that* Dazai had left was a crater a few flies were already feasting on. His eye bandage had fallen; with a hum, Chuuya fixed it into place, tapping two fingers on the missing eye bag.

"I did tell you," he informed the pile. He knew better than to linger on mere plastic. It left his fists clenching for a vendetta that wasn't there, still. "I'll kill you myself."

His thumb hovered over the fish charm on his phone. He considered sending the pic to Dazai, too.

Then, Adam's unmistakable car horn filled the silence, and he didn't think about it anymore.

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## FOUR MONTHS LATER

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*Case number: 56670971*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, after Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black]  
had been rescued from [...]*

---

*Dear brother,*

*You'll forgive the succinctness of this letter. I wish to offer you my most sincere  
condolences for the tragic end of that secretary of yours. Gin tells me you held her close  
to your heart. It is a shame you did not manage to save her from her fate.*

*But I do think this will be good for you, in the long run, Chuuya. The truth is easier to  
accept when we are uninterruptedly faced with it.*

*There is a divide we cannot overthrow.*

---

...

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One of Kouyou's girls opened the door to her room after a single knock.

“Vice-Executive,” She bowed, immediately, eyes trailing down Chuuya's new *Ballet-fit* suit  
— as Kouyou had described it, in the ripped piece of paper she'd left in the gift box

abandoned in front of his penthouse — with unmistakable intention. Her smile was a tad too bright. “I’ll leave you two to it, then.”

Chuuya removed his hat to offer his own nod; he closed the door behind himself, not before receiving a meaningful squeeze to the hand.

“There you are,” Kouyou tutted, in a blue dress, Western style — half facing the mirror of her vanity desk, eyes lost between the reports balanced on her crossed legs. The slit of thigh shown by the dress had a new scar Chuuya had missed; despite it not being the first time they saw each other since he’d returned, he felt momentarily blindsided. “Don’t you look stunning — I knew blue would suit you. Can I bother you with some help?”

He almost thought she meant the reports, until her rose-tinged lips curved, hands offering him a gold-carved hairbrush.

“Of course, Ane-san,” he concluded.

The rhythm of it became lulling — stable motions that never got even a wince out of her reflection; momentary breaks for knots even worse than Chuuya’s own. Their hair wasn’t quite the same shade; while the Executive chatted mindlessly about the ballet they’d see that night — *a rather boring plot*, she admitted, *but I know the Prima Ballerina, and she’s a sight for sore eyes* — and the latest whines out of Mori’s mouth in his absence — *he’s convinced the Ability Permit will either come by the end of the year or never* — Chuuya focused on nothing but the feeling of it over his gloves.

“I left it in your penthouse,” Kouyou said, at one point — gently pulling his sleeve. “Can I assume you’ll be spending more time there, from now on?”

Chuuya paused. He’d never told her about furtively still sleeping at Albatross’ — wasn’t sure of why she’d never brought it up, except some odd understanding she would never willingly vocalize. “Yes,” he confirmed, at last. “It’s a waste to have it there, empty and dusty. Or maybe I’ll sell it,” he added, tentatively. It had been on his mind for a while — finding a middle ground. Something flashy, but small enough not to set his bones on alert. “Get something a bit less — *less*. But bigger than the old place. To start with. At some point, I’ll get used to walking miles to pee at night.”

She smiled. There was pride in it. “I’ll buy it for you again when that time comes.”

“I’ll be Executive by then,” he replied, with a shrug. “I’ll do it myself.”

A knot got stuck in the brush.

The scar under his ribs itched. He scratched at it, and dared: “You knew too, didn’t you?”

In the reflection, Kouyou’s smile stayed as it was. Her eyes grew a bit hesitant, though.

“About Tanaki?”

He kept quiet. Then: “That too, I guess.”

“It happened during your undercover week with the *Red Serpents*. We had to act fast — we couldn’t risk the syndicate forming the thought we were stalling, haunted by the thought of executing someone we had been close with,” Professionality was at the edge of her every letter. The facts and the explanation and the good of the organization. It made sense. There had been nothing else to do. Chuuya — still; foolish and betrayed until the end — had sat on Tanaki’s chair at the entrance, and just spun until it had gotten dark enough to walk to Kouyou’s home. “I preferred waiting for you to come back.”

He trailed two fingers between the hair on her scalp. “Did she get a grave?”

“Of course.”

“Where?”

She met his eyes in the mirror. “Chuuya.”

“Ane-san,” he echoed, unimpressed. “I know you’ve been aware of much more than an execution. Can’t you at least owe me this?”

With a sharp wince, she fell quiet.

“You knew too,” he insisted. “Didn’t you?”

“You know I did,” She studied an irrelevant line in the files in her lap, frowning around some concept she didn’t know how to express. Chuuya kept untangling her hair. He had only been out of the Hospital for a day. He could wait. “It took a few weeks to get Verlaine to — passable breathing conditions. Most of January. After that, he was a stable presence in the *Ivy Dungeons*. I was the first person Mori informed.”

Hearing Verlaine’s name next to a present tense almost had him crack the brush.

“And now he’s fine?” Chuuya inquired.

“Healthier than I have ever been,” Kouyou tilted her head. “I suppose you and him have that swift healing process in common.”

*Dear brother*, the letter had started. Chuuya hadn’t thought it a prank for a single — miserable, *merciful* blink. He had memorized the swirls and twirls of Paul Verlaine’s handwriting without any wish to do so — a perfect copy to Rimbaud’s own, whether the man had ever realized it or not. The French of the letter had pissed him off to no end — either the assumption that Chuuya *would* have learned the language even when he believed him dead, or the possibility of his brother having kept tabs on him while he rotted in a basement.

“I’m nothing like him,” Chuuya said.

Kouyou hesitated.

She straightened in a way that told him to let go of the brush — turned around in her stool, just tall enough for the top of her head to brush his chest. Her satin gloves didn’t tickle when she held his hands; Chuuya’s own gloves didn’t let them.



“Chuuya,” she started. It should have felt comforting, he thought — but she wore the eyes of orders. “You understand why I didn’t tell you.”

There wasn’t a question there.

*Three years*, he thought. Betrayal and then betrayal and then betrayal — it sounded too tiring to even think about. *Strategy*, he corrected, consequently.

“You know I do,” he offered, with a shrug. His spine kept waiting for an order to stiffen — the certainty of doom. He’d felt it since Dazai’s slept lined eyes had laid on him, asking why he was out of bed. Chuuya kept waiting to feel angry — kept waiting to feel grief, and revenge, and *something* as bitter as Ueda Akinari’s hands had sworn. Chuuya kept realizing he didn’t really care at all. “The Mafia doesn’t have that many rules.”

*Never disobey the Boss*. Kouyou smiled, just a bit; tightened her grip. “Nonetheless, I’m —“ A pause — perhaps, the realization that apologizing would have contradicted their duties. “Chuuya,” she insisted, instead.

He smiled, squeezing her fingers back. *It was no betrayal*, he thought. *There was no blood*.

He still didn’t know where Tanaki’s grave was.

“I don’t blame you,” he promised.

“Don’t blame Mori, either,” she said. “He would have told you, once the Executive seat — it was a secret card for a reason, Chuuya.”

*It makes too much sense to blame him*, he could have told her. He’d compartmentalized on his wheeled-chair way out of the Hospital; had felt nothing but the weight of a slightly irritating order by the time Mori had passed by his office, Elise in tow and a relieved smile on his lips.

“The most famous Assassin from the European forces?” Chuuya scoffed. “I’m shocked Boss doesn’t have a bell around his neck.”

“Paul prefers foulards, from what the lists of his commissions let me know.”

He stared. “*Paul?*”

Kouyou smiled a secretive smile. “He gets awfully irritated whenever I refer to him as that.”

Oddly, it made him laugh.

Rarely enough, the woman was the one to hang off his elbow all the way to the theater — she smiled with a relief that had Chuuya feel better than any empty, desperate apology would have. The Mafia was the Mafia, and the love was as black as the blood. Turning eighteen had left him more tired than anything — quiet but *determinate*, he had decided he was simply fed up with the ache of it all. He was an exceptional patient, anyway.

He wondered, though —

“He doesn’t accept visitors, except for the recruits he trains,” Kouyou whispered, once they had sat in their guests of honors seats, surrounded by some high society Chuuya didn’t really care for. The crowd applauded; a thin woman in blue tulle entered the stage. “But I’m sure he hates all of us. He’d probably make an exception for you.”

Chuuya didn’t know how to feel about it. “Do I have to talk to him?”

She munched on her lower lip, eyes on the raised legs of the quartet tapping the wooden floor. “I’m not sure what Mori would prefer.”

“What would *you* prefer?”

“That you never had to step a foot in that man’s presence,” Kouyou offered, immediately.

“I can do that,” he said.

“Chuuya,” She traced a word on the hand he had abandoned on their shared armrest; only his name. *One word only.* “This was never about you — no matter what it *should* have been. I would like you to try and make it about you, where you can.”

He studied her profile over the clarinets.

*Home*, the ground always echoed, once he stepped back in Yokohama. Petty like an offended child; a bit disbelieving that he’d come back — like he could have ever stayed away. He offered the woman his index, and she twinned her own with it — a secretive, short hold. *What other place has ever been as kind?*

Kouyou didn’t speak until the intermission was over, and the second part had long started.

Unexplainably unreserved, eyes fixed on the ballet, she swore: “The demon child had no choice either.”

The scar on his ribs itched. He scratched it with uninterested fingers. He remembered waking up, cocooned in morphine and fingers encircling his wrist — Dazai’s thumb running unaware paths up and down that old back scar the inside of it. He had felt horribly warm, for a moment — had held that closeness to his ribs, remembering how it had felt to share blood and finishing-air.

*What’s Double Black?*, that User had asked. Chuuya had grown petty because of it. He’d invited Dazai along. He’d grown used to the weight of tales. He’d grown too used to the urge to shove Dazai off himself, before realizing he’d been the one to reach out.

“He’s mine first,” Chuuya concluded. “You are Mori’s. He had all the choices he wanted.”

Her flinch was full-body.

It was too dark to see the thing on her face — he got the odd feeling of having said something not quite smart enough for survival. *But it’s true*, he thought. In spite of it all — in spite of Dazai’s walls and secrets and meetings with Mori. He had fought nail and tooth for it, and he hadn’t even wanted to. It was his, all the same.

*I know you*, he'd said.

The feeling of a skull between his hands was a weight on his mind. Chuuya recalled a dark street and his tired steps — Hamamoto's face. *How can you not see?*, the man had asked.

"Alright," Kouyou concluded, after a while. She seemed to be remembering something; she lowered her eyes to where Chuuya's newest scar was, and frowned. The ballerina on stage fell to her knees — expression a tad too precisely beautiful to communicate pain. "As you wish."

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Fumiko Enchi was doing her very best to climb the stone cross that marked Tanaki's grave.

"I'm not visiting you if I can't sit, you hag," Chuuya heard her mutter, with that upward tilt that was constantly woven around her voice. The weeks of torture and the months under Kouyou's rancorous tutelage had turned her into a skeleton of herself — she was thinner, but with gun calluses and with bruises that were hidden by the colorful military get up she'd picked as a uniform. "So you better haunt whoever built you a fucking pyramid as a goddamn grave —"

"You could just sit on the grass, you know," Chuuya informed her, floating up to the nearest branch of the juniper dangling over the stone.

The woman paused, startled.

"Oh," she said. They had cut her hair, and it already showed signs of having regrown from the mess it'd been — the scarlet strands barely reached her chin. "It's you."

Tanaki's grave was nothing much — a sad, white-stone match to Rimbaud's cliff tombstone, with only her name carved. It was the concept of the grave itself that was spiteful; Tanaki had been in the Mafia longer than most people, and she'd get her eternal rest in a tainted memory.

*But she's a traitor*, Mori had told him, easily. *So that's all there is, I'm afraid.*

He curled one eyebrow, kicking one foot in the air in Fumiko's direction. "I'm assuming that's how you actually knew her."

“The *Special Division*? In a way, yes,” She shrugged. “I *did* kill her husband. Great fun. But she only knew to ask me because my cell was near her office.”

Something ugly crawled in Chuuya’s guts. “She had an *office*?”

“She was one of their longest investments,” Fumiko opened her arms and bowed to the stone cross, obnoxious. “The little *Nine Rings*’ fool, who still dreamed of rebuilding a syndicate that ended up rebuilding itself without her — and taking her unborn kid, while they were at it. Not many jerks at the *Division* who didn’t know her.”

He tried to imagine it. It was hard to sit by and sit with — Tanaki’s warm, welcoming smiles, and the hands that had tickled his skull.

“She wasn’t very happy when Ueda turned up,” she added, offering him a look that was entirely indecipherable. “If it helps.”

“It doesn’t,” Chuuya assured.

“Sucks to be you.”

“Sucks to be *you*, too.”

Fumiko pretended to toast to that.

His fingers itched. He felt the urge to jump down that tree branch; touch the tombstone with his own hands, to believe it was real. Mafiosi didn’t get graves — even what he’d built for the Flags was a wish they probably wouldn’t have appreciated. *But it feels wrong*, Chuuya always insisted, where he couldn’t be heard. *To become nothing like that*.

*That’s stupid*, he’d told Dazai. *Just get in my urn*.

He clenched his jaw.

“How did they do it?” Fumiko asked.

Chuuya shrugged. “Fire, they tell me.”

“*Tell you*?” She blinked up at him, drooling a look that had his shoulders stiffen. “How come *you* weren’t there?”

He disliked the implication of her tone. The assured shrug of someone who had *been* in his head, and who hadn’t seen enough to act as if she knew him — but who had seen *enough*, anyway. He had crawled all the way to her dungeons and demanded to be cursed — Chuuya wasn’t stupid. He had to assume it had opened him to her worst analyses.

“I was in Europe,” he told her, clipped.

“They could have called you back.”

“I was undercover.”

“Yes,” Fumiko’s eyebrows raised. “And they could have called you back.”

“The Mafia has more important business than witnessing a traitor burn,” Chuuya informed her, a tad annoyed. “I sent a fish representative.”

“Your partner,” Understanding colored her with *something* — finally abandoning her quest to climb the cross, she landed on the ground, wiping grass off her vibrantly pink pants. “I sneaked in the dungeons while Executive Kouyou tortured the poor woman — she told me your partner gave her most of her wounds. It lasted weeks. He had no time to invite you along for a tickling session?”

Chuuya sunk his nails in the bark, and kept his eyes on the carved *kanjis* of Tanaki’s name. He had never known she even had a first one.

Fumiko hummed, tapping her fingers on her chin with far too much glee. “I suppose that’s for the best. Maybe he didn’t want you to hear all she had to say about *you* in particular.”

“I doubt it,” he replied, unimpressed. She’d been a victim of the *Division* — in spite of it all, he couldn’t fault her survival. “Why did she do it?”

“How should *I* know?”

“Who knows,” Chuuya crossed his legs. “But you’re a traitor, who’s only alive because we decided you were more useful begging for your life than otherwise. I don’t think you have a choice but to tell me anyway.”

The woman’s careless expression froze on her traits.

“How are Kobo and Mishima?”

“Don’t you start,” she said, with a thread of voice. “We were having such a great time.”

Chuuya waited, patient.

“What do you want me to say?” Fumiko snapped, eventually, brusquely. “That she woke up every morning and detested her eyelids for parting? That she sat at that desk of yours and mourned a betrayal she had no choice but to keep up — for *decades*? I doubt she did. I doubt she would have lived half as much and with half as many wrinkles, if that had been the case,” There was a bitterness to her voice that was foreboding; a prediction for her own hands, curled on her lap. *I think the Mafia will kill you, eventually* — Chuuya thought about telling her. “She wanted her freedom. The *Division* gave her a price for it. She died paying it, and it was no use at all.”

He studied the eroded stone of her grave. It had been there for *months*, and he hadn’t. She had been burned alive, and Chuuya hadn’t even seen her ashes.

“She died for nothing,” Fumiko concluded. “That’s all. Given all the stories I’ve heard about you — you should be familiar with it.”

Chuuya stiffened. “My friends died for *me*. Don’t you dare compare it.”

A bit surprised, she blinked at him.

“What?”

“You’ve changed,” she noted. She didn’t make it sound like a bad thing. “Just a bit.”

He was taken aback enough to fall quiet.

Upcoming winter brushed against Tanaki’s grave. They sat there in silence until it was dark, and Chuuya never came back again.

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““You’re being dramatic,” Yuan declared.

“*Gimme a sec,*” he whispered, his voice a frozen thread — bent in two with his hands between his legs. The punch had rendered his vision blurred — the familiar sandy roads of Suribachi City twirled and spun behind his eyelids, trying to get him to focus on anything but the hit his nuts had received. “Just a second.”

“Sure.”

“I’m alright.”

“Of course you are.”

“I’m going to obliterate a kid.”

“No,” Yuan patted his back. “You won’t.”

From behind the destroyed wall of one of the near makeshift buildings, a few kids snickered, possibly convinced they couldn’t be seen.

Had Chuuya and Yuan been someone else, perhaps they would have even been right. What most tourists and researchers didn’t know, was that *every inch* of Suribachi was accessible — it made for an overwhelming maze of hiding places, based around the inhabitants’ penchant for learning what would keep them secluded from outsiders’ gazes. Whether they liked the notion or not, people in Suribachi spent every day of their life buried deeper than most eyes could find — it usually adapted into a self-reflected lifestyle.

He breathed in. “Brats don’t know street etiquette anymore,” he muttered, straightening up, painfully. “*We* never kicked outsiders in the nuts. We pointed guns at them like civilized people.”

“Now, *that’s* a lie,” The girl cleaned some dust off his shoulders, huddling inside Chuuya’s green jacket. With how cold November was that year, Agent Minami had forced her in a fluffy coat she had stubbornly worn underneath that leather. It made her look like a colorful snowman. “Did your mind remove your earlier years?”

Chuuya stared.

She snorted. “Right. Sorry.”

Squinting at the eyes between the cracks in the wall, he let out a sigh. The work bag Hirotsu had handed him — with his blankest face — was overflowing in so many dossiers of reports on the *Suribachi Project*, it had toppled over from the old wooden box Chuuya had abandoned it on. All the numbers and architectural papers didn’t fit with the grayish sun batting against the plastic roofs — but they’d needed some scouts for the settlement, and Chuuya still knew the crater better than most people of the Mafia.

*Just ask some questions on the worst areas to start working on*, Mori had tutted, all pleasing smiles. *While I do trust your memories, Chuuya, you haven’t lived there in so long. Things might have changed. I want to know what we’re dealing with.*

“Things have definitely changed,” Chuuya grunted, glaring at the giggling kids. “People used to shit themselves at the sight of me.”

“Yes, yes, the big bad *King of the Sheep*,” Yuan reassured him. “Maybe my hair dye trick finally got the stories to die down.”

“They didn’t punch *you* in the nuts.”

“Chuuya,” she insisted. Her fingers closed around his forearm, petulantly *pulling* — a rattling his bones were awfully used to — until he accepted to look at her. “Come on. It hasn’t been that long. You know what they’re feeling. As far as they know, we’re no more than two well-off kids in nice clothes treating them like a zoo of survival. You’re not one of *them*. I mean — look at you.”

He blinked. “I dressed down,” he replied, a bit embarrassed.

Going around Suribachi in shoes and a shirt that had cost more money than what the inhabitants had ever seen had seemed a bit tasteless — Chuuya had rummaged through his closet of official Mafia clothing and come out with pants he was pretty sure were Dazai’s, and a hoodie that was too tight around the shoulders.

“Yeah, but —” Yuan made a face, waving her hands all around him. “It’s — *something*. The way you stand? Your expression? You look posh.”

He scoffed, offended. “I don’t look *posh*. ”

“I probably look poshier too,” she insisted, leaning over his frame to study the kids. “Momo says it’s the regular eating and the vaccines.”

*Vaccines aren’t real*, Dazai had once lied to his face, matter-of-factly. Irritated by the thought of him, he stuck his hands in his pockets and made his way to the wall, stubborn.

“*Posh*,” he muttered, making a beeline for the widening eyes and scurrying legs, as the little group figured out they’d been found. “I’m not *posh*. Hedonism isn’t —“

“*Stay back!*”

The kid who had punched him in the nuts was back. He was trembling like a leaf, but sinking his teeth so deep in his lower lip the effort *not* to was evident. On a starvation-carved face that couldn’t be older than nine, the fear was swallowed by clear determination, as he spread his arms to push the kids behind him further down the street.

“I — I’ll punch you again!” he insisted, his blue eyes wider than bowling balls. “I will, asshole! I’m a great puncher!”

“Tell him, Makoto,” one of the other brats encouraged.

Chuuya curled an eyebrow, unimpressed. “You the leader or something?”

“You got a problem with that?” he dared. He had a bit of a lisp; possibly the work of the two front teeth he was missing.

“Not at all,” He shrugged. “Just wanted to check who I had to challenge to a *Fire Throw*.”

The kids — Yuan included — sucked in a speechless breath.

*We’re not one of them*, she’d explained — it made sense, when Chuuya swallowed his pride. It wasn’t a matter of convincing those kids they were not the enemy, though; it was a matter of meeting on a field they knew too well to fear being taken advantage of. And the *Fire Throw* had been one of the only — and the most well known — ways for gangs to settle conflicts with more entertainment than waste of resources they didn’t have.

It had been a bit of a shot in the dark, but it seemed that the *Fire Throw* tradition still held its weight. The little Boss’ nostrils flared. “How does a city boy know about the *Fire Throw*?”

“Kid,” Chuuya crouched down. He left a step of distance between them — the little Boss and the entire group held back by his arms still *bent* back, like a cartoonish wave. “There’s no nice way of saying this, but I was eating the rat shit that comes with the food here before you were peanut sized and brain-having.”

“There’s *always* been rat shit in the food?” one of the girls gasped. “We’ll never be free.”

“You’re not from *here*,” The little Boss was skeptical. Despite not having relaxed a bit, the curve of his shoulders had lowered enough to show the bonier corners of his chest. The kids were dirty and clearly fatigued; Chuuya wondered how they’d learned to survive, since the *Sheep* weren’t around to gather the smaller ones. “Look at you.”



“Posh, isn’t he,” Yuan intervened.

“I’ve been luckier than most,” Chuuya let himself admit, flashing her a warning glance. There was a sharp *something* in the boy’s eyes he couldn’t *not* recognize — as such, knowing softening his tone wouldn’t be perceived as anything but bitter patronizing, he raised his eyebrows, daring: “And I’m the guy who’s gonna get you brats something better than rat shit, if you accept my challenge and let me get some information when I beat your ass.”

“You won’t beat my ass,” Makoto spat.

“He’s the best *Fire Throw* player since the *Sheep’s* days,” another boy informed him, proud.

Yuan snorted. Chuuya stood, grinning like a child, offering his hand to shake. “Then he won’t have any trouble accepting my bet, will he?”

The kid squinted.

He sighed, unlocking the wristwatch one of Kouyou’s subordinates had gifted him for his last birthday. “I’ll throw gold in the deal, if you’re too much of a coward to accept.”

The group gasped. Makoto’s eyes glinted.

“Who’s a coward?” he challenged.

*Fire Throw* was a rather easy game — to a bunch of kids who had grown up picking up trash and burying corpses in the almost constant fire at the dead center of the settlement. The challenge of it was picking up the bigger number of abandoned stuff one could find, and then throwing it in the fire. The first item to raise a trail of smoke tall enough to be viewed — by an impartial judge — on the higher level of the settlement, would grant victory to whoever had thrown it.

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit mean?” Yuan insisted, as Chuuya hopped on one leg to remove his shoes. “They don’t have an Ability.”

“I could win without *Tainted*,” he scoffed, tying up his hair — throwing his hat to her. “I was the undefeated champion, remember?”

She caught the hat, unimpressed. “So you’ll play fair and square?”

He snorted. “I didn’t say that.”

Yuan glared.

“It’s a *Fire Throw* game!” Chuuya insisted, as he tasted the grip of his socks on the dirty roads. On the other side of the street, Makoto was being hyped up by his friends, as some of the smaller kids flew around the settlement to announce the game to whoever would care to watch. “I can’t just *lose* — and the rules say you can do whatever you want, as long as you throw trash in the fire.”

“Do you think whoever came up with it had an anti-littering spirit?”

*“The game is starting!”* Makoto called, a bit impatient. He had put on a comic pair of broken, round glasses — Chuuya mentally wrote a tab to get him a new pair for the next time he came down there. “Unless you want to give up?”

“And take away the pleasure of showing you fetuses what a *real* game of *Fire Throw* is like?” Chuuya grinned. “Not a chance.”

Yuan massaged her temples.

“Contestants!” A little girl, not older than five, stumbled her way to the empty space between the two of them. Yuan squeaked, endeared — with a blush that said she’d heard it, the girl raised both her arms and ordered: “Bow to each other.”

Chuuya offered his deepest bow. Makoto, hands in his pockets and a permanent frown on, only bent his head *so*.

“When I crush you, you won’t be allowed to bother us anymore,” he warned him.

“I’m not trying to bother you,” Chuuya let him know. “In fact, once you tell me what I need to know about the crater, you’ll get the most help this lazy city has ever given you.”

The little Boss didn’t sound convinced. “If you’re from Suribachi, shouldn’t you know all the stuff you want to ask me already?”

Still bent, he offered him a helpless shrug. “I haven’t been here in a long time.”

“Coward,” Makoto accused, straightening. With a conviction and a vocabulary that a kid from another place probably wouldn’t have cared for, he swore: “*I’d* never leave. I never will. I’ll die for my friends, and I’ll be buried right here in my home.”

Chuuya felt his smile fade out.

“One,” the little girl counted. “Two. *Go!*”

Faster than the naked eye could catch, the little Boss dashed right past him, flinging himself at a mountain of ruined cardboard boxes so fast, he accidentally toppled Yuan over. They’d climbed down to the lower levels — Chuuya watched him curl by the edge of those makeshift roads and haul the boxes in the gentle, car-wide flames, framed by a circular iron cage. He stretched under the excited screams and yells of his admirers.

*“Show off,”* Yuan booed, dangling her legs from one of the shorter roofs.

“You sure you know how to play, *Carrot?*” Makoto shouted, as he passed him by on the roofs he was jumping across, gathering more useless junk and unbridled support from the on watchers. “If you just heard the name from some poor jerk, you could have told —“

Chuuya activated *Tainted* with a flick of his wrist, and shot to the sky.

The unrepentant bundle of choked gasps from the young voices underneath him, familiarly smelling air arising from the factory remnants all around the crater, and wobbling pieces of

building for his foot to use as propulsors got to his head — an exhilarating storm of memories from Chuuya's first days, and things he'd thought he'd never get to inhale again. He didn't bother with picking up the pieces of trash he bumped against — tapping his tiptoes on the surface they laid on, Chuuya had them all float in a crimson, netted pile, hovering over the stunned crowd.

Midway-throw, Makoto stopped to stare at the resounding *boom!* the clump of junk made as it landed on the fire — starting a column of smoke so sudden and high it cut the sky in two.

Chuuya landed on the roof by Yuan's side. Eyebrows raised in a way that spoke of not being particularly awestruck — eyes smiling in a way that made her look years younger — she offered him the timer on her phone, reading: *00:16*.

"Ah, shit," he groaned. "I didn't beat it."

"Your record is *15 seconds*. Don't whine."

"I'm not whining, just —"

"*Sheep.*"

They both turned.

Makoto's makeshift gang gathered under the roof, gazing up at Chuuya with something like wonder — something like disbelieving mistrust. A girl in pigtails and a painful-looking, face wide scar over her right eye insisted: "You're the *King of the Sheep*, aren't you?"

"The one who *left*?" Makoto snapped, as he stalked away from the small bundle of trash he had been preparing to throw. "You're in the Mafia!"

The settlement itself seemed to stiffen. In his peripheral vision, Yuan's shoulders did.

Chuuya leaned back on his hands, kicking his legs to get rid of some lingering dirt stuck to his socks. "And?" he questioned. "Don't try to fill me up with some story about the Old Boss — were you even *alive* when he was seminating bullshit?"

The kid became red with rage. "I'm *ten!*"

"Are you? You need to eat more," Chuuya jumped down, landing in front of the gaping kids. They all took a step back — all but the little Boss. He kept his small fists tight, staring up at him with the same rage he'd heard in most voices telling the *King of the Sheep's* tales.

"Luckily, the Port Mafia is mobilizing to do that. Which is why I need your tiny brats' help —" He spread an arm towards the group, casually waving at the unsubtle onlookers that had gathered as soon as the voice had spread. "— to figure out where to start, to give this place the help nobody ever gave enough of a floating *fuck* to save. If you could."

Makoto and the kids stared.

"You're lying," the boy said, hesitant. For some aggravating, *itching* reason, he thought of the face both Murase and Matsuda used to make when he kept stubbornly quiet, all the way to

the police station. “The city doesn’t help Suribachi.”

“I didn’t say the city,” Chuuya insisted. “I said the Port Mafia. ‘Cause we aren’t assholes, we don’t get state-mandated payments to take care of the settlement — payments that always end up who knows *where* — and we have more money than we know how to waste.”

“It was entirely Chuuya’s idea, actually,” Yuan intervened. “You have him to thank.”

“Boss approved it.”

She muttered: “Employer of the month.”

One of the younger boys pulled on the little Boss’ sleeves, shyly admitting: “All those trucks we saw — the ones for construction —“

“Those were for the freak accident with the bridge,” Makoto insisted. “The one they had to set up a boating system for.”

Chuuya winced, scratching his nape. “That — *ah*, that might have been my fault.”

The kids stared harder.

Landing next to him, Yuan added: “He got buried under that club they’re trying to rebuild.”

“It wasn’t very fun,” he concluded. “But an Ability User started an earthquake, and the area they had based the club on was unstable — which I didn’t know it had become. But you,” Chuuya knelt, looking straight into Makoto’s wary, thin eyes. “You’ve been around. And with how good you are at *Fire Throw*, I *know* you have leverage with the other groups in the settlement. You can get information on all the places the settlement needs more urgent work on — if there are kids that have no one to help, or people in danger.”

Clearly taken aback, the kid’s lips parted.

“I —“ Makoto glanced back at the other children — the wide eyes they’d set on him. “I do know what places to skip but — we don’t want any police in here.”

He snorted. “What part of *mafioso* makes you think *I* would want it?”

The little Boss still seemed unconvinced. When he looked over his shoulder again, Chuuya felt a distant pang on his chest — something that fit around his wrist as tightly as the new bracelet that Shirase had given him, cutting his circulation off to leave nothing but *longing*.

*I miss it*, he let himself think. *I don’t want it back*.

“Oi,” Lowering his voice to something the mumbling crowd of kids and onlookers around them wouldn’t catch, Chuuya tapped two fingers on the ruined shoe on Makoto’s left foot — the only one he had. “‘S fine. I’m not letting you guys be separated. This isn’t about bringing you out of here — it’s about making it less shitty. Too many of my friends died here,” The way his breath caught him told him he understood. “Wouldn’t it be cool if we could keep that from happening?”

*See?*, he tutted. Murase was nowhere to be found — he was in a grave, and he was dead at Chuuya's feet, and he was stubborn like a mule. *It isn't about the light. It's about living where you are.*

Makoto munched on his cheek. "Food?"

"I'll get a shit ton of trucks in here by next week," he promised. "We were slowed down by the accident with that goddamn club — I had to remove the boulder to let them pass —"

"*That was you?*" His shrill lit his eyes up in a more childish shade. "I *knew* an Ability User had — the others told me I was imagining it, 'cause it happened at night, but I *told them* that —"

"No imagination," Chuuya assured. With a furtive move, he tapped the kid's foot again — and let out an ugly laughter when Makoto floated a few steps over the ground, yelping in terror. A weight leaned against his back — when he tilted his head back, Yuan had sunk her knees on his back, eyes offering him a look that had his throat close.

She turned her eyes to the settlement, and only grew sourer. "Home sweet home, *ah?*"

Chuuya couldn't speak.

"Sorry," Yuan whispered, furiously wiping one finger under her eyes. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

"Sorry," she insisted, inhaling. She straightened like her bones had forced her; offered him a smile that tried to be sincere. Still — Chuuya had never expected blank states from anyone he had bled on. "I know it's not your fault."

His chest ached. Batting at the flame with a piece of fabric so old, it pulverized between his fingers, Chuuya swore: "I know."

"Makoto's flying!" the girl who had started their race gasped.

"*Makoto's flying!*" the others echoed.

"This feels weird," the little Boss lamented, as he unwillingly somersaulted a bit higher — a bit and a bit *more*, as Chuuya climbed to his feet. "It's *unfair*, anyway, and any Suribachi leader would agree — challenge me to *Fire Throw* with no Ability, and I bet your carrot ass that —"

Curling one eyebrow, Chuuya made him fly as high as the taller roof stood.

"*You won!*" Makoto shrieked, flapping like a fish. Cheering like chirping birds, his friends set off to follow his floating way — climbing up the old windows and belly-laughing, under the slightly stupefied, slightly hopeful glances of onlookers. "I was kidding! *Mr. King of the Sheep, I was kidding!* I'll tell you all the stupid information you want! Mr. King! *Get me down!*"

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“You’re still here,” Akutagawa concluded, as the *Tainted-red* pen Chuuya had thrown to his office door opened the door for him. He didn’t sound particularly enthusiastic — but there was a breathlessness to him, and to his deadly grip around the doorframe, that had him pausing.

“I leave in three days,” he replied, pushing his chair back with his heels. “I need to sort out some bullshit with the *Guerrilla* — Europe can wait.”

The boy gritted his teeth. “Executive Dazai is in Tokyo with that friend of his for a commission,” he recited, as if he’d been offered the same answer by enough people — in the same tone — to have it printed on his lips. His knuckles were still turning white. “And Commander Hirotsu is at a meeting with Boss.”

“Great to know I’m your last option. What, kid?”

In a single breath, Akutagawa begged: “Gin is bleeding out.”

Chuuya rose from his chair so fast he sent it flying to the wall.

Hallways passed them by in a blur, as they shouldered their way past midday guards and some night-shift returning mafiosi. He barely managed to focus on anything but the wheezing intakes of air out of Akutagawa’s damaged lungs, trying to understand the mixture of awkward panic and not pronounced enough terror. *It can’t be that bad*, he rationalized. *Gin is bleeding out*, he’d said.

“Weren’t you guys in Suribachi to take care of that gang who blew up our trucks?” Chuuya hissed, as they slipped up the stairs that led to the Akutagawas’ room.

“I brought her back as soon as we noticed,” the boy explained, shoulders stiffening when their door appeared in sight. “We don’t understand — you have to be discreet —”

He stared at him. “*Discreet?*”

*Rashomon* clawed the door open.

There were no traces of dust on the dark-wooden desk and wardrobe of the small dormitory; he knew cleaners could not be thanked, as Chuuya had often been notified about the latest guest of *Building Two* — and his refusal to allow anyone but his sister in his room. His futon,

gray and rolled up, was pushed all the way to the corner — treated with the jealousy of a prized possession.

Not the *most* prized. That honor went to the strange collection of sugar packets on his desk, and the pile of blank notebooks hiding them from sight.

Gin laid on her futon — pale and vacantly horrified — her lower body hidden by blankets.

“Kid,” Chuuya said, kneeling by her side. Her brother mirrored him on her other side, hands hovering uncertainty over the mess of sheets he’d piled up on her. “Hey. ‘You okay?’”

She nodded, tight — then turned a slightly murderous look to her brother. “I *told you* to get a girl —“

“You said someone we can trust,” the boy hissed back. “*What* woman —“

“*Madame Tanaki*, I don’t —“ Gin froze in the middle of a breath. Chuuya felt the texture of the futon under his fingers in high definition; then he felt nothing at all. “Just — Ryu, I don’t think I’m dying.”

“You were *bleeding* —“

“*Oi*,” Chuuya called their attention. “Can we speak clearly? Who attacked her?”

“No one,” Akutagawa snapped. “And she’s bleeding anyway, so it might be like *me* —“

“You have dysfunctional lung issues,” he cut him off. “Has she been bleeding as she talks?”

The siblings exchanged a glance. The ball of tension in his chest had him grit his teeth — in a fit of inspiration, he tried to study the blankets over her, attempting to figure out where the blood was.

He paused.

Utterly slow, he raised his eyes to Gin’s face.

“Gin,” Chuuya started. “For fuck’s sake.”

“I really don’t know,” she insisted, just a bit embarrassed. Her thin, bruised fingers tightened around her sheets, and he vaguely recalled reading the Akutagawas’ report — she’d been the only girl in their group, and she’d been left in Hirotsu’s care since the Mafia had taken her in. “But I don’t feel like I’m dying. It just — *hurts*.”

“She *never* says that *anything* hurts,” her brother pressed on, frantic in a dead-eyed way that never stopped being slightly concerning

Chuuya pinched his nose, closing his eyes. “I would think this hurts quite a bit, if Ane-san’s stories mean anything.”

“You know what this is?”

Something between the clefts of his brain let out a whistle, dying jingle — an Arcade's *game over* symphony. He sat back from his heels, and let the remaining bundle of his mind say, as blankly as he was capable of, desperately thinking about how the Sheep girls had approached this: *alright*.

"She's not dying," Chuuya concluded. "Got it? Hey. Look at me. It's fine. 'Makes sense you didn't know,'" The siblings released a breath at the same time. "I think it's kinda weird that she got it this old, but maybe the starvation has something to do with it. Go to the infirmary for a few checks as soon as possible."

"But what *is* it?" Gin begged, squeamish.

"Your period."

"Period of what?" Akutagawa snapped.

"Of bleeding, I guess?" He scratched his head, privately wishing the ground would open and crunch him up with retracting teeth. *Do not make it awkward*. "I'm — really not equipped to explain this as accurately as she needs to hear it. If you guys don't trust Ane-san — we can just get her to the Infirmary."

They exchanged a look. "Explain it non accurately, first?" the girl begged.

Chuuya stared at them.

"It's perfectly natural," he dared. "Nothing to be ashamed of whatsoever."

"Then how do we close the wound?"

"There's no wound."

Eyes squinted, Akutagawa looked at him like he didn't believe him.

He stole a few beats of merciful silence. "Alright," he concluded, snapping his finger towards the desk. "Get me one of those notebooks. If either of you laughs, I'll kill you."

The pictures he scribbled didn't help much — apart from widening Gin's eyes in horror and making Akutagawa's face blanker than usual — but he managed to make his way through a correct enough explanation of what the girl would have to do for the next few days, and how the situation would reaccour. Neither of the siblings happened to be particularly squeamish, given their line of work — by the end of it, Gin had sat up, gathering her blankets with something like resignation.

"I guess," she offered, unenthusiastic.

"It's a cool thing, I think," Chuuya dared, as Akutagawa spun around to gather new clothes — something to bring her to the Infirmary, where someone could give them better supplies. "My old friends threw Yuan a *happy womanhood* party the day it happened, or something."



“I’m already a woman,” Gin grumbled. She ran her eyes over the collection of blades she had abandoned by the door, wincing at the thought of training. “This is just inconvenient.”

“The wonders of biology,” he tried.

“Vice-Executive.”

He shut up. ““You want sweets or stuff?” he dared.

Gin lit up.

By the time he had gathered the secret stash from Dazai’s office — with some pettiness that had no place among the bone deep, sincere *nothing* he’d felt since Dazai had blinked at him behind the edge of Verlaine’s lily-smelling letter — Akutagawa had already helped Gin move to one of the beds of the Infirmary. Chuuya was welcomed by a circle of nurses patting her shoulders and explaining some discomforting realities with encouraging tones.

Looking a bit mystified — and like she was severely regretting causing a fuss — Gin accepted the cookies he handed her with a sheepish smile.

“Sorry,” she offered, head low.

Chuuya perched on the railing at the end of her bed, floating Dazai’s favorite sweets next to his hand. He threw some figs-flavored gummies in Akutagawa’s face — ignoring the nasty glance the boy directed at him from behind the pack, which *Rashomon* had stopped inches from his nose.

“Don’t start,” he warned her, munching. “You guys had no idea. I’m glad you called.”

“Still,” Soaked in the sheer embarrassment of someone like her realizing they were speaking to a superior, her voice turned into a thread. With new-found vitality — cheeks finally reddening the paleness of sickness — she sat up, offering him a curious glance: “I didn’t know Executive Verlaine knew you.”

Chuuya bit down on a sweet too hard, and perforated the skin of his cheek.

“Executive *who*?” Akutagawa asked.

The nurses had already left; she made sure to look around anyway, before whispering: “He’s the Secret Executive. The one who’s training me.”

“He *has* a name?” Her brother didn’t seem particularly interested in the notion. He went back to his figs a moment later, curling up on the guest chair in a black bundle that made him look a bit younger. *Sixteen*, Chuuya thought. He was sixteen. *What had he been doing at sixteen?*

*Dear brother*, the letter had said.

*Are you mad at me?*, Fumiko’s puppet of the man had questioned.

“He talked about me?” Chuuya asked — a bit tickled by the notion; a bit uncaring.

“He never did, before,” Gin admitted. “But he never talks about anyone. I assumed maybe he didn’t know many people in the syndicate, given the reclusion. But he mentioned you after what happened at *The Sheepdog* — he wanted to know if I had news about your condition.”

Something ugly twisted his lips in a snarl. He wouldn’t have called it *care* — Verlaine’s care was a gun pointed to the man he loved, and the face he’d made the first time Chuuya had laid eyes on his driver disguise.

Verlaine’s care was a promised grave, and Chuuya had no will to dig the earth any longer.

*I wish you hadn’t deserved to die*, he’s said. *If it’s you, who should have died more unfairly than you did — what am I supposed to do with it?*

“He’s my brother,” Chuuya clarified.

In the middle of braiding her hair, Gin glitched like a videogame screen. Akutagawa gave his bravest attempt at disguising the way he choked on his figs as one of his usual coughing fits. He looked at him like he feared he was being made fun of.

“The white man in our basement is your brother?” the boy accused.

“That’s what *I* said,” Chuuya exclaimed, a tad too intensely, vindicated. “It’s a long story. You — if he asks about me, do me the favor of telling him I don’t appreciate cryptic letters.”

Gin blinked. “He does seem like the type to send those, yes.”

He was hit, belatedly, with the realization that the kid had spent more time with the man than Chuuya ever had. Their shared air had either tasted of gasoline or of laboratory-made electricity — of the woods at the edge of the city. Fumiko’s hallucinations smelled like nothing at all. *Verlaine has no desire to leave*, Mori had said, in a careless tone that would have convinced even *him* that Chuuya had always known. *There was nothing left of your brother to bury*, he’d told him, once.

*Perhaps there really isn’t*, he considered.

“What’s he like?” Chuuya asked.

Gin had leaned over to her brother, letting him whisper something in the shell of her hair. In a distracted blink, she questioned: “Sorry, Vice Executive?”

He studied sugar remnants on his gloves — the left sleeve of Pianoman’s coat, falling from his shoulder, brushing the floor. “Nevermind.”

Officer Matsuda's office stood mostly untouched.

He had wondered about it for the first five minutes of his sneaking in; the old *Recruiting & Hiring* paper hung outside the door had quelled his doubts. The Yokohama PD had hardly ever lacked fresh meat; Chuuya assumed no one wanted to wear the shoes of the *unofficial Suribachi City handler* — especially not now that it had officially been declared Port Mafia business.

The red-thread board on the wall was still where Chuuya had left it; except the thread had grown thinner, and most of the pictures had curled at the corners.

Matsuda's chair was out of the desk — if he squinted, he could pretend he had just left for an unauthorized coffee break.

"Maybe we all grieve the same way," Chuuya commented, thinking back to the impeccable state Officer Murase's office had been left in by Matsuda's himself. "*Ah, you fool?*"

The Officer, of course, didn't answer.

Chuuya got to work.

He'd guessed Matsuda would have kept the majority of his exchanges with the *Division* where his colleagues would have mistaken them for nerds paperwork — rather than risking putting it all in a pendrive, where the *Division's* hackers could have intervened as they preferred — and he wasn't at all wrong. Chuuya dug through files in the *S* section — skipping past Sheep documentation he had long since pettily scribbled over or fed to the paper cutter under the desk — and searched for anything and everything carrying his name on it.

By the time he'd gathered most of it — he landed on Verlaine's face.

"Still don't get where they got this from," Chuuya murmured, tapping his nails over the translucent material. It was with uneasy, itching displeasure, that he realized Tanaki had to have had a hand in it. Secretaries could get anywhere in the HQs, most probably — and Verlaine had known her.

*I don't get traitors*, he'd once thought, as the Kure twins mourned an ex *GSS* comrade of theirs. He had cared for them, and he hadn't understood all the same.

*It wasn't them we wanted to leave*, Rin had said. *Just a place that was rotting us from the inside.*

The picture couldn't have been taken long after their fight; despite being somewhat sunken, his traits were utterly familiar. Pale blond strands tickled age wrinkles and eyes that reminded him of dying fireflies. Chuuya had *attempted*, sometimes — but he had no memory of his

hand on the glass of his tank. He had no memory of what he could have done to make Verlaine decide Chuuya was worth the effort to destroy it all — all but him.

*Human or not*, that fake him had tutted, in Fumiko's hallucination, *you'll never be like anyone but me*.

"Excuse me, this is —" The oddly familiar female voice trailed off. "Chuuya? Is that you?"

Matsuda's ex-wife hadn't changed much in the years since he'd last seen her.

She was still a tiny, small thing in severe makeup and hair, carrying a bright yellow briefcase wherever she went. If he hadn't been slightly used to her impeccable way of presenting herself — even as she secretly passed him a snack through the bars, winking behind her then husband's shoulders — Chuuya would have probably not noticed how thinner she'd gotten, and how unsettled her wandering gaze appeared.

"Mrs. Matsuda," Chuuya blinked. Then he winced, "*Ah* — I mean, not anymore."

Her smile was weak. "It's alright. You never knew me by any other name. It's Akamine."

"Mrs. Akamine," His fingers were numb around the picture — he shut the dossier, and with all the hypocrisy he'd learned, he offered: "I'm very sorry for your loss."

The words lowered her shoulders.

She closed the door behind her, leaving the briefcase on one of the guest chairs. Her braid was perfectly symmetrical, cutting her back in two; she dragged her eyes across the red thread board with a tiredness that was physical — did her best to give him an encouraging expression. "I didn't know the Station had called you in, too. It's been months of visitors coming by."

Carefully vague, Chuuya asked: "Has it?"

"Oh, yes," Akamine cleared her throat. "He left a list to the Station — all the people who had clearance to come by and gather stuff of theirs they might have left here. But now they've finally found his replacement," A complicated expression pulled her mouth. "And now we've got to hurry and clean this all up."

Chuuya had checked the list the moment he'd broken in. His name hadn't been on there.

"Yeah," he confirmed.

"Of course," She smiled. "He and Murase did always hold you in high regard. You seem to be doing better, since your Suribachi days," Not very subtly, she studied the good quality of his clothes, and the motorcycle keys Chuuya had hooked to his belt. "I'm glad. I hoped you'd be taking it easy. You always seemed far too grown for your age."

"I don't think that's bad," Chuuya said.

"No," Akamine conceded. "But there are better things than a stolen childhood."

He gathered the dossiers, keeping quiet. He recalled, a bit distantly, the sound Matsuda's throat had made as it wheezed, gasping for air as blood left the wounds on his chest. *Don't make me do this*, Chuuya had asked, for years, in all but words.

*But he did*, something like Mori's voice let him know. *And that's all that there is to it.*

"Kids doing alright?" he asked.

Akamine grimaced. "It's been months," she attempted, fiddling with the handle of some box of belongings she'd probably been asked to deal with. As far as Chuuya remembered, Matsuda had no family of his own — an orphan. He wondered if the woman felt rancorous about having to deal with a man she'd left behind — wondered if it was a cruel way of thinking. "They're dealing. They're strong boys. And Dad died doing what he loved."

*We'll just mask it as a kill on field*, Mori had ordered, accepting Chuuya's idea. *Revenge plots always get so much attention.*

"That doesn't make it any less unfair," he assured her.

A veil of belated tears glossed over her eyes; she cleared her throat again, scratching the skin of her upper lip. "I guess not."

Chuuya tapped his foot for a second. "Do you need help packing this place up?"

The woman looked up at him, hopeful.

They worked side by side, in silence. There wasn't much to be said at all, and Chuuya begged that Akamine wouldn't break and start offering teary anecdotes about her husband to the man who had killed him. He gathered the documents he couldn't let the Station hoard any longer, and fed them to the paper cutter under the distracted motions of Akamine's box filling. Intermittently smiling at him, she didn't question him for a second.

He wondered if he would have cared more, had he been a few years younger. He picked up the framed picture of Murase and Matsuda, from their Academy days, and offered a small: *sorry*.

By the time they were done, the sky had grown a soft peach color, and Chuuya had carried all the boxes to Akamine's car.

She insisted on hugging him, pressing him close enough for it not to feel like much at all. In a fit of curiosity, she asked: "What did he leave you, anyway?"

The buzzing, insistent sound of the paper cutter raced from one side of his skull to the other — end and start. Chuuya had the uncanny, vivid vision of the first time he had seen Matsuda in the settlement; how big his hand had looked, reaching out to pull him out of a hole Chuuya had fallen in just to trap him. *You okay, kid?*

*But he was a traitor*, Mori had said. Maybe about Tanaki; he couldn't recall. *So that's all there is to it.*

“Just stuff that wasn’t his to keep,” Chuuya answered, eventually.

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He put the documents he hadn’t destroyed in *The Alley* — only because he couldn’t think of any other place. The wet stone stairs almost made him slip; the little chalk dog Dazai had scribbled on a corner of the secret safe blinked at him until Chuuya was done. He considered using the leaking pipe to erase it — changed his mind, too lazy to — and ended up doing it anyway.

The self satisfaction was frustratingly small.

He contacted Marie — the new second in command for the *Guerrilla*, since Hamamoto had been left in the Bay to dissolve in silence — in order to deal with the *Hounds* by dawn, and made his way to Rimbaud’s grave.

“Told you I’d come back,” Chuuya started, patting the top of the uncarved stone, before he sat on it. “Just took me a little while.”

The view hadn’t changed at all.

The piece of earth he’d crushed to hide from the Sheep had fixed its corners a bit, but the tomb stood still too close to the edge. When he leaned forward, he saw the crystalline surface of the Bay, washed in the soft golden and orange of sunfall — the rocks where his life had ended.

*But be born again*, one of Kouyou’s favorite poems read. He wondered, absently, if his blood had dried. If the waves had washed it away. *If you must die, do it to breathe again*.

“I know it’s a long shot,” he started, heels kicking the grave. “But did you have something to do with how the bastard survived?”

Rimbaud, of course, didn’t answer.

“I just can’t see how else he’d manage,” He crossed his legs, feeling the pull of Pianoman’s coat where it was trapped under his thighs. The idea of that fabric — of any piece of the Flags — brushing that stone was complicated in itself; Chuuya had silently accepted to have the two spies share a grave. He didn’t want the Flags to see him linger over the man who had killed them. But the blame was his and the killing blow had been his brother’s — with some acceptance, Chuuya would just learn to sit with both facts.

“I’m sure he loved you, if it’s any help,” he added, feeling a bit silly.

The house in France had been soaked with intertwined lives. Imagining Verlaine preparing coffee had almost sent him spiraling — imagining him dying with no understanding of his own heart had felt discomfiting. Chuuya had wanted to rattle his brother’s ghost and *insist* — *how can someone so loved not feel human?*

It had been the only thing to keep him upright, all those years; he didn’t get how Verlaine hadn’t taken advantage of it.

“Don’t mind the fact that he shot you too much,” Chuuya scratched his head. “I think he’s convinced he loves me too, and look at how he went at it.”

Again, no answer. He tried to imagine it; tried to create a personality from the old diaries and knickknacks he’d found in Charleville-Mézières. He had only known Rimbaud — *Randou* — for a few hours at best; had admired his resolve purely out of its cause. Then, said *cause* had come, and Chuuya hadn’t felt like visiting his grave anymore.

“Sorry about that,” he offered. “I can tell him where your grave is, though. If I ever end up talking to him without breaking his nose.”

Just saying it out loud made it sound like a matter of other worlds. Fantasy and delusion — an existence next to the man who had dragged him into a nightmare Chuuya had never quite left.

He imagined sitting by him. Looking at him.

“Still,” Chuuya concluded, petty and a bit angry. “I don’t think he’ll come.”

If the notion offended Rimbaud, he didn’t say.

Chuuya turned around, studying the spot where the Sheep and the GSS had surrounded him. If he squinted, he could see the indent Shirase’s old shoes had left on the cobblestones; the way he had been so dramatic with every motion and pointed finger, and how he’d been terrified — and how he blew up Chuuya’s phone every week, these days; with stories of quests there was a 50% chance he’d actually put in place himself.

*You’ve changed*, Fumiko had noted. For the first time since he’d turned eighteen, Chuuya felt that it wasn’t so bad. *Just a bit*.

“I’m mad he didn’t tell me,” he admitted.

It felt even sillier — lamenting partners with the man who had been killed by his own. But Chuuya had no place in his ribs for disappointment for a boy he hated. The dead could take the waste. He’d take what was left.

“I know why nobody told me. I get that it wasn’t about me,” Chuuya shrugged. “But he’s different. It pisses me off, but he is.”

*Truly, you fool*, one of Rimbaud's letters — memorabilia from some mission he'd had, away from Verlaine's blank stubbornness — had read. *What would I not do for you?*

He thought, horribly, about Hamamoto's most vicious expression.

Chuuya cleared his throat. "Anyway," he concluded, jumping to his feet. "I'll let you know if I decide to kick your man's face in. If you tell me where he shot you, I can even make it even. Maybe a *ouija board*? We'll figure something out."

The spy didn't answer.

Chuuya still didn't understand traitors, but he thought perhaps that wasn't about him at all. He patted the man's grave, kicked a pebble where Shirase had grinned the widest, and made his home with a gentle hum on his lips.

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Elise was covered in blood.

"It's actually from this one bucket Dazai left in the dungeons," she whispered to him, all conspirational, right when Chuuya had decided it had to be some sort of artificial paint. "It helps me get into character. Now, from the top!"

Promptly, the girl dropped like a doll with cut strings, assuming the position of a corpse — half resting against the edge of one of the couches by the entrance of the *Hall of Light and Darkness*, half sprawling across the cold floors. Snow had yet to fall behind the windows — the light was gray as if it had, though, bathing her surprisingly realistic rendition of a mauled victim.

Chuuya obediently fell to his knees by her body, wincing at the notion of the sticky crimson on her being *real* and coming from whoever it was — and declared, a bit flatly: "How could this ever happen to you, *oh*, my beautiful Elise —"

"*Eloise!*" the girl hissed, opening only one eye. "I told you, it's my stage name —"

"It's basically your name, though."

"Say it right," Elise ordered, stealing his hat to throw it far away enough to drag an *hey!* out of him. "You keep ditching us for European jobs. At least learn how to pronounce your French."



He spluttered, offended.

Undeterred by his protests, the girl died — again. Chuuya had the vague thought that he would have preferred it if she had been less *professional* about it — if she had stuck her tongue out like a fish, and picked an improbably theatrical position. But she was concerningly convincing — she had splattered blood across herself just the way a pierced chest would have caused, and she'd molded her own breaths into the weak, dying wheeze they were supposed to be. Even her limbs were abandoned with the stiff, awkward carelessness of lifeless flesh — her fingers were hard like petrified claws.

Humming, more curious about her ability than about the conclusion to the tragedy she had confusedly summarized for him, Chuuya leaned against the leg of the couch and asked: “Where did you learn this?”

He had never actually *seen* Mori fight with her — few had. Kouyou had told him Elise turned into something a bit different when it happened; a speck closer to *Golden Demon* than to a cute child, hanging off the hem of Chuuya's coats whenever he left her alone to wander the halls of that castle of hers.

Elise huffed, annoyed at the interruption. But she liked him as much as someone like her could *like* anything — so she sat up, still trailing blood on the floor, and laid his chin on his raised knee. “In the ships,” she answered.

“Ships?” Chuuya echoed.

“The war ships,” the child insisted, as if he was being purposefully obtuse. “Of course. There were so many corpses all day long. Once the room got flooded, and we had to sleep next to them.”

Thinking about a proper response to that was headache-inducing. “The *Great War*,” he realized. “You were there?”

She directed him a nasty glance.

“Right. Stupid question.”

“I did look quite different,” Elise admitted, superiorly, blowing a strand of blood-sticky hair off her raised chin. “If you saw me in pictures, I'm sure you wouldn't even recognize me.”

“*Mmh?*” Only hesitating for a moment — since Elise was untouchable under most aspects, and she attached herself to all of them with the glee of the kid she wasn't; and since there were rules, Chuuya was sure, for what Mori allowed of the Ability he'd made into a companion — Chuuya used his own fingers to separate a blond lock from the horror show on her soft face. She turned into the touch like a cat chasing the sun. “Why? What did you look like?”

She hummed, pensively. “Older.”

“Older?”

“Taller than you.”

He booped her nose. She scrunched it up.

“I had my hair all tied up,” Elise continued, frowning with unfocused eyes — as if reaching for a memory of herself was only *fairly* easier than grasping river water with a holed basket. “There were too many wounded soldiers. Master feared I would get hair in their wounds. That wouldn’t have been good at all.”

*Master*, Chuuya mouthed. It didn’t fit her lips if not in echos, shaping her mouth in hills and rivers that made her look less like a child.

“Why were you older?” he questioned.

Her chin slipped a bit down his knee — he picked it up with a finger. She yawned, suddenly sounding bored again, and hid her face on the side of his thigh: “He always kept me older, before. Since he was a child.”

Thinking about Mori as a kid was enough of an uncanny mental image that Chuuya felt the urge to shiver. He attempted to imagine a boy in a vest other than a lab coat, with eyes filled by the same maniacal glint Mori sometimes hid — and failed. Then he failed to imagine a woman — her eyes plastic, and her power infinite — laying her hands on his shoulders. Perhaps she’d installed the tendency in him, paradoxically.

Elise’s usual attitude was irritation. Had she been different, as an older being who referred to the man as *Master*?

*Did you hate him at all?*, he wondered.

“But then he met *her*, and little girls who don’t like him at all became his comfort,” Elise squinted, peeved. “And then he met Dazai.”

His fingers itched. He decided — abruptly, that he didn’t really want her to continue talking.

“There you are.”

Mori arrived, rarely enough, like a blessing. He peeked down at them from the ajar doors that led to *Hall of Light and Darkness*, scarf wrapped in a hurried manner that let Chuuya know he’d just come back from an execution. There was an ease to his smile that crawled across their intertwined limbs like a land rover; something gentle and amused. Elise stood, skipping her way to his side with a cheerfulness that could have passed for natural — had it not looked like the pull of a thread that could not be seen.

“Boss,” Chuuya greeted, climbing to his feet to pull the door further open with his foot. “You wanted to see me?”

“Disgracefully,” the man admitted. “You’ll be leaving us tomorrow. I was hoping to have a bit of time with you before it.”

Elise grumbled like a broken toy. “Maybe don’t *send him away*, then, Rintarou.”

The doctor's smile was only a bit kinder than the hand he patted her head with. It crooked her ribbon to the side; Chuuya blinked, and it had fixed itself on its own. Elise always looked pristine; she just smelled of rotten underneath.

*Little girls who don't like him at all*, he recalled. *And then he met Dazai.*

"Don't be silly," Mori tutted.

*The Hall of Light and Darkness* was the one place in the Headquarters that had never truly changed since Chuuya had joined — even the rust in the metal frames of the stained glass windows had never been cleaned, intermittently fracturing the kaleidoscopic squares the two of them leisurely stepped on. He had a vague memory of playing a personal sort of *Hopscotch*, using only the colors as a warning line — Chuuya smiled, privately, and dangled his hat in circles by its chain.

"So, then," Mori started, after some convo about the latest wine Chuuya had promised to bring back from Europe faded into silence. "Are you absolutely sure leaving again so soon won't be an issue? If you wish to stay, I could arrange it."

Chuuya shook his head. "There's business to finish. I don't mind finishing it."

"And you're sure you won't take no one but those few *Guerrilla* men of yours?"

*I'd like that*, Dazai had said. "Positive," he assured, pulling at his choker to scratch an itch he couldn't find. Irritation was like a hammer against his skull; his voice drummed louder. "It'll be quick. I'll be home soon. I don't need anyone."

A hum. If Mori approved, he didn't show it. "And did you go visit Tanaki's grave?"

It took willpower not to pause.

"I did," he admitted.

"How was she?"

"Mostly dead."

"Well, thank God," The man blinked. "Our execution force would crumble if we had to make sure to kill traitors more than once."

*That's funny*, he thought about saying. Or some similar camaraderie. Something acceptable. Instead — because it was *insistent*, the need to be told Chuuya hadn't been a little bit of a fool, again and again — he asked: "Did you always know?"

Mori crossed his arms behind his back. He smiled mockingly at some ghost Chuuya couldn't see, and looked at him with the warm distance of a benevolent tyranny. "Would it matter if I did?"

"You tend to do what's best for the Mafia," he replied. "I would just like to understand."

His head bowed, as if conceding. “I have never considered anyone from the prior Boss’ regime particularly trustable,” he offered, after a contemplative pause. “Apart from close exceptions who have long since proved their distaste for him. Ozaki would gut me if I dared to accuse her of any lingering devotion to that man.”

Chuuya silently convened.

“Those who act as they are demanded to in the name of survival are certainly strong willed,” the man continued. “I said so during my speech last year, as well. But are they *reliable*? Mafiosi are made for loyalty. There are too many voices about me for their original fidelity not to be tested.”

Chuuya seldom tried to imagine it — the former doctor, standing over the old Boss’ rioting skeleton. Had he killed him quietly? Had he told him it was for the best? Had he done it at all?

Yes, he concluded. Mori had admitted it to him as a sign of trust mere seconds after meeting him; he had held onto that stupidity for years. On longer nights, it reminded him of Agent Minami storming out of the man’s office — of the lack of hesitation Mori had declared him invaluable with.

*An Ability Permit isn’t much, in the face of power,* Kouyou had rationalized it, days later. *But do your best to make sure he has both, yes?*

A sigh left the Boss’ mouth. “But Tanaki really did take me by surprise, I fear.”

Startled, Chuuya looked up at him.

Mori seemed a bit sheepish. “Betrayal is one of the oldest forms of wounding humanity has ever carried in its arsenal. It crawls where you cannot see it,” He straightened. “Where you don’t *want* to see it, either. And Tanaki — she truly harbored some horrible, horrible feelings towards you. What a shame.”

He focused on his steps. Counted them; let something like tired disappointment wash over himself, and vowed not to think about it again.

“She had it coming,” he offered.

The doctor glanced at him. “Given some other recent — *revelations*, I wouldn’t blame you if you felt any bruising feeling of sorts towards me.”

It took him a moment to understand. The *Ivy Dungeons* flashed on his mind, rusty and sticky with dried blood. The fake silhouette Fumiko had showed him — the blankness of Verlaine’s eyes as he told him some part of him longed for that kind of companionship as well.

*I just didn’t want it to have a price,* Chuuya hadn’t told him. For once. Just once. *Is that so wrong?*

*Reclaim your life,* his brother had ordered. *It belongs to you.*

“I don’t,” Chuuya said.

“I truly wouldn’t blame you at all.”

“I don’t,” he insisted. *Be mad at the unfair hand you were dealt with*, his brother had begged. He slowed his hat to a halt, pressing it against his chest. “I don’t think I was ready to hear it, anyway. I might have done something — rash.”

The man studied him. “No, I don’t think so. You believe yourself less rational than you are.”

“And you believe me less grateful to what has been sacrificed for me than I am, Boss,” he replied, curling an eyebrow. “I’ve known since the fight against Verlaine — the number of Ability Users we lost, the problems I’ve caused you —“

“You were worth them.”

“Once, I wasn’t,” He shrugged, sliding his hands in his pockets. He tilted his head, looking at the ceiling like blood might rain from the safety sprinklers. “And I’m not going to forget it.”

Something in Mori’s expression settled. He hummed, studying him with an interest Chuuya had long since gotten used to — something that never stopped being dangerous, but always curled around his nerves with the familiarity of a type of weapon he at least knew how to be hurt by. There was no *being safe* in a room with Mori Ougai — there was knowing he needed you, though.

*How would you kill him?*, Dazai whispered, through the static waves of a phone.

Chuuya knuckles grew white.

“You won’t,” Mori echoed. “That’s why you killed that subordinate of yours, right?”

With a merciful hiss, the light fragmenting the stained glass windows seemed to dim, all at once.

*[“Don’t let Mori know,” Dazai said, once, deliriously. It was one of his autumn fevers — they were stuck in the middle of a storm, locked inside a safehouse in the rural side of the hinterland. He had laughed with a bit of self-deprecation. “That’s silly,” he’d corrected himself. “Mori always knows.”]*

“Hamamoto was not a traitor,” Chuuya said, very slowly.

He had made sure of it, traitorous and far too stubborn — had made sure that his ashes were abandoned in the Bay, and that his good name wasn’t tainted by a lapse of judgment.

The Port Mafia did not allow for second occasions — that had all been Chuuya.

“But he almost was one,” Mori agreed, with a blink that was anything but innocent. “And you are loyal and grateful to your very marrow, so you blew up his brains for it.”

He said it very analytically. Nothing wrong, nothing bad — merely a recent development in a war field that was their playground. Chuuya had cupped Hamamoto's head so fast the man hadn't had the time to even meet his eyes. He couldn't quite remember if he'd snapped his neck before or after squashing his skull with gravity.

*Does it matter?*, he questioned. It had to. It had to mean something; a higher reasoning and a badge of honor — or else it was just some botched, aimless confirmation that Chuuya had been just stupid enough to fall for it. Fall for —

"Tell me," Mori questioned. "How was he going to kill Dazai?"

*Hamamoto*, he'd said, utterly still. It was the second time. Chuuya had never liked repeating himself. *Don't be a fucking idiot*.

The memory wasn't hazy at all. In spite of it all — among a sea of manslaughter and ruins and blood spilled in the name of a greater, *loved* cause — Chuuya never did forget the people he killed for a *reason*. He had stood and he had watched spit fly out of Hamamoto's mouth from rage, and he had known from the moment he'd caught him — wrist soaked in the gasoline he had bathed Dazai's office with, and fingers trembling around an automatic lighter he'd leave on the coat the boy had left on his seat — that there was a *reason*, and nothing else.

*Enough of a reason?*, he'd asked himself, in a split second.

His shoes had squelched against the wet ground — what a *stupid*, inefficient way to kill a man — and Hamamoto had sworn something about the *not bloodied enough* skin under Dazai's bandages, and then Chuuya hadn't asked himself a thing.

"Fire," Chuuya offered, not pausing their unhurried march forward. How had the *Hall* not ended yet? How had he visualized it so effortlessly — the soundless, nauseating way Dazai's skin would have burned, and the careless face he would have made? He'd hated the concept. He'd hated the perspective. He'd hated Hamamoto for making him face that Chuuya was as stupid as Dazai had sworn he was. "He was going to lock him in his office. He'd organized it so that the floor would have been emptied out by a fake bomb alarm."

"That's a lot of effort," Mori noted. "Did he hold that strong of a sense of allegiance for me?"

"He would have died for the Mafia," he said, clipped. He met his gaze — remembered, for a blink so short it was head-spinning, the deathly *calm* he'd felt. *The stars have died and I will kill you*, one of Virgil's manuscripts had read. *The truth is all there is*. "And he did."

*Something* writhed in his eyes.

Chuuya turned away. "If he was any clever at all, he realized it as he died."

"Why not denounce him as a traitor?"

"Because that Mackerel bastard would have been insufferable about it," Chuuya lied, easily.

Mori tilted his head to the side. "About you killing for him?"

“It wasn’t for him,” He set his jaw. “If it had been merely that, I’d have let him. Hell knows I would have had one less bother,” The kaleidoscope on the ground seemed to switch with every passing cloud behind the windows; he thought about the nothing he’d felt about Hamamoto’s blood on his gloves. “Hamamoto was unstable. We have enough troubles as it is. A man willing to take the matter of the people who lead us in his own hands is a loose cannon. I warned him. *Ane-san* had me warn him. He chose not to listen. I’d have done it in the name of whatever Executive he carried a pathetic vendetta against.”

A look. “But you did it for him.”

“He’s my partner.”

“I didn’t think you cared about that.”

*I don’t*, Chuuya thought. A hospital bed — Dazai, rough from sleep and a rusty piece of metal they had been impaled on. He was so used to hate him he only ever realized he *hadn’t* — even if only for a short breath — when it was over.

“Did I get this wrong?” he asked.

Mori contemplated. “You didn’t,” he said, “But I worry.”

He munched that word in his mouth. “You worry?”

“About the two of you, sometimes.”

*And then met Dazai*, Chuuya thought. Elise had always looked like him, just a bit.

“It wasn’t about him,” he swore.

“It wouldn’t be a problem if it was,” Mori assured, his smile amused. Nothing about him was threatening — he felt his shoulders straighten all the same. “I’m the one who pushed the two of you to rely on each other. You are a wonder on any battlefield. But our Dazai is — well. I do think you need something less... *temporary*, to lay your faith in, Chuuya.”

He wanted to snarl — deny it. That description left a sour taste between his teeth.

He thought of blood fading and decaying down the drain of a shower, as Dazai ordered, *touch them*, and *touch me* — a concession in the form of an humanity Chuuya knew he didn’t believe in. A five claws hold on the back of his shirt; a dead eyed voice in his ear, a thousand miles away, insisting — *how would you kill Mori?* The certainty in his tone, when Chuuya had sworn him being alive was a proof of reality — *my stupid Chuuya*.

He thought of Tanaki’s ashes, and whatever grief kept Verlaine in the basement. *You don’t get to keep secrets*, Chuuya had ordered, upon that first childish promise they’d ever made.

Maybe they hadn’t been kids in a while.

“I know,” he concluded.

“But you’d do it again?” Mori guessed.

Something like ire soaked the thin space between his teeth. It felt wrong calling it anger. It felt wrong feeling betrayed. Chuuya hated that he had fallen for it, again and again, and *again and again*. That Arahabaki never felt any danger at all, in Dazai’s vicinity. Not anymore.

“No,” Chuuya lied. “He can deal with this shit himself.”

Some hilarity pulled Mori’s wrinkles. It made him look a tad older, strangely. The man had always seemed perpetually stuck at the age of his first year of reign since Chuuya had met him. *When he was a kid*, Elise had said — he tried to picture it again, and came up with nothing but a too smart smile and bloodied milk teeth.

“If you say so,” he concluded, patting his shoulder with a hand. Then, belatedly: “I thought you might want to be informed — though your mercifulness is more than admirable, I’m afraid I had to intervene personally, in this specific case.”

Chuuya didn’t understand. “Sir?”

“I’m sure Hamamoto had an exceptional record, before this little — defiance play of his,” he insisted. “But traitors are traitors all the same. I had his ashes brought to the stairs, as it fits them. His grave was built near the border.”

Somewhere behind the windows, one last cloud passed by — dimming the colorful squares on the floor until only blood-soaked wood was left. He couldn’t speak. Couldn’t protest at all.

Eventually, he managed: “The stairs?”

Mori blinked, a bit surprised. “Chuuya,” he said, genuinely taken aback — as if he’d forgotten to let him know what time his own funeral would take place. Apologetic. *Mori always knows*. “You do know where the ashes of our traitors go, don’t you?”

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“It’s actually a fascinating process,” Kajii explained, walking backwards down the stairs of *Building One*, widely gesturing the secrets of the Mafia’s funerary rituals in Chuuya’s face. “I’m not sure how they manage to find enough empty hours to do it, but no one ever catches them. And the stairs seem to never undergo any work — God knows there is quite the traffic to the dungeons on a daily basis.”



“So they fuse them,” Chuuya echoed, for what felt like the fifth time since he’d torn the door to the man’s office open. “And they just add them to the stairs?”

“*So we may step on those who used us as their stepping stones,*” the scientist recited. “At least — that’s how Executive Dazai’s report put it. The old Boss was particularly obsessed with the tradition; the Executive put it back in place after the months of busy business from the reign change.”

“Of course,” Chuuya considered starting a list of relevant information Dazai Osamu had kept for himself for virtually no reason — apart from a general desire to be the worst person ever. Chuuya hated feeling stupid. Chuuya — “So, Tanaki is —“

Behind the goggles, Kajii made a *face*.

It was a strange face. The man had never been particularly affected by death — all of his bone deep fascination usually overrode the rest. It wouldn’t have been correct to call it *grief*; mostly, a miscalculation on a lemon bomb he’d been sure to have down to the dot.

“Sure,” he answered, at last. “It’s sort of — I mean. She’s back where she’s always been, in a way. Isn’t she? It’s sort of — funny.”

It fell flat. Kajii scrubbed his gobble with the hems of his scarf.

Chuuya paused by the entrance to the Hall of *Building One*, eyeing the door to the dungeons — only mere steps to the empty desk that had once been Tanaki’s. Mori had said something about the need for fast hiring — *least anybody believes we are creating graves where they aren’t needed*.

“Don’t you think the whole, *no grave for mafiosi* business is sort of dumb?” he asked.

The man blinked. “Dumb?”

He munched on his cheek; scratched the skin under his choker again, still searching for the itch. “Doesn’t matter. Hey,” Chuuya clasped one hand around Kajii’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. I know you liked her.”

“Oh,” The scientist made another, *worse* face. “That’s not — no. Thank you, though.”

Chuuya stared. “*No?*”

He nodded, a tad obsessively. “No.”

Some more thinking made him decide it wasn’t all that worth it. He patted the man’s back once more — flicked the lemon shaped gadget Chuuya had brought him from Switzerland, that Kajii had hooked to the pocket of his lab coat — and shut the door of the dungeons behind himself.

It was dark.

Suffocatingly so; the yellowish LEDs always worked worse in the autumn and in winter — they left the tight road to be bathed by flickering specks of dirty gold. Chuuya allowed *Tainted* to raise him a few inches off the ground, and used that reddish light to study the uneven texture of the stairs.

He walked. He tried to understand exactly *what* he thought about that revelation, and came up mostly empty.

“Fuckin’ Port Mafia,” he concluded, bent to squint at the rough surface under his nose — with the mixture of awe, horror, and repulsion the Sheep and most of the ungrounds had carried in that greeting of theirs. The old Boss’ reign had been nothing but a living nightmare; but the new Mafia, the one Chuuya loved and lived for, was the squelching, bloodied machine the older Sheep had promised him as an enemy.

He thought of the indents Tanaki’s fingers left on the petals she would fiddle with, on their way to her dead child’s grave. His shoe made a wet, crouching sound against a jagged step.

Chuuya felt a bit sick.

He gulped it down with an ease that should have been nauseating, and scoffed — and heard the sound of steps and voices from the depths of the stairs.

*You’re not doing anything wrong*, he barely had the time to remind himself. His limbs acted faster than he could stop them, as if possessed by the childish urge to hide he’d carried throughout his Sheep-days infiltrations — he catapulted himself down the next ten steps. He sunk a *Tainted*-bright finger in the locked door knob of that rusty door, midway stairs; the one he’d never paid much attention to.

“— this *Mimic* thing, if it isn’t —“ one of the voices insisted, from behind the door. The room around him felt *wide*; Chuuya kept his ear on the door, furtive for no reason he could explain.

“— can’t be all that much,” another voice, a woman, insisted. “We’re not even sure if they will bother us. It’ll be over by the end of the month.”

The mafiosi’s voices grew more and more distant. Somewhere, thousands and thousands of steps down, Arahbaki’s keen ear caught the low, exhausted cries of chained up prisoners. Chuuya let go of the destroyed doorknob, and took a step back on a floor that was less ruined than any part of the dungeons should have been.

As he exhaled, the warm, golden light of the room flickered for a moment. Chuuya frowned at the splintered wood of the door — turned, right as a voice scratched from disuse imperceptibly concluded: “You did come.”

Every stream in Chuuya’s body scratched to a halt.

It was an indescribable shiver, littered by missing pieces and unexplainable agony — a malfunction deeper than any corner of his brain he’d ever explored. Chuuya was years younger; Chuuya was standing in a field, his hands crimson and *Corruption* still lacking a name; Chuuya’s shoes were creaking against the tiles of the *Old World*, and Albatross was

still breathing, so he could be saved. A hand less scared than his own was pressed on the other side of the tank — a man in unknown traits was touching his foreheads and telling him, *won't you see?*

Paul Verlaine tilted his head, and there was no blood on him at all. Chuuya was years younger, and he couldn't move, and it had all been for nothing at all.

“Hello, Chuuya,” his brother said.

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya, literally vibrating on the equivalent of emotional numbing morphine for seventeen horses: i feel entirely normal about the fact that everyone in my life has lied to me. in fact, i'll blame only the one person who believes i ought to be mad about this

anyone from the pm apart from dazai: oh that's a relief

CHUUYA MY DEAR! and we are back, for the last arc of this fic! verlaine finally makes his appearance, if only to grace us with dramatic one liners. he's kinda silly apart from the mass murdering and the chuuya's life-ruining and the being french but oh well. what can you do.

i've got many feelings about the idea of chuuya not being told about verlaine (as the usual mini skit might have told you) and about how he'd try his hardest to rationalize it into something Necessary. to put it plainly, chuuya can't take another betrayal. so he just decides not to interpret it as such. in this interpretation i have of him, dazai is the only one chuuya can rationalize being vindictive towards — the one person who he expects honesty from, and the one person genuinely doesn't expect betrayal from, despite how unaware he might be of it. in the words of my bff — “it's fine for chuuya to be mad at dazai, because he's the only one who will allow it”

(so if you need to be mean be mean to me? anybody?? anyway)

as always, i hope you liked the chapter! and thank you so much for all the love on the last chapters, as always <3 i hope to see you very soon, keep warm <3

see you!!

# WRETCHED

## Chapter Notes

see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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*chapter xxxv.*

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*Case number: 37837387*

*Date: \*\*/\*\*/\*\**

*Report drawn up by: Sakaguchi A.*

*Confidential information acquired by: Dazai O., Nakahara C.*

*Signature: Mori Ougai.*

*On \*\*/\*\*/ of the current year, Dazai O. and Nakahara C. [Code Name: Double Black] were  
no [...]*

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“You’d laugh your ass off about this.”

The Flags' stolen graves had been painted in candid, morbid light by the autumn sun — a peek from winter, approaching a bit faster along to the middle of November. Chuuya wondered, at times, if he'd truly had the gruesome luck of finding graves no one cared for — or if he just had good enough timing to manage to avoid whatever mourning fool he was leeching off of.

*I'm watering the grass*, he imagined himself snapping, jealous like a kid, over a toy he had no claim over but his spit and pride. But he probably wouldn't. *Mind your business.*

"Iceman's eye might start ticking, though," he added, heels bumping against his grave. Sitting on them always made it all a bit cozier. Chuuya tried to imagine the *Old World's* chairs, and some drinks in scratched glasses — but they'd changed the cushions in the rebuilt building, and the glasses were too new to be scratched. "*He killed me and he gets away with it? Chuuya,*" His imitation got a bit too flat, "*What the hell are you doing?*"

Except the dead didn't give a shit.

"Would you give a shit if I punched him?" he questioned. "It wouldn't be permanent. 'Could even make it so I don't break his nose.'"

The graves didn't answer. Albatross' own returned its original gray, as the wind blew the little topsoil off its corners.

Mostly unsure of where the idea had even bloomed from — perhaps those meetings he never quite paid attention during, because all the stupid proposals he imagined demanding to Mori's funds sounded a bit too selfish to his ears — Chuuya asked: "Would you like some graves of your own?"

*We wouldn't like anything*, he imagined Lippman informing him — with that helpful tilt of his head he reserved for fans asking autographs in the middle of a secret shootout. Chuuya missed his little quirks like an aching, open wound — he missed all of them like a lulling melody he couldn't remember the notes of. Verlaine was locked only a few feet underneath the Headquarters' ground, and Chuuya couldn't kill him, and he didn't want to either. *How haven't you learned yet?*

"You were supposed to teach me, maybe," Chuuya concluded. "Slackin' off here, buddy."

*Chuuya*, Pianoman would have said. *Chuuya, go home.*

He curled his arms around his knees — laid his chin on it. "I miss you," Chuuya let himself say. He couldn't remember if he ever had. *Slacking off here, buddy*, Doc bit back at him. And then — even if the dead didn't give a shit; even if there wasn't more he could say, with his shoes stained in their blood and Verlaine's older, *living* traits sewn on his eyes — he swore: "I'm sorry."

The graves didn't answer. *Maybe they'd like to have graves*, his mind insisted. Maybe it wasn't all about Mafia traditions.

Chuuya walked out of the Cemetery with a lighter heart and guilt he'd learned to gulp down. He jumped roofs and surveyed his city with hands in his pockets and thoughts under his nails — until he landed in front of the Arcade's rusty sign, being sloppily removed from the glass doors.

He landed hard enough to crack the street.

“Oi,” Chuuya frowned, walking to the gray haired man he recalled watching reprimand some of the Arcade employees. “What’s going on?”

The man raised one hand to signal him to wait, finishing some lazy conversation with one of the workers from the truck parked by the sidewalk. The bucket list in his hands was signed off with curling ink; Chuuya only read the word *OWNER* before the papers were covered, and the worker went back to directing his colleagues on the ladder.

“Haven’t seen the notice, kid?” the owner questioned. His knuckles tapped the glass doors — on it, a windswept piece of paper hid the missing lights and players inside the Arcade. “We’re closing down the barracks.”

Chuuya stared. “What?”

“Funds,” He shrugged. “Arcades are an old business these days. It’s *all* about the Internet,” He scoffed, leaning against the old bench. He gazed up at the shop with something like bitterness. “And the area isn’t what it once was — most don’t dare venture so close to Port Mafia borders.”

At his side, his numb fingers twitched. He watched the workers drag the sign down with old joints and fatigue-pulled expressions. Stared at the metal frame left behind.

“But,” he attempted.

The man pitied him. He put his hand on his shoulder — Chuuya was startled enough he didn’t even shrug him off. “Old childhood spot?”

“Somewhat,” he replied, automatically.

“Take it as an incentive, then,” The owner studied him with a critical eye, eyebrows raising at the good quality of Chuuya’s clothes. “Ain’t you a bit old for games, anyway? Now, for the sake of that poor Mom of yours, you can spend more time studying. Aren’t University tests approaching and all?”

Chuuya tried to find a slightly more polite way to tell him to choke and fuck off. He didn’t feel much up for rudeness either, though.

He imagined — only for a mere, amusing blink — going up to Mori and coming up with some business-oriented reasons to invest into an Arcade in their territory. *Now, don’t be silly*, the man would have tutted. *What even for?*

“When is it closing?” Chuuya asked.

The owner curled an eyebrow. “It’s been closed for weeks, kid,” he let him know. “We’re just cleaning up for the next owners. You missed the *Goodbye Party*, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” he agreed, distantly. “Alright.”

He squeezed his shoulder again. Went off to talk with the workers again; Chuuya stared at the metal frame some more.

His *in-ear* creaked, tickling the shell of his ear. “Sir?” Akutagawa called, in that vacant tone of his. A strange echo followed; he only understood it once the kid added: “Approaching to your left.”

“I already told you, you don’t need to warn me,” Chuuya said, distractedly, eyes stuck to the shop front. Akutagawa’s quiet steps reached him from one of the alleys — the hems of his coat were stained in familiar, fresh crimson; no mind for the sunlight or the eyes that knew better than to linger on anyone walking that territory. “*Tainted* makes me not easily startled.”

He was, of course, swiftly ignored. “The paid-off guard at the Port has been dealt with,” the kid offered.

“Did the *Guerrilla* play nice?”

If Akutagawa held any particular feelings about being temporarily allowed command of the squad — just the time it had taken Chuuya to go visit the Flags, since he’d miss their usual weekend meetup — he didn’t show it. He did stand a bit straighter — but Chuuya knew he couldn’t have cared less about praise from lips other than Dazai’s.

“They did,” he said. Finally following the line of Chuuya’s gaze, he frowned at the shop, and questioned: “Is this another mission?”

He munched on nothing — to say; to feel. “Was supposed to be an *after* mission, actually,” he corrected, at last. His forehead was wrinkled and permanently uncertain. “Always has been.”

Akutagawa kept quiet. It felt distinctively awkward, but for no other reason than Akutagawa never feeling up for expanding the conversation when it wasn’t strictly needed. Chuuya wanted to rattle him like a toy box, sometimes — except he seemed rather content in his intimidating, awfully intense quiet staring, so he always ended up letting him be. “You ever been to an Arcade?” he asked, sighing.

His eyes grew distant. “Not quite, sir.”

“Just call me Chuuya.”

“Oh, so *now* you want —” Akutagawa shut his mouth, growing blank again. Chuuya snorted.

“You can go home,” he told him. “We’re done for the morning. I just —” The owner exited the glass doors again, dangling an endless ring of old keys around his middle finger. Chuuya tried to look away from the packaged slot machines and Arcade systems, and couldn’t figure

out the hoarse wheeze in his lungs — not even when he exhaled it, holding onto his choker to free his airways. “I’m just going to keep an eye here for a bit.”

Akutagawa studied him. “Are you sure?”

It was oddly — *interested* of him. Chuuya blinked, taken aback. “Yes,” He ruffled his hair, no mind to the way Akutagawa grew murderous; and then, even if it wouldn’t matter to him, he added, “You did great with the *Guerrilla*. Go rest.”

He turned blank again. Half-bowed; went on his way down the alleys, until Chuuya couldn’t see traces of his razor-sharp black anymore.

*He’s doing wonderfully, I must say*, Mori had once observed, during one of his occasional tea — *wine*, since Chuuya had started to pop up — times with Kouyou that *he* wasn’t quite supposed to be present at. But Kouyou always kept a chair for him, and Mori never sent him away; Chuuya could never help but wonder whether they would have said more if he hadn’t been there. *No matter how harsh, Dazai’s methods seem to be working. I do wonder if he’s aware, though.*

*He is*, Kouyou had sighed. *But I hardly think he’ll care, as long as the demon child doesn’t tell him all that harshness was for a reason.*

*He doesn’t want a reason*, Chuuya hadn’t told them, too busy with the bottle he’d brought them from Berlin. *He wouldn’t care if Dazai didn’t have one. He just wants him to look.*

[“What did he promise you?” he’d asked him, once, over the worst of a broken, bleeding nose — and his coughing lungs.

*Akutagawa hadn’t even looked at him. “A life,” he’d said, with a finality that cared so much — that cared so little — it was staggering. Chuuya had wanted to say something to it. He had felt it would have been hypocritical — he had been reborn underneath the crushed alcove of a cliff, and Dazai’s had been the first heartbeat he’d heard. “A reason for it,” he’d added. Chuuya had never considered Dazai’s methods wrong, per se, if they kept him alive in the Mafia. Can’t you look at him once, he’d only wanted to say, so he knows it’s alright to look away from you? “So it’s worth it.”]*

“Be careful with that!” The owner called, as two workers dragged the marble counter outside. “This stuff has a *net value*, you know?”

Chuuya sat on the bench. He didn’t leave until the trucks drove away too, coveted by the owner’s sighing gaze. He inhaled with the engine; didn’t exhale until his eyes tore away from the removed Arcade sign, peeking from the old trunk — flickering, occasionally, from overheated, half broken light bulbs.

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“Why is Mori celebrating a *Permit* we don’t have yet?” Chuuya asked, low, over a polite smile and the rim of a Champagne glass.

Hirotsu glanced at him from the corner of his eye, distractedly entertaining some financially useful fools in gowns in front of them. The sky was a gentle gray behind the golden windows of the ballroom, haunted by frantic rain; Chuuya had read the name of the establishment when they’d entered it, but he’d forgotten it. Laughing the night away in the rows of dancing high society, Kouyou — with his jacket on her shoulders — seemed to meet his eyes at the perfect time, and mouthed, *The Blue Flower*.

Almost wincing from forced remembrance, Chuuya’s fingers tightened around his glass.

“What makes you think he is?” the man asked him, subtly swaying along to the violins.

“Please,” he muttered, with a glare. “We’re not even *close* to the Christmas banquet, and he has invited every last one of the names he wishes to preen to from our ally lists. If I’d gotten invited, I would expect *horribly* good news. Subtly or not.”

Hirotsu hummed. “He’s all but stupid. No way he will make a claim on something we don’t have yet.”

“But *something* must have happened.”

“Why do you think so?”

He found the shock of his red scarf in the dancing lines, entertaining some woman in a green dress that Chuuya recalled sitting in a Senator’s chair and questioning *Mori Corps*’ influence. His smile was serene. His eyes were as clouded as they’d been when Chuuya had kneeled in front of him, with a fresh scar under his ribs.

“He looks like he’s won,” he concluded.

The Commander munched on his lips. He was keeping his eyes on Gin, sporting a beautifully flowy white dress and attempting to convince her brother not to step on her feet to dance. Chuuya had heard something about a promotion in her new future — he had the strange feeling the man was hesitating to make it official, though.

*She’s young*, he had admitted. Chuuya sometimes wondered if that had ever been an issue, before him and Dazai.

“Well, I haven’t heard anything,” Hirotsu offered. “They’re still keeping an eye on *Mimic* — but that feels like a long lasting business. I did hear someone from the Intelligence might be missing.”

That hit his interest. “Someone relevant?”

“If it’s worth whispering about...”

“Traitor or taken?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Boss is keeping it under wraps. I only know because some of my *Lizards* tend to be gossipy.”

Chuuya curled an eyebrow, nudging him. The sound of rain almost overturned the violins, for a moment; it thundered. “You should be careful about that.”

“You can’t denounce me yet,” Hirotzu said, with a humorous tilt only the Champagne could have given him. “Your Executive promotion is clearly waiting for the Christmas bells.”

Chuuya snorted. “You don’t know that.”

He was a bit satisfied, though, and the man could clearly feel it. They leaned against their shared column, and watched long gowns and white shirts twist underneath the chandeliers. If any of those faces was somewhat suspicious about the free — seemingly aimless — invitation, the majority of them didn’t show it. Chuuya could have counted their *clever* allies on one hand. “Have you got any idea what you’ll be put in charge of?”

He sighed. “I don’t speculate. Pianoman used to *hate* that stuff. Whatever Boss needs me for — *wherever* he needs me, I’ll go.”

“Spoken like a true right hand man.”

“Ane-san will have me by the balls.”

“A left hand, then,” Hirotzu suggested.

He tapped two fingers on the glass. “That seat’s taken too.”

Hirotzu mimicked sewing his lips shut.

The music changed to something slightly more upbeat. Hirotzu hummed along; Chuuya let his eyes roam until they landed on the dead center of the dancing parade — a boy in black.

“I’m sorry about Tanaki.”

He studied the popping bubbles inside his glass, golden and pointless. “I know.”

The Commanded paused. “He’s sorry too.”

“Don’t start,” he warned. “Remind me why we can’t bother *him* about figuring out Boss’s late celebratory extravaganza?”

Something like discomfort shrugged the man’s shoulders, slipping one side of his scarf off his arm. “He hasn’t been around much. I think he and that Oda friend of his are dealing with a

secret assignment of sorts — something directly from the Boss' mouth. No idea of what, given his low rank," Hirotsu studied the ballroom — hesitating on the coy way Dazai dipped the girl dancing with him, a wide smile and distracted eyes. "Which you would know, if you weren't avoiding him."

Chuuya didn't turn, unimpressed. "What the hell do you know?"

"I haven't had to replace my car, lately."

"That's unfair. We haven't blown up one of your cars in *months* —"

"Yes," An odd longing fogged Hirotsu's monocle up. "I occasionally miss it."

He stared. "Man, you're weird."

"You're weirder," the Commander insisted, tilting his glass to him. He held the same fondness Verlaine treated as an unknown thing, but both his hands were less unfamiliar with it. "Sir."

Chuuya squinted at him. "Is Miranda really a cat?"

The Commander froze.

"You nasty fucking *traitor*."

Deflating, the man muttered: "I knew he would tell you."

With a sigh, Chuuya clicked their glasses.

The melody reached its peak, twisting the spinning couples into a complicated set of steps only Kouyou's lessons allowed him to follow. Mori was dancing with Elise, now — Ace was keeping an eye on a particularly drunk Senator; Kouyou was locked in a mostly amused dance with some pearl-wearing woman. Obnoxiously, he toasted her when she happened to meet his gaze — a blush of sorts covered her cheeks, and she hid a rude gesture the small of her companion's back.

He didn't look for Tanaki, because he knew she wouldn't be there. He didn't look for Verlaine; he didn't look for the Flags, or his squad. Chuuya flexed his fingers — and vaguely remembered how the soggiest of Hamamoto's liquified brains had felt between his fingers.

"Chuuya," Hirotsu said, after a while. "We need to appear united, now more than ever."

He didn't answer.

"You need to see it strategically, too," he insisted, keeping his eyes on the room. Perhaps he had learned Chuuya's unwillingness to discuss himself where his eyes could be met; perhaps he was just old. "*Double Black's* absence this year has already started enough rumors — you boys need to be an united front, if things are about to change as favorably as Boss hopes."

The thought scritchd his brain with sharp nails. The dissonance of Dazai's face on a stranger's body, taunting him from the roof of a warehouse — his blood-soaked mouth, asking, *what the hell is Double Black?*

"We've just been busy," he said, in his blankest tone. "No one's informed the tabloids about any fucking break up. 'S not like we haven't worked together while hating each other before," He downed his glass, agitating it vehemently as he talked, "In fact — it's *all* we've ever done."

"Boss has been wondering about you two," Hirotsu insisted. "He seems concerned."

"There *will* be someone else, one day. You have to know that," Chuuya didn't quite taste the words before they fell out of his mouth; he didn't know how to stop them either. Reasonings he had never reasoned about — *there*, though, with all the obvious things in his life. *It all ends and you watch it burn and then the sun is in the sky again.* "Maybe we were what the Mafia needed, once. Maybe now it needs something else."

Akutagawa huffed as Gin convinced him to step closer to the center of the circle. He didn't let her go, though — he curled his fingers around her waist as if unsure of how not to claw.

"Too soon, though," Chuuya heard himself murmur. "But it'll happen anyway."

Too old and too knowing, Hirotsu studied him. "You two are more similar than you think. I always thought it worthy of some — caution."

*Deep down inside — you and I are the same.* "Caution?" he echoed, vacantly.

The man seemed to think over his next words. "Power and trust aren't a disadvantage," he offered, "But only when those who share them are on your side."

He frowned. "We are Mafia first."

"I know," Hirotsu's eyes studied the crystal chandelier over their heads. He got the feeling that wasn't the first time he mused over the topic. "But what if you weren't?"

Chuuya didn't answer.

"I'm not saying you have to forgive him —"

"There's nothing to forgive," he snapped, at last, abandoning his glass on a tray. "Because I don't fucking *care* to be part of his schemes. Dazai is an asshole and the sky is baby blue. If he thought he'd get me — he's got one thing coming."

The man's expression turned complicated. *You always liked him better anyway*, he thought about spatting, like a child. "I don't think that was it."

One of the girls from the *Guerrilla* — Yasuda, he recalled; sharpshooter and former soul from the *Pomegranate* — came to ask him for a dance with low eyes and a bright grin. Chuuya accepted just for the sake of getting away from the man's well-deep gaze — and because she'd always been exceptionally accepting of his leading skills. Chuuya liked the

men Mori had given him, despite the distance he sometimes found himself putting between him and them — so he danced with Yasuda until his cheeks ached from something other than the teeth he'd gritted with Verlaine, and accepted her kiss on the side of his mouth when she twirled away with Marie, from the *Guerrilla*.

Mere seconds before he could close his now empty fingers around Kouyou's ones, she winked with something like resignation, and spun him into a different pair of arms.

"Oh, look at that," Dazai said, barely louder than the soliloquizing violins, softening into a sadder bundle of notes. His eye was iridescent with a humorless sort of amusement. "I didn't know they held dancing classes for shrimps, too."

Chuuya's head emptied itself out. All that was left was statics, sharper than talons.

But Kouyou had taught him manners and Lippman had taught him eyes were cameras — he set his gaze somewhere over his shoulder, tightened his grip around Dazai's waist and hand, and didn't allow the dancing rows to come to a halt.

*But you did it for him,* Mori had sworn.

He tightened his grip until it ached.

*[Chuuya remembered every second of it. He didn't remember how he had burned, though — he only recalled breathing, and inhaling smoke that was as familiar as everything he hadn't managed to stop in time. You're mine to keep, he had thought, only once, studying Dazai's sleepless eyelashes. And I will fail.]*

*So — and how utterly easy it had seemed, among fire alarms — he hadn't.]*

The whispers started the moment their feet began dancing.

"I hear Chuuya will get some time at home after this French weekend of yours," Dazai said, at some point — for once, not protesting not being assigned the lead. Chuuya saw his lips move in his peripheral vision, and counted scabs of dry skin. "Of course, assuming you don't end up on a plate of *escargots* and do us all a favor."

"Is Sakaguchi Ango a traitor?"

The Demon Prodigy didn't stumble — as far as the voices went. Not even wounds could force him to; Chuuya knew all they did was cause him a slightly different breathing pattern. Dazai Osamu didn't stumble either — something about his silence, over the pounding rain, managed to get Chuuya to look at him, though. Perhaps they were both tripping fools.

"Sneak attacks don't suit you," Dazai let him know, carefully vacant. He was a terribly good dancer — Chuuya knew stepping on his feet was a *choice*. "You're more of a bomb."

"Bombs can be sneaky."

"You can't."

Chuuya slipped the hand around the boy's waist under his coat and jacket, to brush skin that was cold ever through the shirt. *He has to have a scar, too*, he considered. The skin around his own was still pink and tender; he remembered the rust of the pole that had impaled them tickling the sides of his wound.

"Someone from the Intelligence is missing," he listed. "You and Oda Sakunosuke are dealing with some secret business at the Boss' orders. Is Sakaguchi a traitor, or is he dead?"

"Are you aware," Dazai replied, in the same tone, "That the reason for this silly celebration is that the *Division* has implemented a more severe investigation procedure for *Permit-less* organizations?" He leaned his face close; blinked, obnoxious. "And not *all* members from our Intelligence are missing. They swear that if we don't manage to gain a *Permit* by the end of the year, we will be found and dismantled."

Chuuya hadn't been smiling. It faded off his face all the same, melting like candle wax.

"You going to blame me for it?"

"Are you going to keep questioning an Executive's secret mission for the sake of childish pettiness?" Dazai insisted.

He sunk his nails in the small of his back. It had been dark, under the building. Chuuya had heard his heart beat in his throat. "You know I wouldn't gloat over betrayal." *Not me*, he thought. *Not a hypocrite*.

"No," he confirmed. The violins slipped in a nostalgic, bitter twist of chords; Dazai pressed his forehead against Chuuya's, *hard*, and said: "You'd just think it fair, in the back of your mind."

Tanaki's name wasn't even uttered. Close enough to count the ripping skin on the boy's lips, he felt it mouthed all the same — lost between the insistent whispers of the dancing bodies around them, swearing they hadn't laid eye on the both of them since the last time they had left a street scarlet and haunted. *They're alive*, he heard them swear. Chuuya wanted to rattle them. *My heartbeat is mine*, he'd say, *and his doesn't care*.

*She betrayed you too*, Chuuya could have said.

*And when haven't you been betrayed?*, he could hear Dazai tut.

"Why won't he leave that room?"

Dazai glanced at him.

"He's your brother," he said, eventually. He wasn't sure if he was trying to be mean anymore. *Assume he is*, Kouyou had told him, once. "Don't you know all about how you gods grieve?"

"I'm no god."

The boy's fingers tightened around his own. Chuuya hated him. Chuuya had been buried for him — with him; *through* him — and he had woken up to what shouldn't have been betrayal,

but felt like it anyway. Dazai's thumb traced that old scar on the inside of his wrist, the same black as his gloves.

Something like regret pulled his face. But there was nothing there at all — there hadn't been since Chuuya had said Sakaguchi's name out loud.

"I know," Dazai swore.

He waited for an explanation. It never came.

The music ran towards a peak of soft, low hums. Dazai spun him around, and Chuuya's chin landed somewhere on his shoulder — the fabric of his coat scratchy and familiar, unclenching his fingers and then tensing his nerves — and he met Mori's eyes.

He wasn't dancing anymore. Elise pulled his scarf as she whined about something. Mori's eyes traced the back of Dazai's head as if looking for a bullet wound — then in a *stranger* way; a closed off realization that didn't seem to make him much happy at all. It was gone with the next flutter of violin chords — he raised his hand and smiled, waving at Chuuya.

*How would you kill him?*

Chuuya settled his chin on his shoulder, feeling strangely tired, and ordered his feet to move until the music came to an end.

"To *Mori Corporations!*" a voice toasted.

Reflected between the shards of the chandeliers, a ghost's eyes and his ash blond hair looked at him with unblemished nothingness, dripping blood from the sharpest crystals.

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The room smelled of ink and dust.

"Your commitment to this silence game is as childish as it is ineffective. You *are* aware, yes?" Verlaine questioned, failing at an entirely toneless remark, severing the twenty seven minutes of quiet Chuuya had been counting. He picked up a bullet box from one of the shelves, rattling just to hear a whisper other than the man's voice. He hadn't even realized he hadn't forgotten what it sounded like. "One would question how you haven't managed to shrug that pettiness out of you yet. How disheartening."

He didn't offer a response.

"First you come in and leave the moment I breathe a word," Verlaine summed up. "Then you come back — apparently for a house tour —"

"This isn't a house," he offered. "This is a stingy, self-inflicted prison cell."

"Are you going to run from me again?"

Chuuya thought back to his fingers on the door — the voice behind his back, and the lighting in his veins, and then being outside, again. The stairs and Tanaki's ashes. *Go in*, something in his flesh had murmured, soothing like a mother. It was stained in blood and starvation. *Go in again*. "That wasn't running."

"You have nothing to say to me?"

Chuuya tilted his head.

That gym wide room midway the *Ivy Dungeons* could have been set a few decades ago, and it wouldn't have been a wrong fit. Oil lights dangled from the walls, manually changeable — he imagined Verlaine wasting time lighting them up everyday, just to focus on something other than the ruined-pages book in his lap. All furniture was pricey, warm wood, including the chair the man sat on — and the endless maze of shelves scattered to create an obstacle course Chuuya recognized from assassin training reports.

*The Secret Executive takes care of them*, was one of the few available voices about the man. Something about the ruthlessness of his disciples — something about his distaste for Port Mafia procedures.

*Something*, Chuuya considered, crossing his arms to lean on the wall opposite to him, *about a room reeking of ghosts*.

"No," he offered.

In spite of the vacant loftiness of his traits — the skin of a corpse, still stretching elegantly on a face that had never looked like Chuuya's at all, if not for a shared stubbornness of sorts in their eyes; the tamed strands of ash-blond hair, braided all the way to the silk hems of his waistcoat — Verlaine wasn't fast enough to hide the way Chuuya's voice snapped his ravenous attention to him.

"Nothing," the French man repeated, a bit flat.

He shrugged. "I already told you all of it. You just don't get to hear it."

Something like hunger sealed his nails on the armrests of his chair. It disappeared a second later, and Verlaine was nothing but an idea — six steps from him and draped in black clothes and a few years older, somehow. Somehow. Chuuya felt *Tainted* swirl under his veins like delirium — he set his eyes on the too-human wrinkles on Verlaine's forehead, and felt saner.



*Just a man*, he reminded himself. The Flags had deserved better than to be killed by a mere man — and yet that was all it was.

Verlaine turned the pages of his book. He licked his forefinger to do so. The sound of paper turned Chuuya's mind into webbed glass.

It was quiet for a long time.

"You know," Chuuya started, eyes on an old calligraphy set that looked just like that house in France. *He has peculiar requests, at times*, Mori had once mused, perplexed, studying some report Chuuya wasn't allowed to glance at. "There's this ring I fight at, sometimes."

Verlaine's eyebrow curled.

He'd been a tad too refined not to be made of porcelain, when they had first met — he still was, but his face was far too carved in not to be flesh. "Not the kind of childish roughhousing I'd expect from Ozaki's pearl."

The uncanny familiarity in the appellative had something dormant rattle his bones. *They all knew*, his ribs kept reminding him, caging his lungs in an embrace of *not-quite-rage*. He understood — he wished he didn't have to. He wished he'd found out when he was still devastated enough to crawl to that basement and skin him alive. He wished Verlaine had died long before any of them could learn any of the things that bothered him.

*That's where humanity is*, Tanaki had said, once. Thinking about her made his jaw ache.

Chuuya didn't want Verlaine to be human at all. Chuuya knew he was. Chuuya wanted his friends back, and he would want them until the day he died — and it changed nothing at all.

"Don't let Ane-san hear you call her that."

The *Ane-san* made his face twitch. "Perhaps if she quit it with her penchant for *Paul*."

"One would think you'd miss it," he said, just to be mean.

"One would think you'd call your *actual* brother with such familiarity."

"My brother was dead until roughly three weeks ago," Chuuya informed him, helpfully. His teeth gritted against each other whenever he made the mistake of shutting his mouth for so long — he was so giddy with repressed rage he felt drunk. It all canceled itself out in an odd sort of calm. "But thank you for the *Get Better Soon* basket. As I was saying — the fighting ring is fun. Usually. When they don't bring out the boring assholes with more muscle than encephalon," He rolled his head back to work a nerve in his nape. "You could come with, one of these nights."

Verlaine's eyes thinned.

Searching for a trick he didn't find, he let a vein in his jaw throb. His fingers were sharp; they caressed the pages of his book with something like distant awareness. He didn't entirely feel *there*. He didn't feel much alive either.

*Perhaps I didn't get it wrong*, he thought.

"I have no interest in watching dogs fight for the sake of nothing," Verlaine concluded, with his nose raised. His crossed feet were *stuck* to the old wooden tiles — Chuuya thought about asking him to stand and twirl, just to watch him grow a spine made of pure irritation.

He didn't believe his act one bit. The gnawing ache of starvation carved Verlaine's face like a wound. *What do you miss?*, he wanted to ask. *What do you get to miss, if you've killed it yourself?*

Somewhere in a corner of that basement — hidden amongst the obstacles like the assassin he was too bored to be — Dazai mouthed: *hypocrite*.

"You sure?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised you find scrimmages an amusing hobby," the man mused, with the same tone he'd use to discuss the weather, "You were, after all, abandoned in the hands of — *less* than respectable company, for most of your childhood. It has influenced you negatively. Must be why you're so thin. All the stress and all the hunger. Us beasts tend to look for an outlet."

"I'm no beast," Chuuya assured him, with a smile that had him grow carefully irate.

*Rage like the beast you are*, he'd told him. *You'll remember who you are*. He'd told him so much, and Chuuya remembered all of it. On the worst days, he couldn't even recall Doc's voice.

"But suit yourself. 'Guess you ain't looking forward to some brotherly bonding. I mean," Pointedly, he ranked his eyes across the quiet room. "Clearly you prefer rotting away in a casket."

"This is no casket."

"You're right. No red pillows and stuff."

"Chuuya," the man said — and that word alone had him sink his nails in his gloved palms *not* to tear a crater into Verlaine's chest. *It'd be easy*, the whispers in his skull said — except Chuuya was Chuuya, and his body was his own, and there was no point in blaming Arahabaki for his own thirst. *It'd be easy, and you want it too*. "I see you're still a world-class shit talker."

If he squinted, there was fondness in it. If he squinted a bit more, it was as fake as the layer of untouched perfection keeping his hands still on the armrests — the bubbling apathy underneath. A dead man who still remembered breathing

He shrugged again, unimpressed. "You know, for some reason, hearing you curse is weird," he commented. "Maybe the French accent."

"You learned it, though. I'm touched."

“You’ve been here for what, three years? No time to pick up a Japanese class?”

“Chuuya.”

“Where were you?”

Silence pressed Verlaine’s lips tight.

He waited him out, fingers tapping his arm. Chuuya hadn’t planned the delicate, *bloodied* rage stuck in his voice — Chuuya tasted its poison long after it had left his throat, crawling on its knees and elbows to disguise his begging as an accusation. Or perhaps it was the opposite.

“*People know nothing of true loneliness,*” he recited, before he could convince himself that the man deserved no remembrance. “And something about comets, some shit about *isolation* — and then, *but what if that comet had another comet at his side?*”

Verlaine’s gaze turned dangerously full. *I wish you weren’t dead*, Chuuya had breathed. “And you *swore* you weren’t lonely,” he mocked.

“I got possessed,” Chuuya dropped, with a carelessness that had his eyebrows twitching. “*Mmh?* With that *Nine Rings* business. You don’t need me to explain it to you — I drafted some reports for the *godforsaken Secret Executive* myself. Beatrice got me, and I spent a few months being a pseudo spy on the very brink of death. And then, before the *Dragon Head Conflict* — I trained *Corruption* with Dazai for a whole summer, and it fucked up my *body*, and I had fucking *rotten arms* —”

“I don’t know if I approve of you and that devilish boy being partners.”

“— and then Ueda Akinari, and before that the *Wound Reaper*, and so much more bullshit I have no time to list off,” he continued, undeterred. “But you — you *hypocrite* — decided I was worthy of being acknowledged only once I got betrayed. So you could send me a little note and gloat?”

If Verlaine cared about his words, he didn’t show it. “It isn’t gloating. I find no pleasure in any *I told you so*.”

“Stop pretending you care.”

“I do care. You simply detest it.”

“It was always about proving me wrong,” Chuuya snapped. “That’s all. Tell me it wasn’t.”

The man didn’t answer.

Then, studying the golden shadows of the candles on the ceiling, he said: “Have you ever felt the world was a cruel place?”

*You’ve already asked me this*, he thought. “I love it in spite of it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Verlaine’s taunt was almost pitiful. Still abysmally distant — a twirling thought he wouldn’t have minded saying to an empty room, rather than to him. He had the Flags’ blood stuck all over his clothes; the black hid it masterfully. Chuuya felt lightheaded with the urge to do *something*. He’d been starving so long, the sight of a feast was sure to make his stomach hurt no matter what the first bite was. “You keep settling for the next best thing.”

He scoffed. “You told me making Professor N pay would balance it all out.”

“I would never lie to you.”

“N’s dead,” Chuuya’s limbs were twitching with electric shocks. He hated talking about the man. He hated being there. He couldn’t leave — he owned the Flags senseless cruelty, or he owed it to himself. *The dead don’t give a shit*. “And you’re wearing black in a coffin.”

Verlaine lowered his eyes to him.

It was a chilling stare. The specks of gold and crystallized grass in his eyes had never made Chuuya truly *fear* — he had burned with rage and had been plagued with a purpose that was crimson like blood; and he’d stared at the tip of Verlaine’s finger as it touched his forehead and unlocked the whispers in his veins. The danger had been sizzling like upcoming thunder, and Chuuya hadn’t feared, still — in some forsaken, unexplained corner of his bones, the *certainty* not to be a target had always put any animalistic ferocity at rest.

And yet he *believed* — just for a moment — that his brother would stand and crush his skull between his hands.

“I’m glad to finally see you again, Chuuya,” Verlaine said, very quietly — deathly still. “And I have missed you, whether you’ll believe me or not. But you will mind your words.”

“Will I?”

“You will not accuse me of mourning that *man*,” He spat the word like the blood he hadn’t choked on — brought back to life by something he couldn’t explain. Chuuya watched him grow less pale and hunched with rage, and felt a twinge of interest — a gasp of guilt for it. “There is only one person in this world who deserves my atonement, and it isn’t *you* either.”

*My friends*, he bit his tongue not to say. *My friends*. *What were they good for?*

“N’s dead,” He didn’t want to taunt him — he wanted to believe his urges to be less petty. His friends were dead whether or not he kicked sand in Verlaine’s eyes. “Aren’t you content?”

Verlaine stared at the ground.

“Existence happens in rooms you and I have no invitation to, Chuuya.”

He scoffed. “Then you steal one.”

“No,” he insisted. The conviction in his tone raised goosebumps on Chuuya’s skin — he felt his gloves creak from his fists being clenched. It was an uncanny, vertiginous feeling — how real it felt against the venom of pages Chuuya had read and re-read in between his missions in France; all of it mixed with the memory of the faithless belief Verlaine had attempted to bury within Chuuya’s brain over the Flags’ corpses. He’d sounded a tad less resigned, back then. “You don’t.”

*There’s nothing you need to do*, Verlaine had sworn. It had been desperate; less composed than his spotless clothes or merciless aim. Chuuya had imagined him in a tank more than he’d recalled the sound of his voice; kicking his fists against the glass where Chuuya had just slept and lost himself.

*There was only one thing we needed not to do*, he had begged, *and that was not being born*.

Chuuya munched on his cheek, trying to breathe in through his nose. “God,” he hissed, as he walked away to the wall — just to step over his own tension. “*God*, you piss me off.”

Flatly, the man said; “How self-centered.”

“*See!*” he snarled, brusque enough to have his blond eyebrow curl up. “*That* pisses me off. You depressing, sanctimonious *cretin* — have you been crying over yourself for three years?”

Something like an uncertain offense almost had Verlaine move around in his chair. Eventually, his pride kept him still. Chuuya wanted to laugh, delirium or hysteria — he looked so proper and so dead, and he was *alive* — and Chuuya was talking to him like betrayal was a thing of the living. *The dead don’t give a shit*, he recalled, *but I do*.

“You forget,” Verlaine said. His eyes laid on something a tad too high to be his eyes; Chuuya realized, belatedly, that it was their shared hat. “I know all *you* have been through since we fought.”

“From your monk seclusion, yes. At least I’ve been *outside*.”

“The Mafia kept me alive against my will,” Verlaine bit, awfully close to a snap. “I was kept in this world without any consultation. I should get to choose what to do with my own imprisonment, should I not?”

Chuuya stared. “You’re an *Executive of the Port Mafia*. No one is imprisoning you.”

“Would you have me out?” he challenged.

The thought had his heel press against the ground with a strength that would have cracked it open — had he not worked on keeping *Tainted* less responsive. It didn’t quite fool Verlaine, whose touch cursed materiality just as much as his own — he huffed what could have been laughter, in a less detrimental cage, and turned another page in his book. Ignoring him — with his bloodied hands and his longing gaze and his guiltless spine.

*Ignoring him.*

Something in his veins roared. “You’re such a coward.”

“And you’re as hopeless of a believer as you have always been,” Verlaine assured, distractedly. “Have I ever told you this story —“

“I think you were too busy playing widow in the basement.”

“— the French authorities had me undergo a training of sorts, before they allowed me out in the field,” the man continued, tracing the lines of ink with his finger, as if reading out loud. “I’d been isolated since my creation,” *Birth*, Chuuya could hear Rimbaud’s voice tut, *your birth*. “The lessons didn’t make much sense to me. At first, I justified them as a way to teach me how to go unnoticed. Eventually, I understood they were trying to teach me how to be human.”

*Shirase’s hands*, Chuuya recalled. Bruised and small and devastatingly familiar; handing him a piece of bread and fluffing up his stolen pillow because, *it’s more comfortable like this*.

*You were born between shit and ruins, you idiot*, Albatross had blinked, once. *Of course you needed some socialization. I’m surprised you don’t have chronic fleas, at this rate*.

“You are human,” he let him know.

“I didn’t need Arthur’s pity,” Verlaine said, very easily. “And I don’t need yours.”

“It isn’t. Your stupidity just annoys me.”

“If you believed yourself human —“

“I believe myself rather lucky,” he replied, a stubborn note in his tone. “*Loved*, too. This might be surprising to you — given you’ve spent them growing spider webs in a basement — but I used these years to come to the conclusion that I don’t really want more than that. You were loved too. It’s not my fault you didn’t care.”

Verlaine didn’t seem to be listening. “They had me to describe humanity to them,” he said, his eyes distant, but set on the pages. Chuuya wanted to rip the book off his hands and throw it to the wall. “*Why is it human?*, they asked me.”

He studied the nearest burning candle, the gums of his un-gritted teeth aching. He didn’t want to listen to him. He didn’t want Verlaine to bite his poison in any other muscle of his — where it would linger and it would spread and it would *mark*, as if Chuuya hadn’t already been giving a voice to the mere power in his skeleton.

*Do you need more ghosts?*, Dazai had once wondered. He didn’t even remember when.

“I said — *because it’s not me*,” Verlaine concluded. “I got full marks.”

“You know what your Arthur’s last words were?”

It hit the man like a gunshot.

A strange sight; enough to have Chuuya fall quiet. A less trained eye wouldn't have found it, perhaps — the devastation cracking his bones until his fingers turned into claws; draining his eyes until the pupil was a lonely moon on a sky no one had any care to count stars on.

*Pollution kills*, Kenta had sworn. Verlaine had spent three years in grief-black and he hadn't mourned one day.

"Don't," he warned, tight.

"*Live,*" Chuuya recited. He recalled the dirt of the empty warehouse on his old pants — the way watching people die had never felt like much, but watching Rimbaud choke on his shattered sternum had had him take his hand. "*There is no longer any way of knowing who you are or where you came from. But even if you are a pattern etched on the surface of raw power* —"

"Chuuya."

"*You,*" he spelled out, "*Are you.*"

The assassin didn't flinch. Chuuya knew, without an inch of reasonable doubt, that the man had told Verlaine those exact same words before.

"You betrayed him, and he still wasted his death pretending I was you," he informed him. "Caring for me. Promising me my own humanity — long before you killed anyone for the sake of proving me wrong, and of feeling a little less lonely in your self hatred. You have done nothing but spit on it, again and *again*, fueled by the stubbornness that wanted you to believe he was delusional. I'd hope you finally realized it, after so long — but he was just a good friend."

Untrembling, his fingers curled against the yellowish pages of his book.

"*Your shortcomings are going to kill them all,*" Chuuya remembered, unable to bite down his words, unsure if he wanted to, "And yet here I stand, and the only one who's killed my friends is you. *Your* shortcomings killed *him*, and I was never you at all."

The hush of the candles seemed to quieten. Verlaine looked at him.

"And?"

"I would have killed you, if I had stayed in this room, the other day," he swore. It weighed on his tongue like an oath he'd never keep. Chuuya was aimless rage at his most uncontrolled. Chuuya didn't want to lose control. "I heard your voice and I knew it. You talked, and I saw my hand ripping your heart out before you could say another word. I would have done it," He let his hands fall; dangle at his sides until the tips were numb and blue from the basement's cold. "That wasn't running. That was mercy."

Something in the man's eyes dimmed. "And you think you would have managed to kill me?"

"I know I would have."

The lack of hesitation had Verlaine pause.

Chuuya sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Get out of this goddamn basement.”

“No.”

“What do you *mean* —“

“No,” he said. “There is a storm not even I will escape — one that will devour us all, human or not. Until then —” He lowered his eyes to the unwrinkled black of his sleeves. Something like indecisiveness battled through the signs of age on his pale face. Chuuya had the very strange thought that he’d probably watch him grow old, one way or another. “I think I would like to be left alone.”

*So did I*, Chuuya didn’t say. His knuckles were itching. He refused to spill any more blood for him. *You brought the storm anyway*.

“What is this *storm*?” he clipped, brusque. “I thought you cared about nothing but me.”

“I don’t.”

The sincerity in it was disarming. “I *have* been in danger, you know.”

“No,” Verlaine mused. He tilted his head to study him. “I never doubted your strength. You are my brother. We cannot be overtaken by flimsy trials. But I wished —“ He frowned at the pages. Chuuya realized there were drawings on them, too — blooming green fields and warm wooden walls. He thought of Fumiko’s vision; the house whose rooms he knew, and would never enter. Chuuya never knew how honest the sincerity in Verlaine’s words was. “I really did wish you could live a life that needed no strength to be lived.”

It hit him, abruptly, how little he wanted to hear it.

“Too late,” he said, tightly. “And there is no such thing anyway.”

“I know,” Verlaine tapped his own wrist — forced his fingers to loosen, keeping them from trying to reach out. Chuuya didn’t think it was to him. *The blood was for nothing*, he thought, *and we’re both here anyway*. “I’m sorry,” he added, and Chuuya *knew* it would never be to him. “I know.”

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Chuuya failed to figure out what, exactly, had brought him to *The Alley* until the liquid cobalt of the neon sign outside buzzed, partly obscuring the sound of breaking glass at the end of the stone stairs.

The way down was dark, barely bathed in that fluorescent blue — enough to underline the cracks and rifts of the old stone. It rained, still, and the coat he'd left around Kouyou's shoulders was a half mourned lack; he watched raindrops shatter in crystal shades, mixing with the steady influx of water from the evermore-leaking pipe by the wall. It took him a moment to realize he hadn't been there in months.

*Sometimes you leave and you don't realize it until you return*, Noguchi had said, once. *The nice thing is that you hardly feel it.*

"You won't drown," Chuuya ordered, and it felt useless even as it dripped from his wet lips. "Get out."

He sat down on the fourth to last step — he *counted*, just as an excuse not to think about the throbbing *something* rattling his ribs — and opened a crack with all his hastiness. He hated that Dazai hadn't even flinched, probably — too used to his patterns. He didn't feel the anger that had been stuck in his veins since the Hospital bed until it choked the breath out of him, his shoes stepping on fragments of a water glass by the second to last step.

*The Alley* seemed to laugh at him.

Sprawled like a suicide-survivor against the stone wall of the alcove, Dazai studied him with a dazedly low-lidded eye, between his abandoned, half curled legs — bored and so rain-wet it was a wonder he wasn't shaking head to toe. He didn't say a thing.

"I need to pack my stuff," Chuuya insisted, nonsensically. His apartment was on the other side of the city.

He thought of the place underneath Albatross' own, abandoned to the old paint job and *DO NOT ENTER* sign. Paper was probably still stuck to the ceiling — old pages from an astronomy book Kouyou had gifted him, because Chuuya liked stars and couldn't find it in himself to decorate; and then the journaling from their first official mission, with all the neon green thread and the information. *Mission Blue Flower*. Three lifetimes ago, two times shorter and three times meaner. Their carved heights on the side of the door resembled both humidity stains and a joke.

Chuuya studied the bundle of Dazai's coat on the ground, soaked in the pipe water and the tapping rain, feet jittery from that higher point of view — and he exhaled.

His eyes were stuck to the fragment — locked between his lithe, pale fingers; dangling over his knee along to the hypnotic fall of blood drops and dried Champagne — from the glass he had to have thrown against the wall, stolen from the ballroom's refreshments. It was the only reason he missed the face Dazai made, when he breathed out: "Did you *t-talk* to him?"

He stilled.

Searching for something in his vacant gaze — *something*, Chuuya knew, but he couldn't recall — he felt that gaze piercing back, unchanged. Chuuya tried to make sense of the sounds swimming in his ears with leftover rain, because the Demon Prodigy didn't talk like anything but a trickster, and Dazai Osamu didn't *either*, and yet —

“Why?” Chuuya heard himself ask. “Is there some relevant information you needed the *King of Assassins*' favorite person to get for you?”

The neon sign flickered. Breaking against the veil of water from the pipe, it grew gentler.

“You're not his favorite,” Dazai informed him. He sounded drunk, somewhat — sickly and nasal, and not quite there. The familiarity had him straighten for no sure cause. “Rimbaud was. And I wouldn't have told you anyway.”

*Perhaps I made it up*, Chuuya thought, a bit numb — thinking of the way Koda's syllables had used to chase each other.

He squinted through the darkness and the sea between them, at the broken veins of his eye — of his *eyes*, almost, because his bandages were loose and his unworking eye took a peek between those cell bars with a daze that was nauseated. Dazai was *all* loose — drenched clothes and unkempt hair and *something* in his traits, determined and lazy. Coming undone in that shared hideout, like it was fair — like Chuuya had ever allowed him anywhere he hadn't lock-picked his way through anyway.

It took him a bit too long to recognize it as the *Ferris Wheels* of shoes too close to the edge — drowning in a river.

He studied him. “What did you do?”

Blinking, a thousand miles away, Dazai did nothing but stare.

Knots curled themselves in his chest with the exceptional ability of wrinkled hands. Chuuya studied the twitches of his fingers, and then the graffitied stone walls — the rusty fence behind him. Head tilted back against it, Dazai said: “Did you know Madame Tanaki was the reason Ueda Akinari got his hands on you?”

Chuuya almost flew to his feet, tense like an arrow. “What did you do?” he insisted. “Tell me.”

“None of them cared about informing you of her execution,” he continued. He parted from that alcove of his like a root being ripped from the ground, sloppy and resistant — crawled forward, very slowly. *Not drowning*, Chuuya's mental list let him know. *Not overdose* — *thin pupils*. But he was drenched and studying him like he wasn't sure he *was* there. “I'd find some amusement in telling you they wanted to keep you in the dark, but to be honest — they didn't even think about it. It was the same with Verlaine, I think,” Dazai squinted at nothing, arms trembling from effort. “In the grand scheme of the Mafia's mighty existence, your grief didn't amount to much. Isn't that maddening?”

Chuuya stared at the fragment of glass he'd abandoned by his feet. Dead bird at the door; the shine of old Champagne.

"Mori's poisons," Chuuya said. Distant; a shout underwater. "Did you take Mori's poisons?"

The rain had turned Dazai's palms freezing and too slippery. It took them a moment — when he threw himself forward, knees on the first step — to still enough to cup Chuuya's cheeks, forcing his eyes on all his dazzlingly unstable focus.

He was so close his breath turned into a cloud over Chuuya's nose, spurred by the cold and the rush of water from the sky and the pipe, barely shielded by the descent — and for a moment there was nothing but that lone strand of hair trapped between Dazai's eyelashes, and the way he held his head like webbed glass he was *set* on shattering.

"Silly, stubborn Chuuya," Dazai insisted, like an epiphany — it was barely a breath. His lips were chapped and littered in raindrops. "We just keep breaking your heart, don't we?"

*Don't be stupid*, he mouthed. His lips didn't even move. Chuuya was petrified.

Something like nothing at all turned his mind into an empty cave of buzzing. He didn't even feel the rage of that patronization — of Dazai's tendency to *pull* and to *force* and to breathe in Chuuya's own breathing space, until the air was pettily stolen and scented in all of Dazai's familiar intensity — until he had the boy in a locked hold under his merciless arm, ripping a choked gasp out of his lips.

He dragged him to the alcove again, teeth gritted too violently to care about how viciously Dazai kicked and fought and protested and *bit* — no matter the bruises blooming across his bones as Chuuya's grip relentlessly slammed him against the sharp corners of that alley, slamming back.

*Hamamoto's brains between his fingers*, he thought, and, *it can't have been for nothing*, and, *who are you lying to but yourself?*

"Throw it up," Chuuya ordered, pushing him to his knees near the sewer grate, viciously enough to hear it *crack* — "Fucking throw it up —" And when Dazai tried to rip himself off, he sunk his nails in his nape and just *slammed* him forward. "*Throw it up right now!*"

Dazai trashed around. His fist hit Chuuya's knee where an old scar was, and Chuuya landed on the ground, forcing the sewer grate off with a rush of heartbeat in his ears — heard his mouth shape insults into reality and spit sharp words through the seams of it, deaf to the protests and the whines out of Dazai's own spit sticky lips — and he forced him down again, and *again and again*, and he stuck two fingers down his throat, and hooked his hand into his hair until entire strands were ripped off, dragging his head down the hole.

A pitiful, disgusting sound wrecked Dazai's throat, rattling him so wretchedly his hands lost their grip on the marks he'd clawed, bumping his forehead against the ceramic of the toilet.

"You think I'm allowing Mori to fucking execute me over your corpse?" he snapped, unsure of anything coming out of his mouth, frantic and *angry*. "You think I'm —"

“Don’t let Mori know,” Dazai slugged, amidst delirium and vomit. It was barely a string of letters — barely understandable, apart from that odd amusement he always seemed to drool when it was about the Boss. “Mori can’t know — don’t let him —” His knees gave up on their quest, landing him on stone. “ — can’t know I —”

He threw up.

Chuuya’s heels hurt under the weight of his thighs. He dropped like a puppet, panting and painstakingly squeezing himself — where the neon cobalt light was nowhere to be seen and the rain was a tad louder. The sound of his breathing was aggravating, and he’d held onto the back of Dazai’s shirt so *callously* he’d torn holes in it.

It was eons before it was quiet.

Dazai leaned back, falling against the metal fence, his next inhale vertiginously shaky. Chuuya waited for him to whine, and felt like punching something when he didn’t. Dazai swayed as if he was going to crack his skull open against the wall, and Chuuya’s fists clenched in preparation.

When nothing happened, he only felt stupid.

*At least we’re not bleeding*, he considered, in a fit of uncomfortable familiarity. The two of them — a messy bundle of harsh breathing on an alley’s concrete. Chuuya detested the settling calm in his veins; his bones’ adjustment to what shouldn’t have been normal. He detested the sight of Dazai’s face — the bandages hanging from his chin, and the horridly lost look in his pupils. How the User who had worn his face hadn’t looked like him as he died — and how Chuuya had *known it*.

He climbed to his feet, joints creaking and eyes pulsing. They’d stored water bottles inside the wall-safe stash — Chuuya threw one at him, and ordered: “Clean up.”

*Get one the anthodites from the Infirmary*, he thought about adding. But it would have been a waste of breath. Dazai knew; Dazai would. Dazai didn’t even want to die.

Chuuya attempted to find something to get his hands busy. When he didn’t, fingers clenching and unclenching, he dropped on the wet third to last step again — right back to the start.

It didn’t help much. In his peripheral, Dazai’s torturously slow cleaning motions were a puppeteer’s fault. *Sometimes*, Chuuya did not want to think, and thought anyway, *Dazai felt so very young*. Felt so very drenched in blood, alone and surrounded and coveted and feared and *alone*. Sometimes, Chuuya stitched him up and the words refused to leave his throat — they nested there and made a swell that was fated happenstance, because he knew better than to deny that whatever tethered them to each other’s ripples was suppositious, by then. Sometimes — at fifteen years old and when that building had buried them without a tombstone — he wanted to sit next to him and ask, *can we be friends?*

*No*, he imagined him saying, a bit stupefied. Chuuya would have answered the same — that was how he knew. *Of course we can’t*.

“You know,” Chuuya said. “They’re closing the Arcade.”

A bandaged hand wiped chapped lips, tired. Dazai looked at him through his wet fringe, devastatingly blank — torrid and glistening right behind the dark glass of his pupils, as if choking on his desire to do *something*.

“My Arcade?” he echoed.

It made him angry for no real reason. “It’s not just fucking yours.”

“If that was your Arcade,” Dazai muttered, very reasonably, framed by a subtle frustration that felt a bit unreal on his tongue — *ours*, he mused, *ours*, *who else’s*? “Then you should have been here when they shut it down.”

Chuuya stared. Opened his mouth; heard nothing come out. “That’s not fair.”

His glance up at him was pitiful. *We just keep breaking your heart*, he’d said. *Don’t we?*

His fingers twitched.

It kept raining. Cars passed by underneath the bridge, right outside *The Alley*; Chuuya picked up a glass fragment from the first step — he let it fall after a breath, electrified and barely distracted by the echoing sound of the pipes. He could feel Dazai’s eyes on him. He picked up the glass again. Put it down. *Figure it out*, he heard Tsuchiya snap, a bit irritated. *Are you going to run again?*, Verlaine had questioned.

“Get out,” Chuuya said.

“Do you have it?”

He raised his head, fingers stuck around the laces of his shoes.

“The scar,” Dazai asked. His eyes fell on the rain-soaked fabric of his waistcoat, the shirt under it — settled by his ribs, where Chuuya sometimes felt his heart throb, still. “Do you have it?”

Despite the haze of the horrid blue light and the buzz of the piping system, Chuuya knew his confusion wasn’t on him. The question made no sense whatsoever. “We got skewered like a meat combo, jackass,” he reminded him. “Of course I’ve got a scar.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I don’t,” he insisted. Chuuya didn’t really want to be in his same room. Chuuya only had to be away for a week, at most, and he’d asked him to come anyway. *But you did it for him*, Mori had sworn. “It didn’t matter, so I don’t.”

Chuuya couldn’t think of an answer. “Get out.”

“Can I see it?”

He set his jaw, teeth shattering against each other. He tapped his fingers on the stairs — once, twice. *But you did it for him*, he’d sworn. Chuuya understood, belatedly, that it had been a warning to stubbornly blind ears. *What won’t you do?*

“Are you going to leave, after?” he asked.

Dazai tilted his head. “What else can I do?”

The spot he’d punched on his knee pulsed. Chuuya raised his fingers — uncertain of *when* he had removed his gloves — and unbuttoned his waistcoat with a few flicks of wrists. He gave up by the time the spasms of his fingers got to his nerves; settled for dragging his shirt out of his pants and crumbling it along with the waistcoat, freeing only his lower stomach. Whipping rain-scented cold tickled him; he exhaled against the goosebumps.

With no courtesy, Dazai’s eyes zeroed on the ugly patch of skin.

He hadn’t observed it much, but he knew its ridges with the absent traced-memory of nimble fingers on boring assignments. The Sheep had had a tradition of trying to match wider scars with one of the countries from an old book they’d stolen — Chuuya didn’t think that one would match any. It was too wide and too strangely precise; sharper where the sculpted leaves of the railing had been. The shade of dead skin — a crisp, burned brown, surrounded by blushing bruises and staggeringly white outlines — was so well known, he sometimes ended up staring at his unmarred flesh instead.

“That’s ugly,” was Dazai’s verdict. Oddly, he sounded a bit jealous.

“You’re ugly,” Chuuya tried to snap. He half managed — obnoxiously shushed by Dazai’s unsubtle scurrying forward, uncaring of just how dirty his soaked pants were getting. He landed on the first step, half kneeling, half dropped — leaned his chin on one of Chuuya’s knees, mollified and empty, and didn’t move.

*I knew you’d come get us*, he had told Kajii, a few days after waking up in the Hospital.

The man — always one for research — had asked again, nonetheless. *I knew you’d come get us*, he hadn’t promised. He hadn’t wanted to talk. Dazai would have stitched himself up with debris and moonlight before allowing their hearts to stop beating in tandem. And Chuuya —

*We belong to the Mafia first*, he had told Hirotsu. He had squeezed Hamamoto’s brain out of his eye sockets like it didn’t matter at all.

The stairs were steep. Chuuya tilted back until the back of his head could throb against wet stone, and saw nothing but blue neon shattering a water curtain.

Something sweaty and feverishly hot touched the tender skin of the scar.

His muscles jumped with it, startled by the shock of contrasting temperatures and of a tickling exhale on ruined skin — but it didn’t jolt Dazai’s forehead in the least. The tip of his nose was the only freezing part of him, raising goosebumps in the middle of Chuuya’s

stomach — his bandaged hands were loose and hooked to his belt loops, pulling his legs apart just enough to reach him.

Chuuya felt very tired, all of the sudden.

*You could have told me*, he wanted to say. Verlaine and Tanaki and all of it. The sky was devoid of stars, over the limit of the alcove roof — filled with rain. *Isn't it lonely, being prodigious and demonic all at once? Fuck you. Fuck you.* It wouldn't matter at all. *I'm sorry about Sakaguchi.*

A bit gentler, and unfit just for it: *I know.*

His hand curled on Dazai's scalp, scritch through hair he had been too close to ripping off. Dazai's whole self seemed to slump forward with a stuttering intake of breath, as if surprised by his own materiality — by the permission to be so. *It didn't matter*, he'd told him, *so I don't have it.* In a frustrating twist of guts, Chuuya wanted to rattle him — *of course you can be touched.*

Something too scratchy to be flesh touched the scar tissue. Chuuya only understood they were lips when they clicked dryly against his fluttering muscles — a small, pointless kiss.

Warmth choked his viscera like solidified blood, clogging his airways and his veins. “Hey,” he exhaled, like a warning, eyes on the sky.

The steps dug against his back — his nape; his shoulder blades; his elbows. Dazai's fingers slipped from his belt loops, butterfly-touching the back of his thighs right where they ended — they crawled underneath the clingy wetness left behind by Chuuya's raised shirt, scarred palms branding the rain-sticky skin of his hips as that grasp tugged him a bit closer, *digging* in his flesh. Another kiss, in that same spot, like it made any sense at all. “Hey,” he heard himself insist, hoarse. Dazai's nails were always cut too clean — he felt them sink in nonetheless, *tightening* right as his mouth parted on the jagged corner of the scar. The inside of his mouth was wet and warm and too long lasting. “Hey,” he echoed, lost.

Neck aching, he studied the head pressed on his lap. He dragged his thumbs to tuck Dazai's fringe away, leaving only his eyes — looking up at him, never one to be caught by surprise; vacant and horribly bright, underneath fragile eyelashes.

Warmth choked him. Chuuya's jaw went achingly slack at the mere murmur of it.

The ghost of his lips' brush was there all the same, far too close — melted honey on concrete. A suggestion of an inhale on wet skin; the blown up pupils in the gaze Dazai refused to quit clawing his face with.

*This is just another poison to him*, he knew, abruptly.

All at once, the hands tightened around his waist with the same obsessive grasp Dazai reserved for murder, and *hauled* — and Chuuya, balance personified and gravity's son, stumbled enough to drop from the third to last step into the second, a tad closer, arms around Dazai's most innocent expression — the starvation in his eyes when they ended up pressed

*almost* closer than they had been underneath that building. He *felt* Dazai's mind curl around the frustrating thought of, *still not enough*.

Chuuya felt a bit like he was losing it. He took his hands off his nape — knew it was freezing, when he cradled Dazai's cheek again. He didn't even flinch.

*Ask me not to go*, he thought, nonsensically. Chuuya would go anyway. He wouldn't. *Ask me so I can figure it out*.

He met his gaze — bruised with a sadness Chuuya knew nothing about, and plans he didn't get to know, and the blooming realization that they had never been half as equal as he'd stupidly thought — and knew Dazai never would.

*If we're doing this partner thing*, he'd told him, a thousand years ago, underneath the fake rain of broken pipes. Dazai had broken them himself.

The blues and purples under Dazai's eyes didn't vanish when he ran his thumbs over them; Chuuya felt starved, all of the sudden — glued to the ground in spite of it. He tapped that smooth, sensitive skin until Dazai's eyes closed — let his hands fall like the drying spit from his lips wasn't rising goosebumps on his ribs, still.

*But for him*, Mori had warned. *But for him*.

He stepped away. Dazai's nails let go.

"I never left," he informed him, hard. He was on his feet faster than he could realize having decided to; he felt as if he was moving through jelly. "The Arcade's closing anyway."

The boy didn't say a thing.

His gaze was all for the scar. His mouth was parted. Deliriously, he recalled the wet sound of its click against his skin. Chuuya tapped two fingers on his lower lip, fugitive and unblamed, watching him stay curled on those stairs — *what if*, he thought; and, *maybe when I come back*; and, *never* — and turned to climb the stairs like it'd save him from crucifixion.

*It'll be normal when I come back*, he swore. He'd pretend Verlaine didn't exist. *Double Black* would play Mori's bidding until they were ash. He would tape Dazai's furniture to the ceiling, and get called *dog* in a less meaningful way in return. It would all go back to normal, once he came back.

*It's all I have*, Chuuya thought, distantly. It didn't sound like begging until he burned from it.

"It'll just reopen somewhere else," Dazai spoke up, like an idealistic afterthought.

He set his jaw until it throbbed — looked at his curled up frame over his shoulder. It was still raining. Kouyou still had his coat. "Maybe."

The boy lowered his head, inscrutable. *But for a moment*, he thought, a bit desperate, tickled by lips that weren't there and the assuredness that it had been easier, at some point, *he had been right there*. Tanaki had been alive and Verlaine had been dead, and they'd been stuck



together by the blood in their insides, and Chuuya hadn't known how to tell him, *I'll make them bury you with me so I'll know I won't have to do it myself.*

*Too soon*, he'd told Hirotsu. *But* —

“Maybe not,” Dazai mused.

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The first of Verlaine's letters came when he was at the airport, about to board.

“Seriously, what woke his ass up?” he asked Kouyou, huffing, as she fumbled with the scarf she had forced on him. The paper was getting more and more wrinkled in his white-knuckled grasp, as he attempted to focus on the swirling way Verlaine wrote French *fs* and not feel the pounding flush of rage hammering his ribs. *Better reasons to be angry*, he reminded himself. Somehow, the letter smelled of lilies. “He's been fine with ignoring my existence for more than three years, and now he wants to play pen-pals?”

Kouyou shrugged, a bit helpless. She didn't quite fit among the crowd of the airport — her kimono attracted the gazes of white tourists, and her general *Kouyou-ness* had hurried travelers part like the Red Sea to avoid her breathing space.

“I can't say,” she admitted. “He's never — he never outrightly *asked* to see you. His interest was unmistakable — and just *awful*, I would like to add — but he never demanded you to be brought to him. Perhaps he always knew it would happen, eventually.”

He rattled his knuckles against the duffel bag on his shoulders, squinting at the arrival times board.

“It's better that you didn't.”

The woman studied him. “Didn't *what*?”

“Take me to him sooner,” Chuuya forced himself to admit. The scarf she'd used was a bright green, and warm enough to let his hands tremble only from leftover torture spasms. “Boss, I think he knew I would have — if I'd *seen* him —”

He trailed off. But Kouyou was no stranger to bloodthirst — she tapped two fingers on each of his temples, attempting to smooth over wrinkles. She lowered her head to search his eyes

underneath his bent head, eyebrows raised. She smiled — not unkindly, but not patronizingly.

“I’d ask you *one word*,” she said. “But I feel like we might alert the airport guards.”

He snorted. “What did we buy them off for, then?”

“Because it’s always better to have more than less,” Kouyou reprimanded, easily, tapping his shoe with the tip of her umbrella. Her gaze went a bit distant, as she studied the swarming people around them. “God knows we never seem to escape messes, lately.”

*Lately* was a broad term — given the most calm and peace Chuuya had had since joining had been the two weeks he’d recently spent in a coma. Still, he frowned. “Am I going to miss something?”

“Nothing too relevant,” she replied. “If it even happens. Mori still has his eyes on *Mimic*.”

He frowned. “I thought that’d been ruled out as a *Special Division*’s issue.”

“It had,” Kouyou confirmed, gelid. “Until we found out they’d sent *us* a spy.”

Chuuya stilled.

“You’re telling me Sakaguchi was —“

Her eyes snapped up to his, startled. “How do *you* know it was him?”

“I just —“ His head was swimming in ideas he couldn’t focus on. Dazai’s arm around the man’s own, as he dragged him to his office — the glint of his glasses’ as he bowed to Chuuya. Dazai’s hand in his own, as they danced to a music he had already forgotten. *But you would think it fair, in the back of your mind*. The way he’d stared at the ground of their abandoned, makeshift safe house — a frog in a well, too bored to jump halfway.

*If it was your Arcade*, he’s said. *Then you should have been here*.

“Ane-san,” he attempted, feeling jittery all over, “Should I just stay around until —“

“No,” the woman cut him off. “No, don’t be stupid. You’ve promised the men in Rouen your help, you can’t just take it back. It’s nothing we can’t deal with. As cocky as he can be — Mori wouldn’t have sent you away, otherwise.”

He was unconvinced. “But it’s a syndicate we know almost nothing about.”

“That man always knows more than he lets on,” Her smile was a bit tight around the edges. “A trait of devils. I trust him. Don’t you?”

It didn’t feel like an accusation. Kouyou wouldn’t have dared, he knew. Chuuya thought of Hamamoto’s blood on his hands, and Mori’s eyes looking at him.

*I’m just a bit worried*, he’d admitted.

“Of course,” he offered, at last, frowning. “I — of course. But can you call me if something of *actual* relevance happens?”

“He’ll call you himself,” she promised. “It might even end up being nothing — a meeting to decide how to proceed, maybe. If Mori is acting as calmly as he is about this, I’m assuming it will all be over by the end of the week. And you’ll be back by then. It will be alright.”

Chuuya nodded, hesitantly. “As long as I don’t come home to another earthquake, I guess.”

For a moment, her knuckles grew white in a clenched grip. She chuckled, though.

Her laughter was a balm on bruises Chuuya *knew* would have disappeared by then, had he not held a tendency to press them — the curiosity of a child on a webbed glass floor, in love with the creak it made when he jumped on it. Chuuya had never fallen in his life.

He studied the letter — no blood stains, and none of Doc’s notes at the end of a medical prescription. He tried to remember if he’d ever even bothered to learn landing.

*Mourning never depended on acquaintance*, the letter read. Chuuya had the tickling feeling it had to be a poem, but the concept of Verlaine asking for poetry to be brought to his basement was far too insufferably reasonable. *Since they all swore it hurt more than the first sunset, I believed it.*

“ — think they might attempt to get more information, before they accept to join,” Kouyou was continuing, as she led him to the Gates. “Well — if they even *dare* take that step. I’m not sure of just how far that spying job will take them. I’m not sure they’ll want to risk a Mafia execution — not with their daughter in the picture.”

*Do not talk to me of grief*, the letter insisted. “You mean the Kyoukas?” Chuuya asked.

“Who else,” Her smile turned tight. “Only so much I can concede to them, before they start questioning if the Mafia *really* is that blind. Had any other potential member stalled like they’ve been doing for the past year, Mori would have locked them in the *Under Port*.”

“And you won’t?” Chuuya insisted.

“I don’t want them,” Kouyou tutted. Her eyes glinted a tad too starvedly. “I want that little flower of theirs. You’ll like her. She’ll need a new family soon enough. We could train her together — it could be fun.”

He killed Verlaine’s letter in a clenched fist, hiding it in his pocket. He stepped over the line, where Kouyou wasn’t allowed to follow, and let his gloved hand linger on her own — intertwined over her sash, peaceful and unconcerned and weightless. *How do you do it*, he wanted to ask, like he was just fifteen again — and she was bright and *wanted* him; whatever that meant — *how are you twenty two and alive?*

*Do not talk to me of grief*, the letter insisted. *For all I have touched died before I could take my hand back.*

Chuuya pulled back.

“Ane-san,” he said, “I’ll be back soon.”

The promise seemed to startle her. Hadn’t he known what to look for, he probably wouldn’t have noticed it — still, her eyelashes fluttered on a breath a tad too shaky to be planned. Her smile turned enigmatic — Kouyou studied his face like a treasure hunt, and she *looked* twenty two, all of the sudden. It seemed awfully young.

Her hands twitched. She cupped his cheeks for half a blink, fingers slipping down like melted wax, leaving his skin pulsing. “I know,” she swore. He recalled, oddly, the sight of her hands braiding Tanaki’s hair over the marble of her desk. Chuuya wondered, for the first time, whether all the blood ever got to her head too.

“At times,” Kouyou admitted, absently, “It does feel like one of the few things I’m certain of.”

The guards over the metal detectors called for the crowd to move. Announcements echoed through the airport, awakening sleeping travelers and lighting up the yellow lines at his feet. Chuuya dropped his duffel bag to the ground, and threw his arms around Kouyou’s middle, almost pushing her off her feet.

She inhaled on a choked gasp, heart beating only a *tad* faster against Chuuya’s chest. He closed his eyes, pressing them against her shoulder — felt her hands linger around his scalp, sinking in like they did in corpses to verify their *post-mortem*.

“Dear,” she said. She only failed at a reprimanding tut by an inch, and he let her get away with it. “Do try to — *ah*. I can hardly rescue you from a fallen building from all these countries away.”

“You would,” he insisted, muffled by fabric she hated to wear when all wrinkled.

“Obviously. But it would be a bother.”

Chuuya bit down a grin — unexplainably elated.

He rubbed his cheek against her, the way Hikari did when he was hungry and childish — he thought about the way she called him *her brother*, whenever useful allies wanted to play conversation.

Her never chapped lips mouthed *something* against the shell of his ear. It took him eons to hear it, surrounded as they were by announcements and voices and metallic squeaks. Eventually, Chuuya watched the chain of his hat dangle in front of his lidded eyes — eventually, he focused on nothing but the death grip of Kouyou’s nails around him, and her oddly wet murmur of, *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry*, against his ear.

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Hirai Kurou directed the movements of all the goods from the Port Mafia's French deals — as such, he lived in the dusty attic of one of ten warehouses in some industrial area of Rouen, and he smelled like car oil and gunpowder.

*I apologize for the mess, Executive*, he'd said, upon their first meeting, two days ago, covered in a mixture of blood and petrol. *It's been — a very busy season.*

*I'm not* — Chuuya had started.

*I know*, Hirai had interrupted, smiling. *But we get all voices, up here. You might as well be.*

"The new trafficking laws in Belgium mean sending the trucks from their airports rather than the French ones would save us *months* of fees," the man explained, as he led Chuuya and Adam to one of the warehouses. Snow cracked underneath their feet; Adam amused himself by munching on gum and loudly announcing the change of temperature on every single step they took. Chuuya had asked him not to listen — *it's, uhm*, he'd said, *for your own moral code*; which the android had stuck two fingers in his ears for. "Which means we *have* to get them there, and fly to Japan from there."

"That sounds reasonable," Chuuya said, as he nodded to the stationed Mafia guards bowing in a half the moment they caught sight of him. "Why did you request support from Yokohama?"

"Colder," Adam said, in the meantime, a few steps back. He still wore his usual suit, no coat or anything of the sorts — he'd still let Chuuya wrap Kouyou's scarf around his neck, politely not mentioning the way he'd turned beetle red when he'd remembered androids couldn't exactly get cold. "Colder. Colder *again*. Warmer."

Hikai threw Adam another perplexed look. Eventually, as he pulled the doors to one of the warehouses open, he continued: "Our closest base is in Lille — which is convenient, since it's only thirty minutes from the Belgium border."

"And you need help bringing the trucks to Lille?"

"*Les Fleurs du Mal* have their eyes on us," A shiver rattled the man's back. "We've lost more than three hundred men to their attacks in the last three weeks — they must have camps on the way to Lille. We managed to keep the goods from them, but the latest shipment is going to have them like sharks on fresh blood. Too many Ability Users, and too many men in general — sending *you*, sir, is probably the wisest decision Boss could take."

The doors opened to an infinite space of warm stone and rusty metal, with wooden support beams that let the almost-winter sun filter in in shattered curtains. Dozens of trucks were parked in rows mere steps from the entrance, filling up the place in a gasoline scent.

Chuuya squinted, hands in his pockets. “What’s this *latest shipment*?”

“Warmer,” Adam insisted, walking circles near the entrance. His shoulders and head were covered in snow; the fingers stuck in his ears had some soft material wrapped around them — one of the thousand tricks he could get by unscrewing his own hands. “Colder. Warmer. Warmer again.”

Motioning him towards one of the trucks, Hikai led him to the other end of the warehouse.

“You used to run the gemstone trade once, correct?” he told him, as he reached up to open the back doors of the truck.

Blinding, overwhelmingly sizzling *blue* hit his eyes the moment the doors parted. Chuuya had a hard time seeing anything else, for a moment — the storages the gemstones were kept in, or the old spiderwebs in the corner; the paper listing off the type of stones, plastered on each box, signed off with nothing but lines of ???

“Indicolite,” Chuuya whistled, as even Adam paused to blink at the dazzling show, leaning forward. ““You checked the cut?”

“We’ve been breaking our minds over it for more than a month,” Hikai confirmed. “It’s pure. And worth a *lot*. We don’t usually deal with blue tourmaline at all — the Mafia has no dealers in Kenya, or Sri Lanka, or in any of the more known territories of origin. We found it in America.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s not rare.”

The man rubbed his nape, awkward. “We had some — misconceptions.”

“As in, you never thought about looking for it in America despite the high demand?” Chuuya stared. “I remember sending out orders for it when I still directed the trade. It has been *attested* that it could be found in some specific locations there. ”

Hikai cleared his throat.

“Master Chuuya,” Adam called, where he was obediently facing the wall, pretending not to be there. “Hirai Kurou’s heartbeat just grew faster. He will lie to you in approximately seven seconds.”

“Is he broken in the head?” the man asked, spluttering.

“He’s just got peculiar hobbies,” Chuuya climbed inside the truck, crouching down to dip a hand in a box of already-shaped tourmaline — an abundance of rotund, sharp-cornered cobalt gems swam between his fingers, catching the light from the sun filtering in. The color reminded him of the Yokohama Bay — of how his own eyes had looked before Arahabaki had burned one of them and covered the other in ash. “I’m gonna take a wild guess — nobody listened to my advice, because I was still the *new kid straight from the enemy organization*.”

Hikai cleared his throat again. “If it helps, I was the one to recover your document requests to start the research this year.”

Turning his head — Adam directed him a glance. Chuuya raised an eyebrow. He mouthed: *stable heartbeat*.

He raised one of the gemstones, squinting through the blue to study the mafioso. “So, you want me to guard the travel to Lille?”

“A definitive defeat of *Les Fleurs* wouldn’t be awful,” Hikai added, bashedly. “But I’ll keep my requests humble. That syndicate sniffs through the gems market like they were born for it. We are honored by your presence alone, sir.”

Chuuya grunted, a bit awkward, throwing the gem back into the storage. He didn’t manage — Hikai jumped on the truck as well, and picked it up before it could land. Hovering it between their palms, he grinned a smile that was the same gray as his aging hair, and said: “Here. You can keep one, as payment.”

He blinked. “I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You will. And let me say — this is one *hell* of a gift, if you don’t want it for yourself,” The man leaned into his space, wiggling his eyebrows. “Got any prissy superior amenable to charms, who has recently lost a ring?”

Chuuya scoffed, observing the lines of rusty trucks with a critical eye. The transfert wouldn’t take that long — especially not with Adam to help out. He got lost in images of returning home with a newly annihilated organization up his sleeves — he almost forgot to answer.

Scratching the scar in the middle of his chest, he conceded: “Got a partner who did.”

Hikai’s eyebrows touched his hairline. He followed, as Chuuya hopped down from the truck, offering: “That’s some big commitment at your age.”

The scar seemed to itch. For no reasonable explanation, Chuuya recounted the exact number of seconds it had taken for Dazai’s onyx pupils to swallow his eyes. His fingers twitched — he felt belatedly glad not to be holding the stone. “Not that kind of partner.”

*Hey*, he recalled. *Hey*.

With a shrug, the man decided to throw it in his hands nonetheless. “Well, you could make a hell of a ring from this. Or something else, if it’s not that kind of partner — I’ve been hearing bolo ties are incredibly *in* in the East, lately.”

Cyan and emerald flares chased each other through the glassy maze of the gemstone. It was a stunning shade, against the black of his glove — the sort of thing that looked better under the light.

*I hate him*, he thought about saying. *I have done far too much for his sake*. What was a gem in the face of blood? What was blood, in the face of the expression Mori had made when he’d said, *be careful* — what was any of it in the face of Chuuya’s stupidity?

“The asshole’s more of an all black guy,” he concluded.

It took Hikai disappearing, called over by one of his men near another truck, for Adam to finally make his way to him, ears still stuffed. With a wince, he signaled he could lower his fingers — the android did so without skipping a beat, as he leaned down to study the gemstone.

“That is rather valuable,” Adam offered, as the reflected blue flares twirled around the datas in his pupils. “And this color is particularly so.”

“You do odd jobs, you get odd payments,” Chuuya stuck the gem in his pocket, leaning back against the truck doors to study the detective. “You know, you didn’t have to come with.”

For a moment, Adam seemed genuinely offended. It melted from him with the same ease of the various expressions he *could* do, but rarely let himself make around Chuuya himself. *They exist to make sure I fool the humans into trusting me with their lives*, he had explained, once. *My database is mostly in agreement that you would already let me do that, despite my — eerie vacancy, you called it?*

“I don’t think you’re eerie, by the way,” he added, horribly out of context.

Adam didn’t seem to care. “I do not think you’re eerie either, Master Chuuya. And I have fun doing missions with you, when my duties allow it.”

He curled an eyebrow. “You have fun with Master Chuuya’s illegal job?”

“It can’t be illegal if it’s Master’s orders,” the android insisted, with that logic that never left any place for discussion. It made him a terrible, fearsome adversary whenever they played *Debate The Cards*. “I was programmed to help the world, and you are my Master.”

Suddenly, he felt a bit guilty. “You really shouldn’t override your system for me, you tin can.”

“It’s alright,” Adam gulped down another one of his gums, standing straight. “I liked you. I like you now. Both me and Eve. Actually — she’s learning how to install pipes, as far as I know. She wants to make sure Master Chuuya doesn’t have to keep showering at the neighbors’ whenever you’re staying with us.”

His ears burned so viciously Chuuya felt the need to check if they’d caught fire. Kicking the ground, he muttered: “You guys do know you’re not my parents, right?”

“Of course not,” Adam seemed appalled. “I am your servant.”

He made a face. “*Fuck* that, you’re not.”

“Well, what are we?”

He thought about it. “Do you want to be best friends?” Chuuya asked — mostly as a joke; echoing what he’d heard Elise say to every doll that Mori had ever conceded to buy her.



Astonishingly, Adam lit up.

“I have checked the definition of *best friend* in over three hundred and seventy dictionaries,” he informed him, after a few seconds of buzzing. “It is a great show of trust, and it denounces a type of relationship that would certainly be useful, during a mission. It would be my honor to be regarded as such by Master Chuuya.”

He stared. “Alright, wait up —“

The man grabbed him by the waist — it could have been a hug, if he hadn’t decided to pick him up like a sack of flour a second later. Making his way to the entrance, Adam’s more robotic tone informed: “*Master Chuuya’s relevant information on the current database has been updated.*”

“For *fuck’s* — Adam, wait —“

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“My best friend and I thank you for the journey you are allowing us to share with you,” Adam said, straight as an arrow, bowing to the few rifle-armed guards in front of the last of the trucks. “We will make sure to conduct appropriately, and to help your mission to the best of our abilities.”

The guard exchanged a glance, eyes on the British flag pin on Adam’s chest.

Chuuya sighed.

“Yeah,” he concluded. “What he said.”

As he dragged him inside the truck, the android leaned down, whispering: “You know, my international research motor mentioned *friendship bracelets* are usually —“

He sighed again.

There usually had to be some justification offered to the passage of more than a dozen trucks down a public highway, in the middle of the night. During his travels to France, Chuuya had learned the *to-go* method in the country tended to be rather elementary — a few French flags over the front lights of the truck and some shortcuts tended to do the trick.

As they settled between cargo boxes, the heavy doors of their truck were shut. It took the vehicle a moment to roar to life; Chuuya knocked the side of his shoe on the ground, lighting up in a soft shade of crimson that helped Adam sit in the *lotus* position, gazing up at him with an openness that signaled he would be ready for both horror stories and war debriefs.

Chuuya failed to hold in a snort.

“This is actually sort of thrilling,” Adam let him know, once he sat next to him. “I have both read and watched countless stories about organized crime, but I must say — the Port Mafia never fails to amaze me with their craftiness.”

He winced — Hirotsu’s monologues about letting a metal-made policeman so deep into their affairs ringing in his ears. “Maybe don’t let Wollstonecraft know about all these analyses of yours?”

“She knows I work with you, oftentimes,” Adam offered. “She’s never complained. In fact — she was the one to encourage our collaboration against Verlaine.”

He studied the laces of his shoes. Pulled one of them, frowning at the ground.

“What is it?” the android asked.

The reddish, gentle gleam turned Adam’s face more human — jumping with the occasional bumps of the truck; morphed from squares into lines, until it became nothing but the shadow of blood the detective had never bled. Chuuya had spent so long digging the ground for his remains — only an arm, and the gentle smile people seemed to have a tendency to curse him with before dying, to be accounted for — that most of his nails had fallen off.

*Can he even be told?*, he wondered. Verlaine had a bounty the *Special Division* had only been the last to put on his head. *Do you owe him loyalty?*

“Can you keep a secret?” he asked, because he owed it to the Mafia, nonetheless.

Adam tilted his head, genuinely intrigued by the question. “I am not entirely sure.”

He huffed. “Because your Creator is higher on the list?”

“I owe her every answer she asks of me.”

“Fair,” Chuuya sighed. “Let’s — alright. I’ll make it a hypothetical.”

“My database can work with possibilities. I have a seventy-three percent guessing rate.”

He vaguely felt he should have been more impressed by the notion than he was. The android certainly seemed satisfied. He tapped his pocket — right where the blue tourmaline Hikai had gifted him rested. Something like home sickness had him extract it, tapping two nails on a surface that was *almost* the same shade of the sky in Yokohama. In the darkness, it reflected *Tainted’s* light in a purple circle across the walls of the truck.

Focusing on the sound of the engine under his chronically sore thighs, Chuuya dared: “What would happen if Verlaine hadn’t died?”

Adam blinked at him, very slowly.

His suit was never wrinkled. His eyes were never warm. He was *comforting*, though, in an odd way Chuuya had never managed to explain — he was littered in memories from some of the worst days in his lifetime, and Chuuya wanted to grin a bit whenever his eyes laid on him. He recalled asking him why the Flags had died — only engrossed enough in him to know the inhuman couldn’t lie.

That same machine-like rationality seemed to fail him, that time around. “I imagine,” Adam offered, hesitantly, “That Master Chuuya would feel rather sad.”

Chuuya stared.

“That’s not what I —“

His in-ear creaked to life. “*Executive?*”

It took him a moment to focus enough to pull his eyes from the detective’s earnest honesty. Clearing his throat, he tapped the in-ear, asking: “Hikai. It’s all clear, for now.”

“*That’s — unusual,*” Through the statics and the closer sound of the engine, from whatever passenger seat Hikai was playing guard from, his tone seemed unconvinced. “*I don’t know if I like it. We’ve had issues with leaks of information, lately — if someone’s let Les Fleurs know about your presence, they might have geared up accordingly.*”

He tapped the gemstone again, rolling his neck back to crack it. “That’s alright,” he assured. “They never gear up enough, when I’m involved.”

Hikai huffed a half laugh.

By the time the in-ear had died down again, Chuuya had no time to turn a stunned expression on Adam again — he was blocked by the fingers the android used to pinch the burnt strand of his hair, curiously eyeing the freshly ashy edges. “Did you get in an accident?”

“No,” Chuuya replied, after a moment. It didn’t seem like Adam had anything to add to their previous conversation. “I never told you about the Mafia’s funerary customs?”

The man laid his chin on his hands, shaking his head. “Eve finds funerary customs particularly intriguing,” he offered, instead. “In her free time, she likes to attend funerals.”

“How charming.”

“Androids aren’t born. Not exactly. They don’t die, either. I believe she’s more interested in grief, though — the same way I’m interested in humans,” Adam shrugged. It was a staggeringly casual gesture — one that reminded Chuuya more of himself than any of the detective’s habits. He felt his lips curl up. “Why does the Mafia burn your hair when somebody dies?”

He snorted, throwing the tourmaline in the air — watching it float inches from his face, blue and beautiful. “It’s not the Mafia,” he corrected, discounting his hat with a motion. “Or, well — you do it yourself, when someone you care about passes away. It’s a way to... I don’t know. Show that they had an impact on you. Humans are fussy about their appearances, you know?”

Adam nodded, fascinated. “Did you do it for your friends?”

“Sure.”

“And now?”

The truck jerked forward, pushed by some hole in the concrete. Chuuya kept his eyes on the gemstone. “This friend of mine,” he offered, a tad curt. “And — my subordinate. You know, Kouyou once told me that the burnt hair is meant to be more of a reminder for yourself than an offering.”

“A reminder?” he echoed.

“*I am alive,*” Chuuya quoted. Vaguely, he could remember her stark frame behind his own — examining his work on the Flags’ burnt strand. “*I can be turned into ash, still.*”

“*Memento mori,*” Adam recited, solemnly.

He raised his eyebrow. “Alright, professor.”

“Is that your only tradition?”

“We don’t bury our dead, if it counts.”

*That* seemed to take him aback. “That is — unlike most traditions Eve has researched. Why is that?”

Chuuya came up short. “Well,” he tried, as he let the tourmaline drop in his hands again. His mind wandered — the sick cobalt under Dazai’s sleepless eyes; the nail shaped bruises he’d found on the small of his back. *I lost it*, he’d told him. *In the grand scheme of things, your grief* —

“When you live in the Mafia, you die in the Mafia. Something like that. It started long before Boss was Boss. It’s — you know, I’m actually thinking I could —“

The truck jerked forward again.

It was distinctly more vicious. If not for the tears of *Tainted* stuck to his skin, Chuuya would have fallen onto Adam’s lap. Sticking the gem in his pocket, he hissed: “What the *hell* —“

Feet — hefty enough to bend the metal in two knee-deep alcoves — landed on the roof.

“Oh,” Adam blinked, as the vehicle almost *screeched* to a halt, immediately restarting a run in the wrong direction. “Master Chuuya, I think *Les Fleurs Du Mal* have arrived.”

He grinned, climbing to his feet. “Up for some more *thrilling experiences*, Adam?”

“Quite,” The android barely had time to say, before the doors were blown off the hinges — whipping them with the merciless wind from the ink-painted highway. His smile reminded him of himself. “And should Master Wollstonecraft ask, I have done nothing but faithfully assist the man she assigned me to years ago.”

Chuuya laughed, right as he stuck one of the gemstones from the cargo boxes through one of the criminals’ chest — calling it back into the box with a hiss.

*Les Fleurs Du Mal* wore blood red clothes, entangled with climbing ropes and tolls that made their affiliation to the gemstone market clear. Their balaclavas covered everything but stunningly mean spirited eyes — pairs that dimmed just a bit once Chuuya climbed to the top of his moving truck, turning every reachable surface into a shining mine field of scarlet intention.

He lost sight of Adam somewhere by the third man whose rope he’d severed — ripping the screaming enemy off the trees framing the highway. Vaguely, he heard the buzz of his secret weapons detach from his body, followed by some sort of interesting information on the gemstone market — offered in that content, calm tone of his.

“This isn’t —“ A coughing woman under his fists wheezed, as he held her skull mere inches from the edge of the truck he’d slammed it on. “It — you weren’t supposed to —“

“Surprise,” Chuuya offered, before kicking her off the roof.

The vehicles hadn’t stopped moving — no matter the projectiles *Les Fleurs* were steadfastly shooting through the drivers’ windows — which meant, Chuuya hoped, that he was hopping just fast enough between trucks to take them out. He hooked his feet over the edge of one of the first vans in the scattering, accelerating rows, and tilted backwards to sink his hand in the concrete.

“—*xecutive!*” Hikai screamed, over the roar of the wind, just loudly enough that Chuuya could hear him through his car window. “*We’ll crash — ten of our guards have been wounded* —“

“I’m sacrificing one truck,” Chuuya let him know, squinting at the jumping crimson silhouette he could only see through *Tainted’s* light. “You and your driver need to jump when I say so.”

“*What?*”

The three trucks rushed closer and closer — just enough for their front lights to blind him. Chuuya breathed in, once, counting. “Jump.”

“*Executive* —“

His hand let go. “*Jump now!*”

The explosion seemed to echo across the entirety of the valley the highway was sunken in — a masterpiece of orange and golden, wrecking all across the scorching air with the might of a sunset. Chuuya flew so high he felt clouds between his fingertips, watching bubbles of debris and fire spread across the concrete — and then turning to follow the horrified screeches surrounding him, from the floating trucks *Tainted* was hovering by his side.

“*What the fuck!*” One of the drivers let out, scrambling to stay in his seat when the door was torn open. Chuuya hid a grin — instead, he ripped a piece of road that had gotten stuck to his shoe, and sent it flying like a bullet to the *Fleur* hanging by the tip of his fingers from the edge of one of the trucks.

He fell into the sea of flames with a scream, joining the companions Chuuya had made sure not to let *Tainted* touch.

“We didn’t even discover their Abilities,” Adam shouted, mostly untouched, from where he was perched over the roof of one of the trucks. “It is a bit of a disappointment.”

Like a jinx — the flames underneath them seemed to tremble, circling like a vortex.

Before Chuuya could curse, or focus on rendering the trucks even lighter to make sure the snake-like column of flames wouldn’t touch the wheels — the unmistakable sound of statics ripped a hole in the shell of his ear, much louder than any of Hikai’s calls had been.

“ — *not sure if this is quite* — “ The voice from the *in-ear* questioned, familiar enough to almost drop the vehicles from his gravity-grip. “*Ah — Chuuya, can you hear me?*”

“Boss?” Chuuya snapped, speechless.

“*Oh, how ingenious,*” the doctor said, not a worry in the world. “*Unsurprising. Dazai was right about the leaked encrypted line. Chuuya, I hope your mission has been going well? We all miss you a lot.*”

The column of fire was hauled forward like a whip, all of the sudden — it wrapped around one of the trucks, startling screams out of the men in the boot. Chuuya hopped onto the roof quicker than even his brain could catch up with, sinking his palms in the minimal space underneath that *living* flame — he cursed at the burns, digging the metal until the grasp of the column became far too wide, allowing him to throw the now-free truck a field away through the night sky.

“I’m a bit busy, Boss!” Chuuya called, eyes on the metallic ropes Adam was cleverly roping the vehicles together with — dragging them over in far enough directions for the Ability’s fire whip to hesitate, confused. “Can I contact you later —“

“*Oh, this will be very quick, I assure you,*” Mori insisted. There was a low, indistinct murmur behind his voice — a mixture of voices Chuuya only belatedly recognized as a meeting. “*Kouyou let you know I would only contact you if it was an emergency, correct?*”

Chuuya froze.

“Is *Mimic* — “

“Not yet,” the man reassured him. “*But we are at a point where a decision has to be taken. You see — I do have a plan to deal with them before they can cause us more issues. Lord knows it is past the time for us to intervene. Poor Akutagawa was almost —*“

“*What?*” Flames brushed his side, leaving him with shivering goosebumps — and enough anger to rip an useless structure off one of the trucks, and fling it into the blurred silhouette on the road. “Is he alright?”

Mori chuckled. “*Don’t worry, he is. But the Executives are at a bit of a stalemate — your vote would be more than helpful.*”

He landed on one of the trucks, panting. “I’m not an Executive.”

“*Chuuya,*” the man insisted, as if nothing could have bothered him less. “*Do you trust me to deal with this?*”

The world was a blurred bundle of *things* — the incessant, horrified screams from the men in the vehicles, as some of them shakingly attempted to direct their rifles to the invisible threat among the fires; Adam’s silhouette, too fast to follow, as he recovered falling mafiosi; the pulsing *heart* of it all, because that was how *Tainted worked*, stuck inside Chuuya’s fingertips and bones like another being. Mori’s voice. Mori’s *trust*. He had to ask for more information — he wasn’t even sure what they were talking about.

“Deal with what?” he managed, on his way to the ground, landing among smoke thick enough to tickle his throat. He turned, looking for a man or a woman in red, directing the flames — over his head, thousands of skyscrapers away, the trucks trembled like constellations.

Mori’s amusement filtered through the white noises — as stable as his smile had been in that ballroom, celebrating the nonexistent. *Mori always knows*, Dazai had sworn.

“*With Mimic, of course,*” he said. “*And, if everything goes as it should — with that boring matter of the Ability Permit too, soon.*”

*That*, at last, got Chuuya to pause.

War raged around him. It had never quite escaped him that the *Permit* was a responsibility on all of Mori’s inner circles’s shoulders — but a tad more on his own, ever since spying through the slot of the man’s office door had revealed a barter Chuuya had never really explained to himself.

*You are valuable*, Kouyou had only offered, when he’d confessed. *Some things can be regained. At the very least, you’re sure to help gain them.*

“*Master Chuuya!*” Adam called, from one of the trucks. His distraction had allowed the fire whip to wrap around two of the vehicles — as they got pulled down, Chuuya barely had time to think before he slammed his foot on the road, cracking the air with gravity-lined electricity.

The night sky glowed crimson. He jumped up, eyes frantically searching the explosion — his eyes found a running pair of legs.

“—*uuya?*” Mori was insisting. *“I really am sorry to bother you, but if we want to move on —”*

“Yes,” Chuuya cut him off, squinting at the vanishing black silhouette. “Boss — if you have a plan — if you think it’s our best shot, I —”

A hiss passed through the flames.

He pounced.

The wet, squelching sound of the User’s viscera between his fingers was far too loud among the dying fire whip — falling from the sky like a dying cobra, disappearing in gorgeous flares against the firmament — for him to hear what Mori said in response. He only caught the end of it, blood drooling from his gloves as he carefully began to direct the floating trucks to a still-intact area of the highway.

“— *grateful,*” the Boss offered, in between statics. Helicopters would arrive soon, Chuuya knew. They had to hurry out of there. *“I will talk to you more when you return next week. It really is a shame your departure got prolonged. I will leave you to it, then.”*

Chuuya was a bit out of breath. He met Adam’s waving arm; tiredly offered a nod. “Yes, Boss. Good luck.”

*“We shall certainly need it. See, Dazai,”* the man continued, over the white noises of the encrypted line he was turning off. From one of the trucks, Hikai leaned so far out of his car window — his victory *whoop!* almost flung him out into the sky. *“See, I told you this could be —”*

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The mafiosi stationed in Lille had a hotel room prepared for him and Adam — a suite of old furniture, reminiscent of Rimbaud’s house, and bathed in the golden light of the first sunset.

Hikai — welcomed in after a single knock, and sporting a limp — found him sitting on the wooden table at the dead center of it, studying the cracked screen of his phone.

“Shame,” he said, nodding towards the device. “We can get you a new one, sir.”



Chuuya shrugged. “You should have seen the last one.”

The sound of Adam’s turned on shower from the bathroom filled the silence — heavy, but not exactly awkward. Hikai studied him with the same uncannily starstruck expression he’d worn since he’d first stepped into the warehouse — if he cared about the insistent sound of water, far too intense to be a realistic shower, he didn’t show it.

*I do have to keep up appearances, Master Chuuya*, he had told him, more than an hour ago. Chuuya regretted never having a talk about certain human behaviors with him.

Water drops from his own shower dribbled from the tips of his drenched hair, landing on the cracked skin. His inbox was mostly empty, apart from unresponded invitations from the *Guerrilla* members he usually went to drink with — and a very peculiar text from Kajii, reading only, *sorry about the lemon tree*.

Dazai’s messages box stared back at him.

“I wanted to thank you, sir,” Hikai started — only a *bit* sheepishly. “On behalf of the squad. And we ask your forgiveness, if we didn’t, *ah* — keep calm, exactly, during your intervention.”

He snorted. “*S* fine. Probably weren’t quite expecting the floating shitshow.”

“It was clever.”

“It worked,” He shrugged. “That’s all.”

The man’s smile turned tight — but not unkindly. It was hard to figure out how old he might have been; between wrinkles and *something* ancient in his eyes, he could have been Hirotsu’s age or Kajii’s, and yet passed as neither. “You truly are just as the stories describe you.”

Chuuya raised his eyebrows. “And how do the stories describe me?”

Shaking his head, Hikai offered a gentler expression. “No matter. ‘You kept the gemstone?’”

Instinctively, he pressed on the bulge in his borrowed pants’ pocket — old Sheep lessons, that never failed to remind him just how *easy* it was to have something stolen from his pockets. Vaguely, he wondered how the work in Suribachi was proceeding. He’d have to visit soon. “I’m not about to refuse an offer of gratitude,” Chuuya said. “It was unnecessary, but I’m not stupid.”

“No, not at all,” the man agreed.

He squinted. From behind the bathroom door, Adam offered his best impression of some very out of tune singing under the shower. “But I’m still not entirely sure the mission is the only reason why you gave it to me.”

Hikai sighed. “I just — I wanted to thank you *personally*, too. It’s just one gem among many. The accounting books won’t be maimed in any way.”

Tilting his head, he waited.

“Hamamoto was my cousin.”

Untouched for too long, the message inbox faded into a black screen. It was only the spasm of Chuuya’s thumb — horribly startled and cursed to a permanent shake — that lit it up again.

Dazai’s name stared at him from the top of the screen. It felt mocking. It felt like nothing at all.

“Oh,” Chuuya said.

“Voices travel fast,” Hikai hurried to say, as he cleared his voice, perhaps taking his silence as an accusation. Chuuya found no words to tell him he was only half wrong. “It’s — it was confusing. At first it was news about a death during a mission, and then it turned into accusations of betrayal and attempted *coup d’etat* — and then we received news that someone had insisted for Hamamoto not to be buried, according to our costumes. For him to die as — not as a traitor,” Something wet stuck to the last sounds out of Hikai’s mouth; he cleared his throat again, standing straighter. Bowed. “I just wanted to thank you, sir. For doing that for him.”

He looked at him in silence.

“You shouldn’t,” Chuuya said. His lips felt anesthetized. He was numb and so, so used to it all. “I’m the one who executed him.”

If Hikai flinched, he didn’t see it.

“Then I thank you even more,” he swore, still bowing. He wanted to walk over to him and *rattle* him — wanted to wipe the awe out of his tone and his eyes. *That User’s flares were beautiful too*, he imagined himself insisting, *and they hurt some of your men anyway, didn’t they?* “You killed him, and yet you cared enough to go against the rules for him anyway. Hamamoto has always been a good kid. I’m — I’m glad someone saw it, despite his mistakes. A gemstone is nothing, compared to that. Only something a good man deserves.”

Dazai’s message inbox blinked. Only for a moment, he thought he saw him type.

It was gone in a beat. Chuuya flexed his hands, studying the wrinkled fabric of the gloves — recalled the unmistakable, *sticky* sensation of blood. Recalled Hamamoto’s eyes — the smell of gasoline. *‘You really going to make me do this?’*, he had asked, feeling so angry it had turned into the hunched spine of exhaustion.

*I’m not going to make you do anything*, his subordinate had sworn. *You’re always the only one who does it.*

“Thank you, then,” Chuuya concluded. It mixed with the vomit in his throat. He gulped it down, like blood and best intentions, and that was it. “I’ll make sure one of those gets it.”

Hikai laughed, like it was a joke.

He didn't notice him leaving the room. He hardly paid attention to Adam's review of the — as he called it — *human showering experience*, and all about it he had every intention of letting Eve know for her studies. Chuuya offered him a grin when the man ruffled his hair, very surgically, like all the instructions he'd received had fallen flat; watched him sit on his bed and fall in that strange state of absence he usually entered upon rebooting.

*Don't call it that*, Adam had once replied, as offended as an android could possibly be. *That's not accurate at all*.

"You should sleep," the android called — in that echoey tone he got during the process. "We have to be back in Paris by tomorrow, if you want to take the rest of *Les Fleurs* out."

Dazai's contact stared back at him. Chuuya let his thumb hover over the *calling* option. Let it fall, watching the screen turn off on its own — the same funerary finality of a lost race.

*It'd go back to normal*, Chuuya recalled. All he had to do was return home.

"Yeah," He jumped off the table — pressed his feet on the ground, reminding himself of what gravity he hadn't stolen felt like. "Good night."

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No other news about Yokohama reached him, for the rest of the week he spent in France — no letters from Verlaine; no hacked encrypted lines and no secret messages through those sycaries that Hirotsu seemed to have hidden in every corner of the globe. The sole mention of the name *Mimic* caused most French criminals to wince — Chuuya thought about asking Adam, and then thought better of it. Despite it all, it was better to keep the Mafia's aims as hidden as possible.

"It's fine," He waved Adam off, when the man attempted to ask after his jittery pensiveness. "They can handle this. I'll know soon enough."

The android did nothing but nod. Both his forefingers twitched, though. Chuuya — cursed with observancy and the same spasms, whether manmade or not — pretended not to know they existed to point Chuuya out as a liar.

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“Take care,” Hikai told him, on his last day. He tapped his pocket, pressing oddly into his space — only to make sure the gem was still there. “And throw a flower or two in the Bay for me, would you?”

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Chuuya came home to an empty airport.

It didn’t bother him as much as it might have in any other season. He made his way through the bustling midnight crowd with lidded eyelids and a renowned interest for its people — one that always seemed to return after even a single day outside of Yokohama. The city never changed at all — not when Chuuya’s eyes got burned and not when his skin got torn open; not when Shirase called him a traitor and not when the last of the Flags’ ashes touched the Bay.

“Welcome,” one of the guards near the entrance greeted, opening the glass doors for him. Chuuya was half confused by it, until the man handed him a flier. “Enjoy your stay, sir.”

*Celebrate a brand new December, this year!*, the tourist trap brochure informed him, in bold golden letters. He snorted, studying the cartoonish rendition of Yokohama’s tourist attractions, as he stepped over the rows of parked cars. It was far too early for the holidays — but Chuuya could already imagine snow-lined streets and lights, and the funnily confused face Hirotsu would make upon receiving a gift. *Come to Yokohama!*

His phone rang.

“Yes, yes,” Chuuya huffed, crumpling up the flier to throw it in the nearest garbage can. His car was at the edge of the nearest parking line; he scrolled down the missed calls from his flight, and pressed *ANSWER*.

“I told you I’d call you as soon as I landed,” he insisted, before Kouyou could utter a word. “In case you forgot, that usually means waiting for me to land. And what’s with all the

emails, anyway? ‘S been a while since they hounded me like that. I can’t have missed another financial fraud case —“

“*Chuuya*,” the woman said. “*Listen*.”

Her tone was unfathomable. He frowned, skipping over the last of a row of motorcycles, kicking one foot on the nearest wheel of his car — an old ritual Albatross had taught him, to check on possible malfunctions from lack of use.

*Really*, the man had insisted, *most things tend to act up unexpectedly, when they’re left alone for too long*.

“Oi,” Chuuya pulled the driver door open. “Is everything —“

The world turned golden.

It was sudden enough not to make a sound — nothing but the screeching, never ending shriek of mechanical white noises, trailing down his ears along to the warm blood of a head wound. The concrete of the airport’s parking lot pressed against his skull, blurring his vision a tad more with every blink he dared to take — unable to move his lips enough to curse, he squinted at the glass of the real world, attempting to focus on the pillar of flames arising from his car.

*A bomb*, his slowed-down brain realized, belatedly. Distant steps and faraway screams — airport guards and concerned travelers, all of it just as muffled as the goosebumps on his skin.

“—*uuya*?” Kouyou’s voice called, from the shattered phone a stone-throw from him. There was a palpable, *hysterical* concern in her voice that Chuuya couldn’t understand. *What’s she so scared about?*

Something too close to his face was too *hot*; Chuuya batted it away from his cheek, until he realized it was a piece of his own hair — he clasped it between two hands, inhaling the leftover smoke.

He crawled on all fours, blinking — eyes stuck on the dangling chain of his hat.

“*Chuuya — are you —*“

Attempting to stand did nothing. Chuuya fell back on his ass, barely held by his palms — he stared at his burning car, its flares curling like claws and its metal parts circling him like dying sharks.

Through the burning skeleton of the vehicle, a piece of black fabric fluttered along to the November wind; turning into ash as quickly as the screaming guards attempted to get to him. Concussed or not — targeted or almost; attempting to fuse Kouyou’s voice and her intentions into something *sensible* — he realized that he could have never failed to recognize it.

Chuuya tried to stand. He fell, again. He stayed down.

A few steps from him, warped by flames and melting metal, his car got reduced to ashes, and Dazai Osamu's coat burned with it.

## Chapter End Notes

chuuya: verlaine i dislike you vividly but you need to leave this basement before the cockroaches mistake you for food

verlaine: arthur used to call me verlaine

chuuya: cause that's your fucking name

hello there!! the homoeroticism was heavy in this one huh? difficult scene to write, but again, one of the first ones i ever planned for this fic. i hope you guys liked the chapter as a whole — there was definitely a lot to juggle, and that final scene... you guys don't know how much blood sweat and tears i wasted on that. god. i hope it was good enough!!!

and verlaine!! oh my god verlaine!! this isn't the last we see of him, but i hope what we got was good enough for (what i feel was) a long wait for his appearance!!

and one of my favorite fun facts from canon — how come the fact that the executives had a meeting to decide what to do about mimic, before oda died, isn't discussed more in fandom/fanfics? i really like the idea (and what it could mean when we consider chuuya canonically wasn't around during dark era, whether or not dazai would view his missing vote/agreeing vote as a "betrayal" of sorts). hope you guys liked my twist on it!

next chapter will be the last chapter, which is kinda the most insane sentence i've ever typed down here. i'm saving up my soliloquies for the last comment, but let me say this now — if you're still reading this 700k words in, and if you still like it, i owe you my life and more. this has genuinely been such a big part of my life for years, i'm happy for whatever bit of love you've been showing to it <33

as always, thank you for reading <3 i hope you have a wonderful day, week, night, and everything, and i'll see you soon!!

<333

**than a dog.**

## Chapter Notes

and for the last time... see you at the end ;)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

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### *chapter xxxvi.*

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one day you will look at me,  
laughing because my face is too pale,  
blown by the november wind,  
like fig leaves or something,  
like an abandoned dog.

truly that's how it seems to be:  
i may be more wretched than a dog, perhaps;  
i myself occasionally thought that way,  
i myself might have sorrowed.  
in spite of all that you will again remember,  
in the time when I am not, on the day when i am no longer on this earth,  
that man, that time, at that point on that road, pale-faced, like fig leaves, blown by the wind  
— it was a cold afternoon —

disconsolate, abandoned like a dog.

[cloudy autumn, 1. nakahara chuuya]

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**Port Mafia Encrypted Line.**

*Recording — 10.355.78.9*

**To:** *All.*

*[...] as far as it must concern, Dazai Osamu has been declared a traitor. Non-  
overridable orders are to capture him upon sight. He may be maimed in the effort, but  
not killed. He is to be brought to the Boss' presence as soon as possible — once found,  
his death will be executed under the solemn traditions of our honorable syndicate.  
Should any members of the syndicate fail to capture him after a direct encounter, they  
will be punished. Any and all members suspected of collaborating or aiding his escape  
will be executed in his stead. We [...]*

**Recording [...] [...?]**

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“Dazai’s always been good at cutting loose.”

At some point during its way to Chuuya’s penthouse, a bird had perched on top of Hirotsu’s Camaro, and left a stain on the passenger window. It cut the Yokohama roads behind it, unmistakably fake — abruptly pulling him out of any illusion to be looking at the world as it was. *There is no point in comparing*, one of Verlaine’s letters had read. He had a tendency to write like he held no doubts that Chuuya would not be reading. Proving him right felt both aggravating and necessary. He never did. *It isn’t real and it isn’t fake. It is merely a mistake.*

Chuuya browsed through the dossier in his lap. He didn’t offer a rebuttal — not until Hirotsu’s lips parted again: “We both know no one in the Mafia can find him.”

“You want to be the one to tell Boss that?” he asked, distractedly, eyes on the ink. He glanced up at the swarm of *Tainted*-glowing papers, floating all around him. “What the *fuck*,” he added, teeth gritted, “Is a *Surveillance Task C77OK*?”

Hirotsu winced. “Top secret.”

“What fucking secret,” he muttered. “Who the fuck made *him* the only secret keeper.”

The man couldn’t argue.

Paperwork had been miserably endless for the past year, since the Mafia had taken over most of the city’s affairs — he would have marveled at how much *worse* it had managed to get in a mere two days, had his own irritation hammered his temples less whenever he focused on it.

“Do you think he used the tunnels?”

*No*, Chuuya almost answered, instinctively. There was no easy way to call the Demon Prodigy a coward — but he knew. And he knew what the man wouldn’t say out loud — *do you think he built them for this?*

*No*, he insisted. *He was either going to leave on a sudden thought or never at all.*

All the careful talks had gotten to his nerves far too soon. “Maybe,” he offered, absently.

Some cars honked, uselessly. The lack of any muttering radio was awfully evident — but neither of them made any move to turn it on. The afternoon had painted the sky in soft gray tinges, mixing with unreflecting skyscrapers and colorless umbrellas. A comforting scent in its own way — acid and metallic, perfectly bundled through the *tip tap* of raindrops on every available surface; insistent enough to assure a long lasting storm.

*Tip tap*, it insisted. *Tip tap*. He watched a raindrop fall from the top of his window.

The weather had been the only reason why Chuuya had accepted Hirotsu’s car lift — *Tainted* worked just fine under the rain, but the hustle was hardly worth it.

In any case, he had to get a new car.

Like clockwork, Hirotsu glanced at the rear view mirror. “Is the wheel —“

“Fine,” Chuuya interrupted.

“It got perforated. Multiple times.”

“Perhaps, if you hadn’t driven us through a shootout —“ He set his jaw. He couldn’t see the man through the storm of papers; he could feel the chastization in the silence, though. “Sorry. I just don’t get how they managed to track us.”

The quiet lasted some movements of the window wipers more — creaking and old; rubber against undeterred raindrops. “The anti-tracking systems are attached to our cars’ GPS,” the man let him know, eventually. “But Dazai was the one to code them. The Intelligence is still figuring out how to access them again. Until then —“

He clenched the dossier so tight, it ripped at the corners.

*Typical*, the back of his skull tutted. When Chuuya got distracted by the sea of paperwork, it almost sounded like Verlaine. It pulsed like a head wound. *Typical, still* — it was all inevitable and it was all Dazai’s fault.

Hirotsu glanced his way, searching through two particularly crowded pages of information. In the slot, he looked painfully blank; he watched him rub his temples. “Hangover?” he asked, slowly.

Chuuya grunted.

“I picked you up at the Arcade.”

It wasn’t a question, but the confusion was more than clear. “The Arcade was shut down,” Chuuya informed him, pulling his legs closer, before the dossier in his lap could fall. “I was at Beatrice’s old place.”

The Commander’s eyebrows brushed his receding hairline.

“*Nine Rings*’ Beatrice?” he echoed.

“That one.”

A beat. “Why?”

He stretched in the minimal space, trying to figure out if the lines of numbers in front of him were meant to be more than an attempt to look clever. *I plant tricks so I don’t lull myself from boredom*, he remembered Dazai saying — and then he stopped remembering, promptly. “She’s got a literal wall of unopened *Petrus* bottles. Let me tell you — that stuff’s worth the eye of the head. Had myself a nice old celebration, since the entire organization has decided to pointlessly mourn our freedom.”

Hirotsu was silent for a long time.

“If you wanted to join you could have just answered my calls,” Chuuya huffed, distantly, eyes still on the ink. “Kajii was going to come, but then his car got tracked halfway to —“

“Chuuya,” the man said, very gently.

He paused.

The windshield wipers fell mechanically. It was an awful screech — rendered a bit *screechier* by the play-doh that had been stuck to the sticks months ago. He vaguely had the time to think, *and the old man didn't take them off, yet?*, before stony refusal settled on his shoulders.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” he ordered, very casually.

Hirotsu shut his mouth.

“This will be more than convenient for us,” Chuuya insisted, even as his brain demanded him to halt. “Can you imagine the stress-free work environment we’re about to experience? Can you imagine the *peace*? No more dead fish in the vents and no more fake coordinates to missions. If we’re lucky, the abnormal amount of viruses that motherfucker’s left in our systems will be wiped out by the end of the year. I am *nauseous* with glee — and you fools are wasting time being all moody and shit. Seriously —“

Abruptly, he got the feeling that Kouyou would have been rather disapproving of that outburst.

“Seriously,” he concluded.

*You say more with what you don't say*, she would have crooned, *and if you don't say anything at all, you've said everything*. And Chuuya would have scoffed — so she’d have tapped his chin and said, *Chuuya*.

The Commander was still quiet.

With a static-lined hum, the *in-ear* the man had abandoned on the dashboard came to life. It rumbled a bit, muttering intelligible words over the buzz of the heating system; then, the familiarly vacant tone of the syndicate-spread announcement recited, for the hundredth time: “— *a traitor. Non-overridable orders are to capture him upon sight. He may be maimed in the effort, but not —*“

Chuuya studied the rain-lined windshield, munching on disintegrating teeth. *All is inevitable and all*, he reminded himself, *is his fault*. Kouyou tutted, nails piercing his under-skin — *quiet, dear*.

He shut the dossier, louder than a gunshot and only somewhat less bloodied. Abandoned it on the dashboard. “Good riddance.”

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Surprisingly, Hirotsu left him by the doors of the meeting room, and didn't step in.

"Top secret," he echoed, with a small smile that had nothing humorous in it. Funerary silence slipped underneath the doors, curling around the puffs of cold air from their mouths. Every inch of the Headquarters was quiet. Tanaki's desk was still unoccupied. "Enough voices are being spread around. Last thing Boss needs is to worry about too many bodies in the room that's supposed to fix this mess."

Chuuya pulsed with *something*. It wasn't quite aggravation — it was too sharp to be anger. "This isn't *a mess*," he said — and if he focused very, very hard, it didn't even sound like begging. "This is a long term prank, and you all need to stop treating it as a mastermind's *coup d'etat*."

A beat. "You think he's coming back?"

"I think he has no interest in bringing us down with him," he scoffed. The apocalypse — if the whispers from non-existent bunkers and shaky foundations were to be trusted, and that *was* the end of the world — had been nothing but terribly slow. "Not now, at least."

The Commander didn't speak for a bit. "How do we know he's *down*?"

*I believe he and I understood each other more than you ever wished to attempt to understand me*, Verlaine's latest letter had mused. It had been the only announcement Chuuya had received that even the Secret Executive knew of the Mafia's latest scandal. *You and I are innately the same. I think that partner of yours might just be built wrong.*

The doors parted with creaking woods and a familiar hiss — Chuuya gripped the doorknob. "No other place he can go from here."

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Chuuya was made Executive on a Thursday morning, with Dazai's river-soaked corpse on the table — like the first order of business of the day.

"Ah, Chuuya," Mori called, from the head of the table — polite smile and eyes so distracted it was a wonder they were still in his skull. He raised a hand right as he bowed, and paused him before he could pull Dazai's empty chair from his right. Chuuya's newly carved tattoo burned with sweat and something like disappointed expectations. "Not that one, if you could."

A strange tension seeped through.

"For when he comes back," the man added, belatedly. "Of course."

Strident like a broken chord, the sudden *thought* of that possibility almost had him fracture the seat between his fingers. "I'm not sure that will happen, Boss."

"Not now, no," Eerie to the bone, his lips stayed curled. Mori was far too meticulous to be insane. *But he's a doctor*, Shirase had protested, once, during one of their now weekly calls. "Certainly not."

"Of course," Ace concurred.

"Obviously," Kouyou echoed.

He waited. The man didn't even falter.

Kouyou's eyes were stuck to the body at the center of the wooden table. Her fingers twitched — like the idea of poking it couldn't settle between *funny* and *useless*. Next to her, Ace studied the red lights on the ceiling, stiffened and clawed. Mori did nothing but smile.

His grip on the backrest loosened. "Boss," he conceded, settling in the chair next to it — the one that technically belonged to his brother.

"Well," Intertwining his hands under his chin, Mori offered, pleasurably, in the aftermath of that relentless silence: "While congratulations are in order, I hope you will allow me to move them to a more suitable time. We should get started."

The crimson neons whirred and hummed. Chuuya studied the dossiers in front of him until his eyes grew tired of that throbbing nothingness — he raised them, and met Dazai's dead face.

"A fake," Mori said, after a bit. There was a jitteriness to him that reminded him of Elise, oddly — the heartbrokenness of a beloved broken toy and a stained dress. "Obviously."

It was an awfully well done rendition — it wasn't clear if the doctor was impressed or just a bit offended by it. Somebody had ripped out most of the body's clothes; leaving him in a drenched dress shirt and pants curling across bluish, swollen knees. Chuuya studied the crumbling fabric like it might allow him to stall — then remembered there was nothing to escape from, and poked the fake Dazai's cheek with one gloved finger. The motion settled his head a bit straighter. Mori flinched as if shot.

The wet skin was smooth and bloated, like most drowned bodies Chuuya had ever dealt with; the undone curtain of hair stuck to his forehead was braided with dried blood from a slimy cut by his temple. All of him was turning sickly white — disintegrating near the limbs.

“I do hope you aren’t suggesting trying to sell a corpse off to our men,” Kouyou said, at last.

“That wouldn’t be wise,” Mori replied. “It brings us no honor — shows no repercussions for betrayal. No, they found this near the port.”

Dazai’s corpse didn’t speak.

Foot tapping the ground impatiently, Chuuya let out, brusque: “So the underground knows.”

“And they’re trying to claim his death,” Ace scoffed, eyeing the flaccid hand by his dossiers with unbridled distaste. “Moles, again? I thought we’d be done with that after Tanaki’s fire show.”

Over the bridge of the wrinkled, decaying skin of that fake Dazai’s face, Kouyou met his eyes. She shook her head, jaw clenched.

“I hardly think it’s a matter of spies,” Mori sighed, pulling out a dossier from under the body’s back. It squelched so loudly the room seemed to hush with it — water stains on the red cover of the file didn’t seem to bother the man, who opened it just to situate it where Dazai’s vitreous eyes would not look at him. Whoever had worked on him had removed most of the bandages; Chuuya’s nails fell by the unwinded loops on his wrist, and *ached*. “It is too precise of a work, given the suddenness. No syndicate we’ve quarreled with could manage it. Luckily, I think we know of someone who could.”

A chest wide picture was thrown onto the corpse’s chest, where all the Executives could lean forward to study it. It was unnecessary — the first glance had Chuuya dig hands into his chair to keep *Tainted* where it was.

“Sakaguchi,” he concluded, staring down at the absent look behind the man’s glasses.

“Think the *Special Division* is trying to get us?”

“Either that, or Dazai asked them to.”

Chuuya stared.

“It’s not improbable,” Kouyou reminded him — lips curling up in what would have been a smile, if less antagonistic. “A Mafioso who runs is no Mafioso — it wouldn’t surprise me, if he had no loyalty to keep him from hiding between our enemies’ gowns. And Lord knows he could give them all the information they want.”

At that, the silence took a menacing tilt.

It wasn’t as if Chuuya hadn’t *known* — it had been among the first thoughts hammering his skull, as he crawled his way out of the gasoline and the metal parts. All was inevitable and Dazai knew all; there wasn’t a corner of the Port Mafia his sole eye hadn’t scrutinized and memorized.

“We’re dead, if he wants us buried,” Mori said, very factually. He didn’t appear concerned.

“Mafiosi don’t get graves,” Chuuya replied, distractedly. “If he wanted us dead, we’d be dead.”

The man studied him.

“Chuuya, I hate to ask,” he dared, after that quiet examination. Twirling her umbrella between two lithe fingers, Kouyou stilled, only tapping two unsatisfied nails on the wooden handle. Ace wasn’t subtle enough to hide his interest — he uncrossed his arms and pulled the shoelaces of the fake body. One of the moles on its left hand wasn’t quite high enough for where it should have been. Chuuya felt it made no sense to remember. “You wouldn’t have an idea of where he might have gone, would you?”

It took him a moment to understand.

Astonishment almost shot him out of his chair. “Why the *fuck* would I know —“

“I’m not accusing you,” Boss cut him off immediately. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Unclenching his tense shoulders took a tad too long — Chuuya felt every tendon and every vein unfurl like a ripped piece of paper, defensive and unsuitably prepared for a reaction none of the Executives would be particularly charmed by.

*You are at the top already*, that seething *thing* inside him reminded him. *You got the seat. You’ll get all of it.* What need was there for respect?

On the wooden handle, Kouyou’s nails left half-moons of deep-thought.

“I don’t,” Chuuya clipped out, unlocking his jaw. It throbbed with a phantom pain — he hated the childishness of it. *Say you’re sorry or I won’t talk to you again.* “I could give you a list of the hideouts we used, but I doubt he’ll be enough of a moron to use any of them. I’m assuming he’ll lay low for a bit, if he has no intention of exposing us. He might get help with that from the *Division*, in exchange with information on how to play around our lack of a *Permit* —“

“Oh,” Mori interrupted, again. “Oh, that is not a problem anymore.”

Chuuya’s lips parted. The ringing bleeding down the shell of only one of his ears sounded like an alarm. “What?”

“We managed to reach a deal. It’s a recent matter, but definitely trustable. Leaving Sakaguchi unpunished — against our laws — is our act of good faith,” None of the easy-fallen words out of his mouth reeked of the stupefied speechlessness petrifying Chuuya’s limbs; even Kouyou didn’t appear touched. It all felt horribly anticlimactic — a nuclear-peaceful ending for a wordless war that had existed since he had joined the organization. *A deal.* “I don’t mean to press, but — you have to understand that any information could be relevant. Are you *sure* Dazai didn’t tell you anything?”

A headache rubbed his forehead — scratches on a blackboard. “That bastard doesn’t tell me *things*,” Chuuya reminded the table, scoffing. “He doesn’t tell me things when they’re relevant — you think he’d tell me this?”

Mori’s eyes ranked over him.

“I think Dazai must have been in a rather — precarious state,” he spelled out, eventually — as if every word might mean something slightly different, if he wasted a too long lasting breath on it. “To do something so foolish.” Something about that description sat a tad weirdly. It rolled down the table, all the way to the corpse that wasn’t Dazai but *was* — curled in a shivering purpose near the scar on his temple, as if to show how bloodied it looked next to dead flesh. “I think something might have slipped out. I wouldn’t be surprised if *you* had been the one to catch it.”

Under his breath, carelessly stupid, Ace muttered: “Wouldn’t be surprised if he’d told you he’d leave, too.”

He didn’t feel his stiffened limbs until they started to scratch the ground with the seat legs. He turned to look at Kouyou, expecting her lightning struck eyes to be turned on him — all he found was her low gaze, nauseatingly guilty, settled on one of the corpse’s tumid hands.

*Things do not change until they’ve changed*, Tanaki had said, once. Eyes distant. Try as he might, Chuuya couldn’t recall their last conversation.

“I don’t know,” he managed to bit out. “He didn’t tell me shit.”

Harder than steel, Mori ordered: “Are you sure?”

*“I don’t know,”* Chuuya insisted, final. He didn’t realize how loud it was until it drowned out the buzz of the lights. “He didn’t tell me.”

It landed flatly.

The soundless haze that followed only had Kouyou sink deeper in her chair, guilt forced out of her traits with a cleared throat. Ace’s eyes stayed on the corpse, as frustrated as the rhythmic taps of his fingers. Astonishingly — stunningly enough to let the ire trail down his skin, abandoning it in one cold shower of *something* — Mori’s face was struck with a grief so deep it was material.

“Well, then,” the man said, again, a bit lost. “We should get started, then.”

Sakaguchi’s picture stayed put on the chest of that flesh puppet — the water drowned it in less clear colors, sticking it to the scarred skin. Chuuya felt the Archivist’s eyes on him through the mind numbing procedures — the *hows* and the *nevers*; and the plans to make sure the voice wouldn’t be spread where the mafiosi could gather their own conclusions; and the devastating realization of the web-like hold of Dazai’s absent fingers over every Mafia matter.



“The financial assets will need to be taken back soon,” Mori commented, with a sigh. “Dazai is certainly not stupid enough to use *that* money, but we can’t risk him holding the data.”

“Certainly,” Ace said.

“Can’t risk it,” Kouyou chirped.

*He should have never received them in the first place*, Chuuya thought, privately. It seemed an unexplainable act of faith from one of the smartest men he knew — a blindness he couldn’t explain, if not from the eyes Mori had set on that fake corpse, and refused to lay on any less morbid sight.

“Can’t risk it at all,” he concluded.

Awkward pauses filled the bundle of oddly placed soliloquies — glances thrown to the empty seat, waiting for a phantom correction. Chuuya scratched the skin of his arms to blood.

His nails started throbbing. Mori declared the meeting adjourned.

“Be mindful,” the doctor added, distracted. He had yet to take his eyes off the corpse. “Now more than ever.”

Something conflicted raced between the scarlet specks in Kouyou’s eyes, keeping her from leaving her chair and escaping as fast as a muttering Ace was doing. Chuuya had a half feeling some of the voices had been spread by the man himself — before he could dare murmur accusations, though, his gaze got caught on the tense outline of Mori’s shoulders, tapping his fingers mere inches from where that plastic Dazai’s shoulders rested.

A mute request colored Kouyou’s face, as she morphed her traits into venomous latitude — a welcoming porch to a wandering fool. Chuuya pictured hers and Mori’s frames — two familiar shocks of color and the absence of it, as old as any sight in the Mafia.

He shook his head.

Just a tad too slow to hide her surprise, she mouthed, *good luck* — a tad too slow to hide her approval — and left the room with a bow.

“Ah, Chuuya,” Mori greeted, blinking up at him, a good eternity later. He made for a strange sight — for a selfish, shivering moment, Chuuya wished Elise was there, to take the impact of that immaterial, ricocheting hum. The vibration of a loose bullet. Mori was never unstable. “I beg your forgiveness. This old man was taken aback, at last.”

“You’re not old,” he protested. “Sir.”

“I’m sure you were hoping for a better first day as Executive. Unfortunately, the circumstances demand some rapidness in decisions,” Gloved fingers knocked the wood. “Do rest peacefully — that seat had your name on it long before shortage of numbers came up.”

“I know, sir,” he assured. It took only some ounces of might not to look at the empty chair — haunted far more than the lifeless eyes on the decaying corpse between them.

*Chuuya wasn't taking up an empty seat*, he considered. But it didn't quite remove the fact that Dazai's own would never be filled again — that it had taken Mori two days to hang an *unavailable* sign on the velvet cushions, unavoidable and harsh, when Chuuya had stolen years to be worth even just the golden carvings.

The thought had his nails sink in his palms.

"I did have a surprise planned for you," the man continued, sighing, genuinely distraught. "A *congratulations* party of sorts."

He winced. "That won't be necessary."

"No? I found your parents."

Chuuya's mouth fell shut.

That, at last, managed to forcibly haul an amusement of sorts over Mori's lips. "It wasn't all that easy, mind you," he continued, either unaware of the hammering heart in his chest or far too high on it — like Dazai's corpse wasn't between them, and like it didn't make sense that it was. "We have files on them, on the son they lost. Be it you, be it who you were — *inspired* by let's say. We even have their location," The doctor stood — stunned as he was, it was easy enough to ignore the way Mori's legs twitched, keeping him from stepping too far from the corpse. "A beautiful village, if I may."

He felt, rather suddenly, that throwing up in the meeting room wouldn't have been ideal.

"Your father's an army doctor," Mori's grin turned humorous — almost sincere with it. "Isn't that quite the coincidence? I must say, though — Chuuya, you look a lot like your mother."

Oddly physical, oddly squelching; and then cracked like a rock against another, a sound so loud it reverberated across his ribcage. Chuuya felt, in a stupidly non-euphemistic way — deeper than the deeper roads of Suribachi City, and bloodier than the skin under his nails as he *crawled* out; and only an inch, only *moments* more painful than waking up alone and never quite stopping being so — his heart shatter right in the middle.

Something too unreal to be grief struck him like lighting. Losing the never owned, maybe — watching it dance behind a glass, hands far too bloodied to try to punch his way through.

Mori's eyes zeroed on his fists, heavy and always, *always* there. Chuuya felt more of a corpse than the putrid thing on the table.

There was a twirling maze of words under the roof of his mouth — something bitter and too sweet and horrifying; something that had him feel like the seat was too wide for his bones, and he far too small for them. "They —" Chuuya cleared his throat. "You didn't tell them, did you?"

Mori studied him. "No," he admitted. "No one apart from me and the researchers knows, and we didn't believe it would be wise, without your approval. And Dazai," Like a belated thought, the man poked the body's arm. "He knew. Obviously."

*Obviously*, Chuuya echoed.

The shock was a pillow landing to ire that couldn't go anywhere at all. He climbed out of his chair just to let his jittery legs feel like a fight *might* arrive — clenched his jaw around the sight of the expressionless puppet soaking the wooden table.

*An Ability*, he considered, just to breathe in, *it had to be*. Dazai wasn't there to nullify it. The corpse rotted away.

For a moment, watching Mori trail it with unavoidable eyes, he thought he saw something akin to anger. He was quick to wipe it away — then he offered Chuuya the closest thing to a smile he could muster up. “You're free to go pay them a visit, of course. I'm truly glad I managed to give you *this*, Chuuya,” He dimmed. “At least.”

The apology in his tone made no sense. He couldn't quite focus on it, either — everything was echoing off walls Chuuya couldn't see; *you could pay them a visit and he knew, too and a beautiful, beautiful village*.

“At least?” he repeated.

Mori's pupils thinned into a suggestion of something — either kindness or warning. The way he lingered by the table resembled a ghost; when he laid his forefinger in the middle of that fake Dazai's open palm, though, he only looked sad.

“I'm sorry,” the doctor offered. The words buzzed as if incorrect — stubbornly *there*. “You have lost something too.”

His eyebrows brushed his hairline. “I feel like this is more of a gain.”

The doctor's insistent gaze said he wasn't quite convinced. He tapped the corpse's palm with only the tip of his finger — watched Chuuya trace that movement, and concluded: “Actually, I meant Arahabaki.”

The world wasn't made of interpretations — only of absolutes. Scratches and whispers; and all the things Chuuya was sane enough to know he had made up, in fits of loneliness from the rubbles of Suribachi City. Arahabaki held no care and Arahabaki held nothing at all — except all of him, in a fist Chuuya still fought his way through with the stubbornness of a Sisyphus scared of heights. His blood had no sound; his blood made no sound when faced with a locked room, the key's marred copy festering in front of itself.

The stomach dropping emptiness, Chuuya thought, *the starvation* — that was all him.

“Oh,” he heard himself say. “Right.”

“It's truly a shame,” Mori continued, as if blind to the way Chuuya had quietened. Perhaps he didn't believe it to be all that uncharacteristic. Perhaps he was the only one. “More than anything, I ask you to be cautious. The enemy has already been alerted of enough of our failings — we don't need them to know one of our strongest weapons has been secluded from our inventory.”

Chuuya didn't know if he expected him to complain. Perhaps, if it had been a few years ago — that summer he'd spent scratching his arms to raw skin in an effort to let out what only Dazai could put back in — he would have.

"I'm sorry," he offered, instead.

"*Corruption* is a weapon," Mori replied. "As it all is. You included. We'll make do. You certainly aren't something I'd ever call *settling for*, Chuuya."

It shouldn't have been as comforting as it felt, perhaps — not from a man obsessively tracing the life path of a fake corpse. It felt better than the scritch-shrieks in the back of his skull — claws on cell bars; an enclosed storm rattling a cage, like the haunted house of some forgotten remorse.

*More*, Arahaki swore. *Nevermore*.

"Thank you," Chuuya cleared his throat, a tad awkwardly, looking anywhere but where Mori was directing his amusement. "Thank you, sir — I'll do my best."

"You always do. You seldom seem to ask for anything back, though."

The idea was uncannily aimless. "Can I kill the bastard when we catch him?" Chuuya asked, in what he hoped was a lighter tone. The crude edge of it turned it a bit empty.

*When*, he thought. *When?*

"Oh," Mori said. "Sure."

He searched for hilarity in the wrinkles by his eyes. He found the end of an endless hallway, painted in shadows the same way one would assign water a color — he found nothing but vacancy.

*Are you mad?*, Chuuya almost asked, like a child.

Eventually, he landed on, again: "I'm sorry."

A curious gaze laid on him, blinking. The words were stuck between his teeth, half annoyed and half uncertain — it took staring at the *rigor mortis* of the corpse's fingers. "I'm sorry," he echoed. *To you*, he thought, tongue stuck. *I know to you he was* — "I know he —"

Inevitably, Chuuya trailed off.

Something sizzled inside Mori's pupils. Hit by the neon lights on the ceiling, they looked more crimson than black — familiarly stuck and strangely affected by it all. Inevitable, all of it; all of it, Dazai's fault. *I know what?*, Chuuya wondered. That the two of them were a locked door none of them could spy through the slot of — that Dazai sat the same way Mori did. That Mori was hungry; that Dazai had flesh to spare. That none of them had ever been allowed to question satiation.

“Oh,” Once again, the doctor looked more than inscrutable. But there was a glint in his eyes that set Chuuya’s alarms off — a gaze softened to the point of gauging the advantages of having let himself be touched. “Thank you, Chuuya.”

*Perhaps*, he thought, only once — only for a moment, before it was lost in the genuine light in the Boss’ eyes — *perhaps, he should have let Kouyou be his comfort*. Perhaps, he considered, Chuuya had damned himself on a Thursday morning.

But it was gone fast, and he was bowing his head faster.

“I suppose —“ A beat. Mori seemed lost; he cleared his throat, at last, a bit more scientifically confused than heartbroken. Pain in the way of a lost game. Grief in the way of high burying ground taxes. “Well,” Something else. Something visceral. “I suppose — I did mistakenly think he’d have to be here to kill me.”

It was such an odd conclusion to reach in the middle of that chaos, that Chuuya could only keep quiet.

Then: “He said he didn’t have a scar.”

Oddly reluctant, Mori looked up. “What?”

“He said he didn’t have a scar,” Chuuya insisted, brushing the spot under his ribs where he’d been impaled. The wound had itched for days, after the Hospital. After *The Alley*, all it did was pulse in tandem with his heartbeat. “Not like mine.”

“Don’t be silly,” the man replied, distractedly. “Of course he had a scar.”

Chuuya paused. “He said —“

“But it didn’t matter,” Mori recited. He got the feeling to be missing something. “So he didn’t.”

Sakaguchi Ango’s picture slipped from the body, at last, in spite of the wet stains fading the brown of his suit into the eye bags underneath his glasses. Chuuya watched it float to the ground — crumbling between carved seat legs, with widening holes and fading outlines. There was a corpse and there was a traitor — Chuuya didn’t feel as much locked in a crime scene as he felt trapped between the dust particles of a stranger’s chalk outline.

A pair of distant, glass-lined eyes flashed in the pale, reflective surface of Dazai’s sternum.

“Sir,” he asked, before he could juggle the pros of it, “Has Oda Sakunosuke been notified?”

Mori’s face did something terrifying.

It startled him badly enough to land his hands by the corpse’s arm, knuckles brushing the wet, sweat-matted skin — a retch getting stuck in his throat at the texture of it, immediately hauling him away from its reach. The mixture of *things* in the doctor’s face was a kaleidoscope of fragments too wide for his body — anger and confusion and bone-curling fear and *loneliness*, at the end of it.

*You were supposed to understand*, Verlaine had written, in one of his letters. Hysterically, he wondered if Mori had ever written Dazai a single line of ink, or if they'd never been far away enough for it. *You were meant to be like me. You weren't meant to care about anyone at all.*

And then curious — irately: *why do you?*

It was gone faster than his knuckles could stop tingling. Chuuya knew, utter and breathlessly, that he wasn't allowed to say that name ever again.

"I'm afraid it won't be necessary," Mori concluded, tonelessly. He removed his finger from the corpse's lifeline, at last, scratching its palm with haste and too long nails. Chuuya tried his very best to remember if he had ever seen them longer than a surgeon should have worn. Chuuya tried to recall if he'd ever seen him with no gloves. "Carrying our syndicate's endless thankfulness, of course — I'm afraid he's rather dead."

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Chuuya found his parents on a Sunday.

He died seventeen cobblestoned steps from their porch. That time around, if they ever had — he knew he would not be buried. He pretended to be watching them grieve over it, for a moment — sharing lunch and honey sweet smiles, with the wrinkles on their faces and the unreachability of a lifetime Chuuya had missed like an early train.

*Do you want it?*, he thought, with a hand on the phone Mori was questioning from. *Do you even know how to want it anymore?*

"The Mafia is my family," he told the Boss, memorizing the way his mother blew on hot food before putting it in her mouth. *Once, twice, thrice* — some elegant laugh as she got burned. *Perhaps*, he mused, *he would not have cried in that lifetime either.* Perhaps his parents would live until ninety and stay under that porch until then — and Chuuya would never bump into them in the streets of his city and have to say, *I don't know if I'm your son or your grave robber.*

Perhaps — cowardly relieved — he'd never have to apologize for either.

Chuuya died on a Sunday, one hand on a scar on his wrist that called him human — both belated and world changing — and let all his bones be reborn as soon as he entered the Highway.

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The burned strand of hair was right by his left ear, and it kept falling on his eye.

“— dealing with it, sir,” a sniper from the *Guerrilla* was saying, bent in a half as he bowed, his face impossible to be seen. His shadow turned wider the brighter the lightning behind the doors rumbled; when the next thunder echoed, it turned the subordinate into a line of darkness towering over Chuuya like a monster. “We’re not sure of — some of the equipment is malfunctioning. And it seems like the other syndicates might be staging attacks all in one go. It’s —” A pause. “It’s like they’re all trying to take advantage.”

Chuuya blew on the piece of hair.

It allowed him peace for a mere breath — it was back on his skin, tickling and weirdly cut, the moment his eyelids were done brushing.

“The cargoes are stuck at the port, still,” the subordinate continued. “We can’t access the data for the commercializing permit. Until then, even the guards on our side won’t let us pass. I’m afraid it might take — at least two weeks, sir. I’m sorry.”

When Chuuya didn’t speak, fingers tipping his crossed arms, the subordinate dared to uncurl his stiffened back — straightening from his bow.

“Sir,” he said, obediently. Too habitual — too used; one of the few support snipers Mori had ever forced on his prized, fine *Double Black* — his eyes darted to the empty space on Chuuya’s left.

Rain dripped from the canopy over the doors of *Building Two*. Occasionally, it got caught by the flash of lightning — when it did, it turned a blinding white, falling like pearls from a sky that was only mildly less unruly than the murmurs the syndicate was drowning in. *The voices live in the walls*, Lippman had used to say, spy-blooded as he was. *If you can hear them, it’s on you*.

“Eyes on me,” Chuuya ordered, before his teeth could munch the bile. The hair strand fell on his eye — again and again. Perks of car-explosions’ flares. They lingered.

The man flinched.

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The *Mimic* Headquarters stood haunted and abandoned inside a Western building, and the floor of the ballroom was stained in dried blood.

Crimson curtains with gold embroideries hid fogged up, shattered windows, but not well enough — rays of sunset painted blinding squares on the ground and the sheet-covered furniture, giving the quiet an eerie buzz of nothingness. His shoes stepped on glass shards, apologizing for the resounding *crack!* with gentler steps.

Chuuya called out: “Anyone?”

No answer came.

The blood stains were shaped just familiarly enough to unmistakably belong to fallen corpses — the furthest of them spread strangely, though; as the body had been held close enough by a pair of arms to bleed on them, rather than on the floor.

He walked until the tips of his shoes were brushing the outlines of that dried puddle. The sunrays kept breaking in. The blood stayed where it was. Dazai stayed gone, and that friend of his — his favorite, and the exceptional glint in his eye’s intransigence to a more human self-perception — stayed blood on the ground.

Hands in his pockets, Chuuya left.

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Over the next few nights, it began to appear more and more inevitable that the Port Mafia would meet its shameful, ghastly end.

Despite the exaggeration Chuuya had been sure to be subjecting Dazai’s role in the Mafia to — despite the hours spent shrugging Akutagawa, still thankfully in Tokyo for a mission, until



the words *Dazai* and *Port Mafia* did not sound the same as they rolled down his tongue — the days passed in barely composed, entirely too fragile hazes, framed by sporadic attacks and internal malfunctions.

“Oh, dear,” was Mori’s only comment. “How come everybody is so tense? You would think we’d lost a limb.”

Wisely, his Executives did not speak. It was somewhat amusing. Chuuya thought he had to tell Dazai about it.

Then he kept quiet for the rest of the meeting.

*Executive Dazai invented it*, the Archivists sighed, when the *Buildings’* alerting systems broke — and, *Executive Dazai has the passwords*, they insisted, when entire columns of their archives became inaccessible; and, *Executive Dazai was the only one with the full project*, they stuttered, once a squadron got lost in the underground tunnels he had had several different groups of workers build.

*Bastard’s not an Executive anymore*, was the most Chuuya could offer. Frustration would have brought them nowhere. *Don’t let Boss hear you refer to him as such.*

*(In Chuuya’s head, it was a fuck you of offensively premeditated taste. The mocking victory song of a boy falling from the tallest roof, laughing as he cracked his skull open against the concrete. Perhaps Dazai hadn’t planned to leave — he hardly thought it meant he’d never planned in case he ended up doing it.*

*“You think he didn’t know having his hands full would leave this shithole empty as soon as he cut them off?” he scoffed, pacing across Kajii’s office like he was to blame for in-syndicate inflation.*

*The man seemed conflicted. “I don’t know if he was gathering power. He always seemed a bit too lazy for it.”*

He didn’t have to gather shit, *Chuuya didn’t tell him. The skin under his collar had been itching since the embers from his car’s fire had brushed his eyelashes. He stuck his fingers under it and pressed.* Everybody was all too glad to let it in his hands.)

Life became a webbed, cracked glass — he couldn’t exhale. Late night emergencies, and then disorganized troops, and then the *taunts* — the low laughs of prisoners in the dungeons, haunting the building at every hour of the day. They were afraid of Kouyou — they were *drunk* with pain and hysteria about the prospect of Dazai not being there to join in on the fun anymore.

*How did they even find out?*, Chuuya only dared to mutter once, washing bloodied hands.

*Everybody knows*, the delirious prisoner had chuckled, kicking. Mori had framed the Ability Permit — a golden frame on his desk, overseeing the city along with his petrified smile. *Everybody knows you lost.*

“What the fuck are you wearing?”

Kouyou barely spared him a look, crouched in front of the mauled prisoner tied up under the flower-framed roof of her house gazebo. The pair of frayed, faded gym pants she was wearing bent with her, showing off *not-kimono-straight* outlines Chuuya had never even considered she might have. “Not now, Chuuya.”

He stared. “No, seriously.”

“Chuuya,” she *almost* snapped. There was no pleasurable expression on her traits — only the few strands of hair fallen from her ponytail. *Like she had ever worn a ponytail*, he thought, stunned. “If you could? I have enough paperwork to deal with, without having to add punishments to it.”

“I’m an Executive,” Chuuya grumbled, as he leaned against one of the columns. The man on the chair whined low and soft, wheezing around the throat *Golden Demon* had torn open. “You can’t ground me anymore.”

The *katana* in her fingers twirled between a thumb and a forefinger — she sliced lines across the man’s chest like a personal vendetta. He shrieked.

Blood splattered on her — the unbuttoned dress shirt Chuuya hadn’t even known she owned, and the cartoon-kittens patterned bra she was wearing underneath, which he respectfully only glanced at once, gulping down an hysterical snort. She smudged the traces on her chin with the back of her hand — hauled the man’s forward by his mostly ripped-off hair, and spelled out: “*Will* he target us, or not?”

Chuuya straightened as if electrified into it. “He’s seen Bandages?” he pressed, failing at disinterest.

The man’s shattered lips opened on a tongue-less scream, dripping coagulations on blood right onto her naked feet. Kouyou studied his eyes, quietly. “Someone has to.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Someone has to,” she repeated, more to herself than him, allowing the man to fall back on the dried fluids on the chair. There was still a composure of sorts to her jittery bones — she stood awfully tall and posed, even as she wiped sweat from her forehead, blinking as intermittently as she did when she hadn’t slept in a week. “Someone will. The underground isn’t that wide, and the Archivists *swear* his bank accounts haven’t been touched. I refuse to live with a sword of Damocles on my head. Mori wants to know if we will be uncovered by the end of the year,” Kouyou raised her *katana* again. “I’ll tell him.”

*How humiliating*, Chuuya thought. Dazai’s frame, no coat and a pretense of clean hands — towering upon them with the sword of justice. He wouldn’t even care about fairness. He would only do it to hear bars slam on Mori’s grin.

She sliced the man’s head off faster than he could shout.

It rolled on the ground off the gazebo with a wet, squelching thud. Snow had started to gather at the corners of the street — it wasn't there to soften the landing, though. Wondering when Hikari would come out to lick the blood off, Chuuya kept his eyes on the mutilated head's one, and dared: "So the *Permit* is useless, now?"

"Not useless," Kouyou replied. She looked for a place to clean her *katana* on, and ended up swiping across her dress shirt. "Not at all. Just — not enough. Not as long as the demon child is alive. Not as long as he knows all he does."

Chuuya studied the scurrying of an ant, crawling inside the head's eye socket.

That had been the other part of it — the paranoia. The Headquarters dealt with petty, smaller gangs' attacks — more of a taunt than any actual intention to challenge them — and they dealt with missing data and they dealt with mocking prisoners. But no one seemed able to deal with the eerily plump silence — the whispers in the walls. The unyielding certainty of dangling over the edge, held by the mercy of lithe, bandaged — traitorous — fingers.

The words were out of his throat before his mind could strangle them. "Then let's make sure he doesn't know anything."

Kouyou looked up. The strident sight almost had Chuuya looking away. She had never looked her age more — she was a tad shorter without the sandals, and eons, *eons*, smaller without the layers of the kimono. It seemed improper to even meet her eyes.

"What?" she asked, eyebrows high.

"Let's make sure he doesn't know," Chuuya insisted, as the idea seeped across his swarming thoughts. "The issue is he has every fucking protocol in this syndicate memorised, yes? Our deals and our ports and all of it," He shrugged. "Let's change them."

The woman stared at him. "All of them?"

"All of them."

"We have built our connections over years of trial. Do you even understand the costs — the sheer amount of *time* — it would take to revolutionize decades old procedures?"

Chuuya curled an eyebrow, nudging the head with the tip of his shoe. Pianoman's voice echoed in his skull. "You'd rather deal with a few years of paperwork," he quoted, "Or with whatever shit the Government will pull to execute a mafia syndicate?"

All at once, the fire of exhaustion in Kouyou's eyes dimmed.

She dragged the tip of her *katana* across the blood on the marble, pensive in that way a less used subordinate would have mistaken for bubbling anger. But Chuuya had watched her reshape the world under her eyelashes too many times — he knew, when she looked at him, that her valuing was only facade. She'd decided already.

"Write that down and get it to Mori," she concluded. Her skin was littered in goosebumps. It had been since he'd seen her again. "If we haven't descended into chaos by the start of next

week, you can have your hand at convincing him.”

The syndicate was still a bundle of nerves and malfunctioning elevators, by the start of the next week. Nails under his choker, Chuuya sat in front of Ace’s bitten nails, and convinced Mori anyway.

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“I don’t know how you do it,” Mori told him, privately, tapping gloved nails on wood. An hypocrite until the end — as if anyone in the Mafia would have guessed a single thought he might hold about that mutiny. A bit jokingly, he added: “You might want to be careful. That reactory attitude might make me doubt you didn’t know Dazai was leaving.”

For a moment, Chuuya was taken aback by how sincere the mock was.

It didn’t last long. When he’d asked the man if he still suspected him, Mori had studied him for a while — the scratches down his arms and whatever it *was* that kept making Hirotsu observe his eyes, longer and longer each time, like his burned eye might grow blue again now that he was *stuck* — and concluded, oddly: *you can always see when someone was left behind.*

*It wasn’t just me*, he’d told him.

Mori had smiled. Just as sincerely, he had sworn: *I rather think it was me alone.*

“I didn’t,” Chuuya assured him, anyway. He had never been the smartest around, not when surrounded by devils — but knowing Dazai could not be reached had taken no intelligence. Only eyes and longing fingers; the brush of bandages before he disappeared behind the corner, always dramatic and always three steps forward. He’d never chased him once.

*I’m not like you*, he didn’t dare tell any of them. *I never thought he’d stay.*

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*[The hold was imaginary and divinely — irritatedly — inspired. Chuuya knew.*

*Had Dazai ever managed to get his hands around his throat, Chuuya would have killed him out of the sheer unreality of it — the terror of being faced with a copy of what he knew to be real, but just wrong enough to be uncanny. If Chuuya couldn't breathe, it was on his lungs and on the silence.*

*A ghost lingered by the chandeliers. It looked down on him out of physical necessity and a more childish need.*

*It played hangman's knot. Chuuya's older scars itched like a layer of skin bound for removal. Arahabaki didn't say a thing — because Arahabaki never did; because he was too rage and too storm and too nothing to figure out something as petty as leaving. It was only Chuuya who felt the chain on his feet. It was Arahabaki who couldn't walk — and by the time he knew, he could only drag his claws across the walls, shrieking.*

*Don't be stupid, Chuuya told him.*

*It was fruitless to act as if Dazai was truly gone — it was pointless to pretend his absence wasn't louder than a presence. Every room Chuuya entered that lacked him was still about him — still only ever about him. It was all inevitable, and all was his fault.*

*The hand tightened around his neck. When he turned to throw his gloves away, a chant on his lips, it took him three shots of some faraway rifle to remember to stop.]*

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On a Thursday, Chuuya put all the glasses in his cupboard in the bathroom cabinet.

A ghost might have done it in its petty haunting, just to scare the tenants off some inherited home. Chuuya soon realized the attempts to evoke even pettier phantoms, who did not care enough to open all the water sources in his apartment, was meaningless. He stared at their glint under the bathroom lights, and *dared*.

Then he put the glasses back, stubborn and quiet, and stuck all his forks in a pile in the middle of his bedroom — and tried again.

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The corpses kept turning up.

“Do these assholes really think we’ll fall for it at the thirteenth puppet?” Chuuya questioned, crouching on the stone railing towering over the Port section, squinting at the corpse being pulled from the water. A mark had been carved on its chest — the *Hounds*’ sigil. “Or that we’ll believe a lowlife grunt fucker would manage to kill him?”

Kajii scratched his nape. “Maybe they’re trying to give the gangs some confidence.”

“This is ridiculous,” He waved, whistling to call the *Guerrilla*’s attention. They almost dropped the body; Chuuya watched its head lull back and forth, eyes carved out by the Bay’s floor. “Why are they trying so hard to convince us he’s dead?”

“Are we sure it’s not *him* who’s doing it?”

“It isn’t,” Chuuya said — with finality.

He waited for an explanation. When it didn’t come, Kajii tried to guess: “Maybe they’re doing it so we’ll leave him be?”

“He’s a fucking deserter. The Mafia doesn’t leave deserters alone.”

A hum formed a fog in front of the man’s mouth, fogging up even his goggles. He looked at him, head tilted. “Not a traitor?”

The *Guerrilla* threw the corpse inside one of the vans. A hand hung off the edge of it until it was kicked inside, and the doors of the trunk shut; Chuuya studied the blue stains on the skin, bruises and decay, curling around the fingers like an omen.

*Hey*, he recalled. The ceramic floor of an old tub, and Dante sleeping two rooms away. The wrecked bone of a thumb; the smell of dirty water and vomit. *We match*.

He stood up. “Let’s go.”

It took a week for Kouyou to dare voice a lingering idea — something he had seen float back and forth in the *Under Port*’s stairs, between low murmurs of men in safety suits and darting glances and the body bags they kept having Chuuya find, somehow. She stood next to him at

the top of the stairs of *Building One*, and dared: “What if one of these days, we mistake the real deal for a fake?”

The idea was so nauseatingly unrealistic it almost had him turn an impolite expression to her.

He scowled his traits into something less childish. “*That’s* the master plan you think the *Special Division* will put in place to kill two birds with one stone?” he scoffed. “We ain’t even sure the beanstalk *is* with them.”

“I doubt he is,” Kouyou replied, eyes on the stone steps. The back of Chuuya’s skull pulsed, for a moment — rain on *The Alley’s* stairs, and fingers digging between his ribs, and nothing else. “To be honest, I doubt this is even something he’s aware is happening. Perhaps the *Division* heard the voices and decided to torment us,” She scoffed, chin high. “Everybody wants their piece of cake from what’s left of Yokohama’s underground’s demon.”

The corpses kept turning up.

Chuuya wasn’t sure if they kept calling him to deal with them out of some awkward sense of respect or something else — perhaps the swiftness with which Chuuya sent a glance to the bodies and declared them fakes.

*It’s better to be sure*, Hirotsu had muttered, offhandedly, just once.

He had refused to explain further. Chuuya had kicked the side of the hanging corpse, and that had been it.

Eventually, the lifeless eyes and the swollen skin began to bundle into an unrecognizable mass — putrid smell and dirty bandages, and whatever stark electricity the mysterious Ability left on the modified corpses. It made Chuuya’s hands spasm a bit more whenever he touched them. Mori looked at the bodies and never spoke a word.

“Stay close,” he heard a newbie from the *Guerrilla* hiss, pulling his companion out of the doors to the dungeons. “Haven’t you heard?”

Corpses bearing the same exact face could only haunt the halls and the whispers for so long — at some point Chuuya mostly missed, roaming through paperwork and initiating new channels, the curve of Dazai’s lifeless eye began to haunt the spines of most mafiosi as well.

“It’s the prisoners,” he huffed, watching as Kouyou’s *kimono* dragged across the dried blood of the dungeons’ floor. “They’re spreading voices about this place being haunted — trying to scare us out of here.”

Her eyebrows tickled the dangling pearls of her headpiece. “*The ghost of the Demon Prodigy?*”

“As if he ever needed to be dead to fuck up everything,” Chuuya muttered.

Perhaps it should have been more eerie — just how quickly the narrative spread. He’d grown up in a settlement of myths, though, and kept his own secrets about that faithless endeavor all

to himself — when *Dazai Osamu* began to be less of a name to spit on, and more of an assortment of letters no one truly wanted to whisper too loudly, Chuuya stared at the wind-shaken chandeliers over the umptenth corpse, and dared: *haunt me, then*.

The penthouse remained quiet. The blue tourmaline he'd been gifted remained on top of his window seal — mostly forgotten and never not thought about.

“He'd need to be dead to be a spirit,” he let some unsettled new recruits know. “And none of us is lucky enough for that to be true. *Start paying rent if I'm wrong, you nasty fucker!*” he added, with an abrupt shout to the ceiling that got the recruits to jump ten feet in air, knocking his fist against the metal doors.

He got the feeling they only trusted him out of a simple conjecture, carved upon most eyes that had laid on the Mafia's *Double Black* in those years — if ghosts could kill, and if Dazai Osamu had been one, Chuuya would have probably been torn apart in that car explosion.

Still — it was him they called to deal with the corpses.

“It's good, actually,” he informed the Flags, during one of his visits. “For me, I mean. The more I see the bastard dead, the less murderous I feel. 'S kind of hard to fantasize about how much those things stink.”

*Did that work against that User in London?*, he could hear Albatross tut.

Chuuya studied his hands — like the blood might have stuck to the gloves. “This isn't about me, for your information,” he replied. “I'm the last person this concerns.”

*Liar*, the graves mocked. *Liar, liar*.

“Are you doing alright?”

The question landed flatly.

Morgues in the *Under Port* never smelled of blood; perhaps the cold kept it from lingering. The plastic-white tiles were always a bit sticky with dried *something*, though — and the walls loomed like melting candles, turning even that small room into a wardrobe space. The creaking cabinets were all shut, either filled with corpses or purposefully kept hidden from the unclosing eyes of the body on the metal table, at the center of the room.

Pettily, Chuuya stuck two fingers in that fake's Dazai's corpse, pulling his eyelids down. Like a bad joke, they stayed shut, that time.

Waiting for the echo of Kouyou's words to fade, he offered, flatly: “This is the best time I've had since I joined, actually.”

She didn't seem amused. “Chuuya.”

“What?” The morgue turned his voice a tad deeper; framed by faraway, exhausted screams from all around the *Under Port*, he was a background noise to a rotten symphony. Chuuya leaned on the wall of metal cabinets, crossing his arms to nod to the uncovered corpse — cut



up on the chest, and nothing more than dried slashes and shirtless skin. “It’s a dream job. I get to see the bandaged asshole rotting as many times as I’ve wished for him to drop dead. Even more, if we keep going like this,” He clicked his tongue. “Most people get the honor of the six feet deep treatment *once* in their life, you know?”

“Now you sound like him,” Kouyou said. “You know better. Dying is no honor.”

“It is, when you compare it to what I’d do to him if we caught him,” Chuuya replied.

At that, she kept quiet.

*Under Port* mafiosi in bright orange safety suits hurried behind the glass window on one of the walls, hauling carriers and reading files. Their murmurs disappeared underneath the screams — the unbearable lack of silence would start tracing a fire path under Chuuya’s eyelids soon enough; a headache he couldn’t quite afford.

“It’s weird, though,” Kouyou started again, at some point. Her fingers were abandoned by the corpse’s calves, ten shades darker than its ghostly skin. “Seeing him like this.”

“It’s not him,” he said.

“It could be. We don’t know where he is.”

“Cockroaches don’t leave to go die in the sewers,” Chuuya scoffed. “If he’d wanted to die, he would have died here. Probably taken Boss out too while he was at it.”

A strange look crawled between her eyelids.

“I really did think he —” Kouyou threw a look to the glass panel; the shut door. She cleared her throat, and didn’t look anywhere in particular when she admitted: “I really did think — from the first moment Mori brought him to us. I think he knew it too. This was all bound to end with him in that red scarf.”

The concept would have been weirder to sit with years ago, Chuuya thought — a kill and then a throne. Mori’s peaceful, all-knowing smile.

“He wouldn’t have cared, if it had been for the good of the Mafia,” he concluded.

The Executive sighed. “I suppose this is proof that *he* wouldn’t have been.”

And yet Mori bled from every pore — it was evident to anyone with eyes. His fingers were both sharpened claws and frail roots — they hung off him like starved things, sticking to the ground and *searching* for something to latch onto. Chuuya didn’t think Mori wanted to die. Chuuya didn’t think he had ever imagined dying from any blade other than Dazai’s.

Perhaps there was *lack* in that too — fear that could go nowhere. The knowledge Dazai had more reason to strike than before, or maybe less — all depending on whether he’d seen death as mercy or punishment.

“Do you think —” Kouyou paused. With clarity that smelled of repressed thoughts, her nails wrapped around that dead calf, leaving no trace. “I know we believe the *Division* is to blame. But this — doesn’t it feel like his kind of pettiness?”

Chuuya thought about it, for a moment — the incessant calls to his phone; the ruined limbs and the hangman furrows and the gunshot wounds on bodies that bore his face; the way Mori always stared at the corpses a tad too long.

His eyes fell on the corpse.

“No,” he promised. “No, this isn’t him.”

“He was already a dangerous man to walk next to,” she murmured. “There are few things more haunting than a dangerous man walking in the sunlight, though.”

Chuuya scoffed. *Don’t be rude*, he could hear her tut — her voice blending with some forgotten echo of past times. Politeness hadn’t been a thing in Suribachi, though. Chuuya had said his final goodbyes and his first hellos to his mother weeks ago. “Dangerous,” he mocked.

“You know that he is.”

“You cannot categorize him,” he snapped. *Dazai*, he thought. *Dazai*. He couldn’t say it. He didn’t want to. A child throwing a tantrum — he didn’t want to. Chuuya had taken it all in stride without a word, the lost car and the dead brother and *Tanaki*, and this, *this*, he didn’t *want to*. The name tasted like every rotten meal he’d ever forcibly swallowed — as disgusting as it always did after a particularly irritating prank. *This isn’t a prank, though*, he reminded himself. Immaterial nails dragged down the wetter parts of his viscera, Arahabaki and *not*, and Chuuya swore, *this isn’t a fucking prank*. “You can’t — mythify him. immortalize him like all those idiots — he’s going to change everything just to spite you. Just to make you believe you never understood a thing at all — fucking *laugh* and say, *you didn’t think about that, did you?*”

He exhaled in a curse. Her lips parted.

She suffocated the question with posed callousness; let go of the calf like there wasn’t a *point* to everything she did. He watched her walk the short way past the table to him, and didn’t do anything but offer her his eyes, when she settled two hands on the side of Chuuya’s throat — both a cradle and a suggestion.

The skin underneath his choker itched.

“Listen to me,” Kouyou said, very quietly. “Maybe you should step out of this.”

Something that might have been snow was stuck to the collar of her *kimono*. Chuuya studied it until his tongue felt less mean. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Chuuya —”

“I don’t,” he insisted, clipped. “You all — I need you to stop looking at me like that.”

“I’m merely —“

“Why the fuck would he have told *me*?”

Kouyou didn’t speak.

“You all *swear* that he should’ve —“ He set his jaw, inhaling through his nose. Still cut too short and still nauseatingly, horridly coincidental, the burnt strand of his hair from the car explosion tickled his temple. “It’s good riddance, Ane-san. If you can’t see it, that’s on you.”

She stole a few more instants; nodded, and let go of him.

“I’m only saying —” she offered, after a pause, hand too light on the doorknob, “That he’s gone anyway, Chuuya. You truly don’t need to look at his corpse all day to be certain.”

Chuuya stared at the ground.

Despite the shrieks and the rolling wheels, it was very quiet when she left the room. Some of the workers passed by the window; a woman in a metal vest was dragged forward on her knees, some muted scream out of her voiceless lips. The buzz of a mosquito flew over his head, and then it was only Chuuya and the corpse.

*If it breathes*, Mori had tutted. *If it beats*.

He detached himself from the wall.

The metal stretcher the corpse had been left on — thrown with a bitter, blank-faced ease that said some men in the organization still hoped to *accidentally* stumble on Dazai’s true end — was staggeringly cold, seeping through clothes in prickly needles and frozen veins. Chuuya rested his elbows on the sides of that puppet’s head, caging it underneath his unimpressed gaze.

Albatross’s chain dangled between the old ridges of Dazai’s nose. The black of the gloved tip of his finger — when he flicked the eyelashes of his sole uncovered eye, stupidly waiting for a flutter — was a shock against his graying skin.

*No*, he’d told her. *This isn’t him*.

He glanced at the unmarred skin of his crooked thumb. *No*, Chuuya hadn’t insisted. *He wouldn’t make them wrong. He would have known I’d know*.

The thought was strangely enraging.

“When the delusional morons start telling bonfire horror tales about you,” he informed the corpse, “Don’t expect me to tell them you didn’t actually have *claws sharper than a bear’s* and *eyes as dead as the winter season*. ”

Dazai, of course, didn’t answer.

*The dead did not give a shit*, he considered.

He swallowed the thought a second later.

Tapping the stone-hard sides of that neck, low enough for his hair to brush that nauseating, *offensive* rendition, he concluded: “Fuck you.”

*Enraging*, and something else, too — there was no word for it. Had there been, he would have said it already. *You only think about words when something’s no longer there to be named*, Lippman had mused, once, browsing through a script he hadn’t liked but picked himself anyway. *Humans are always cursed with being late*.

The corpse had nothing to say.

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*[The head bandages had always been the most complicated of the bunch.*

*“Will you stay fucking still?” Chuuya heard himself snap, somewhere over the undone roads of bandages — that un-scratchy, three-layers-thin type Dazai had long since chosen as his only favorite — and the monotone kicks he could vaguely perceive Dazai directing to his knees with his toes. Albatross’ old bed was thankfully short; standing in front of his sitting silhouette, reaching for his tallest point, wasn’t as humiliating as it could have been. “Do you want me to tie a knot around your mouth?”*

*“It’s not my fault if you can’t deal with the easiest tasks,” Dazai muttered, bored lips brushing the vein of his left wrist. “I told you I could deal with it.”*

*Chuuya paused his wrapping process — only to direct him his most offended glance. “You literally broke in — are you fucking stupid?” He tightened the choke of the bandages until Dazai yelped, teeth aching with frustration. “You started stomping and whining until I took care of it —“*

*Waving the small casts on his hands, Dazai lamented: “That’s because you broke my fingers!”*

*“I didn’t break your stupid fingers —“*

*“You used your usual Slug pace to break in, and the Widows started being annoying, and I had to break out of the handcuffs —“*

*He tightened the bandages some more. The boy wheezed as if they’d been around his neck.*

*But the head bandages truly were odd — the only way Dazai would accept them was with certain loops and only some parts of the skin under his eye doubly wrapped; clenched suffocatingly by the nape and with no flattening of his curlier hair. Chuuya had no real memory of when he had memorized that useless chant — no real reason to play along with it either. Nonetheless, he'd stumbled to his door with sleep-grungy movements, and woken up quicker than his nervous system had appreciated at the sight of a two-eyed Dazai in his kitchen.*

*Dazai had the grace to keep quiet. The sound of bandages rubbing against curls and skin was soon an added sun ray, joining the warm cascade of the first sunset behind the covered windows. Chuuya blinked against the slumber of repetitive motions — focused on the mindless bucket list of missions Dazai was tapping on his thigh.*

*What's with the bandages, anyway?, he mused, occasionally, about asking. He never did.*

*Instead, he grunted: "If you ever ditch this clown costume of yours, you'll end up falling flat on your face whenever you try to take a step."*

*Dazai glanced up at him, curious. "Ane-san dragged you into her depth perception concerns, at last?"*

*"Who the fuck is concerned," Chuuya muttered. "I'm just saying — half-blind from that eye or not, the little you see must be nauseating."*

*Strangely quiet, he replied: "Not as much as what the other one sees."*

*For a moment, he sounded serious.*

*His grin appeared like a sudden faux step in some royal dance. "I can still see Chuuya even when he's on my blind side, after all."]*

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*[Perhaps he was, Chuuya thought. Serious.*

*Perhaps it had all been a pantomime, only mute and filled with suicidal jokes, and perhaps it had all been doomed from the start. Perhaps Dazai — who had dropped casts at every bored fifth day of having one and who had slaughtered a man for catching him as he scratched the skin under his bandages — had never needed any help at all. Perhaps he'd sat on his bed for*

*the amusement of it, and installed routine on the tiles with feet carved in the word temporary, and he'd thought it worthy of his providence.*

*Perhaps Chuuya had been too serious about all of it — his blind side and his unwrapped eye and his depth perception and the sight of his crooked fingers on his table, braiding bandages like Elise did with her dolls' hair — and how something, he thought, not enraging but not nothing; how something it was, that he was bound to live without it for the rest of his life.]*

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Akutagawa returned from a stealth mission roughly twenty two days after Dazai had vanished — and he returned to Chuuya's office, to Dazai's corpse on the table.

"It's not him," Chuuya couldn't get out of his mouth fast enough, watching as the boy landed against the wall from some invisible rifle's ricochet, somehow paler and wide eyed enough to appear centuries younger — when a wheezing, rasp *thing* that wasn't quite a breath left his throat and left him scrambling on his feet, Chuuya couldn't move fast enough, hands on him to keep him up. "Hey. *Hey*. Listen to me. That's not him."

"He — Executive Dazai —"

"Not him," he insisted, in the tone most subordinates automatically responded to. "Fucker would probably evaporate like a malicious spirit, anyway."

His stunned gaze remained over Chuuya's shoulder, set on the white sheet somebody had put over the latest river-recovered artifact. It took some strength he hadn't used in a bit to push him out of the room, closing the door — no matter the protesting nails Akutagawa clenched around his upper arms.

"They're saying —" Akutagawa cleared his throat, attempting to gulp through the grip he had on him, pushed against the hallway wall. "They are *disgracing* Executive Dazai's name, his loyalty —"

He kept his eyes on the wall.

"Those bitter fools are *lying*," Something like hysteria stuck to his tone. "Vice-Executive —"

"It's Executive, now, actually," he said.

It was very quiet, for a moment.

Breathless, Akutagawa begged: “Chuuya.”

It took him a bit to let go of him. Once he did, taking a step back — another and another; just close enough to grab the kid if his cough-wretched chest started acting up again, and far enough to get a full vision of the way the black coat stuck to his curved bones — Chuuya sighed. “It’s all true.”

Something like a lack of understanding had Akutagawa’s eyes widen like marbles — innocent enough to be genuine, and almost *offended*.

“No,” he snarled. “It isn’t.”

“Kid, you’ve been away and unavailable for contact for weeks, while I have a manufactured copycat corpse of the bastard in my office,” he snapped, more nervous than anything else. “*Who* do you think has a clue of what’s going on?”

Akutagawa flinched as if shot.

“But he’s not —” He struggled for words — held the hems of his gifted coat like they might disintegrate along with his settling understanding. “The Port Mafia is his entire *life*.”

“He was suicidal,” he reminded him.

“Is this a *joke to you*?” he snarled, outlines shining a bloodied crimson. *Void-bright*, he’d once heard Dazai refer to *Rashomon*’s aura as. He had a tendency to talk too much about Akutagawa when he wasn’t around. “He’s your *partner* —”

“He was my partner,” Chuuya corrected, as calmly as he could. Glancing to the empty sides of the hallway, he added: “And you might want to be more careful about how you talk of your syndicate’s latest deserter.”

Akutagawa exhaled like a dying rattle. “He is no deserter. He’s —”

“A spineless coward,” he listed off, raising a hand to stop him. “A downright bastard wrapped in toilet paper, and the reason why I’ve been stuck in my office working on fucking *passage of property* deals for almost a *month* — and don’t even get me fucking started on whatever is going on in our god forsaken dungeons —”

Unused how he was to the feeling, it took him a moment to feel the sting of the bleeding cut on his cheekbone.

*Rashomon* was a spectacle of electrified tentacles, crowding Akutagawa’s silhouette like some holy crown in one of those churches Virgil had loved to describe in his novels. It bathed the hallway in a dim, looming darkness — but not quite enough to drown Akutagawa’s startlement in shadows.

Chuuya stared. He cleaned the blood from his cheek with the back of his glove.

“Good one,” he offered. “Thought you were still struggling with precision hits.”

The kid breathed like it had been ripped from his chest with barbed wire and not much care for his skin — he backed in the hallway as quickly as *Rashomon's* vanishing shadows allowed him to, and stumbled with a form that Dazai would have deeply, deeply disapproved of.

“You should apologize,” Chuuya let him know, staying right where he was. “Not because I care all that much — though, that was an asshole move. Not like I kicked the jerk out myself. But I’m assuming you’ll be nearing execution often enough, what with this *Dazai's defender* attitude — and you don’t want to add *Executive-maiming* to the list of your insubordinations.”

It was Akutagawa’s turn to stare at him like he had grown a second head.

He started coughing a blink after.

At first, it was nothing out of the ordinary — he bent in two and shook like death might be closer than his own contempt for it, curled into a child’s outline. Chuuya stayed where he was.

He didn’t move until he saw a coagulation of dirty, sick blood land on the carpets.

“Kid,” he called, materializing in front of him. Akutagawa didn’t stop coughing, choking on the sound with wrecked insistence. “*Kid*, do you — were you shot? Are you hurt? What’s the —“

Blood splattered on both their hands — wet and invisible on the old fabric of his coat.

Chuuya didn’t quite blink again until they had breached through one of the stalls’ doors on that floor’s bathroom, Akutagawa more dragged than walking, landing on the ground in front of the toilet so heavily his knees made a weird sound. Chuuya slid down against the wall of the stall right as the door bounced back, closing with a rumble louder than thunder — he sat down, huffing with accelerated heartbeat, right as Akutagawa finally managed to spit blood inside the toilet.

“Seriously,” he panted, stretching out his bent legs until they bumped against the other wall. *It’s a shame*, Mori had said about the kid. *It really is a shame*. “I was annoyed too, but I didn’t spit blood or anything.”

The joke didn’t seem to amuse Akutagawa. Perhaps he was just too busy.

“He’s not —“ he managed to insist, amidst soul-rattling coughs — knuckles white around the toilet. “He can’t be,” he begged, starving. “Not yet, I haven’t —“

Blood trailed from his mouth until he had no choice but to retch with it. Chuuya watched his head disappear in the toilet again, his sick sounds the only buzz in that abandoned bathroom, and relaxed against the wall. *Everything was inevitable*, he reminded himself. *Everything was his fault*.



It took eons for Akutagawa to be done. He only understood it was over because his exhausted frame dropped on his heels — leaving him bowed over the toilet edge.

His knuckles were still white. Keeping his eyes on the opposite wall, Chuuya promised: “I’m doing this for you.”

No answer came.

“I don’t know what you want from him,” he continued, though, because he had experience with unresponsive graves and haunted houses all the same. “Whatever it is, you won’t get it.”

His abandoned fists spasmed. Akutagawa fell back against the other wall, jaw clenched tight enough to make a vein throb.

“You can’t,” Chuuya wasn’t sure of the words out of his mouth. The fresh blood from the cut on his cheek had dried. “If you could have, then he wouldn’t have left. Since he did, it means you have to find it somewhere else,” At his stubborn silence, he nudged his thigh with the tip of his toe — he hardened his voice. “Listen to me. You pulled that shit with me. Don’t you dare pull it with someone else. You *cannot* support him. Not now.”

Blindly, he swore: “He saved me.”

*He damned me, Chuuya thought. And I called him partner anyway, didn’t I?*

“Do you know what he could do to us?” he insisted. He motioned towards the bathroom — that building, and Mori’s nervous, stiffened steps, somewhere over their heads. “Do you *get* the scope of it? He knows every corner of this syndicate to the very *bone*. He hates every single one of us with more hatred than you’ve ever fantasized about nesting in your soul. Do you know what he could do? What he could tell the authorities?”

“He wouldn’t,” Akutagawa didn’t sound entirely convinced. “We can find him. He —”

“How do you know that?” Chuuya scoffed. “He’s not one of us. Not anymore.”

His lips pressed together. He had the odd, unsuitable thought — that most kids would have looked on the verge of tears, wearing that kind of expression. Akutagawa only looked angry.

“This is my home. I know it’s yours, too. I know you’re smart enough to understand the kind of threat he’s become. You can go chase him, if you want,” He shrugged, bumping his skull against the wall. “But when you find yourself in front of some stranger who wants you dead, won’t *that* kill you?”

Harshly hesitant — Akutagawa laid his eyes on him.

With the spelled out tone of a lost child, he snapped, helpless: “Why don’t you care?”

Chuuya felt his ribcage twitch.

“I told you,” he said. “This is my home.”

“He’s your partner.”

“Not anymore.”

“It’s the *Port Mafia*, ” Akutagawa seemed a bit more disoriented with every echoing word. He was stained with drying blood on the side of his mouth. Chuuya thought he might bite him if he attempted to clean it off. “And he’s — he just *left*. He won’t destroy the Port Mafia.”

He clicked his tongue. “That he even could is enough to rage against, don’t you think?”

Akutagawa’s jitteriness had his limbs stone hard and yet shaky. Chuuya wasn’t surprised when he stood — he wasn’t surprised when he staggered either, hands looking for invisible anchors on the too-clean walls of that stall.

“He’ll come back,” he concluded, more to himself than to his companion. The resoluteness of it was a house of cards. “It’s — of course he’ll come back.”

He studied him.

“I just need to prepare myself for it, and he won’t be able to say no,” Akutagawa insisted, as he opened the stall door. The creak of it screeched against Chuuya’s ears — he moved his eyes to the wall, and kept quiet. “With enough time — he’ll have no choice but to approve of me. And he will come back. Of course he —“

The bathroom was still echoing when he left it, less than furtive steps and nothing more than a black stain.

Chuuya reached up and flushed the toilet.

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Blood dripped from the glass-made holes in his gloves, landing on the floor with intermittent *tip taps*.

“That was an ugly picture,” Q noted, their side plastered against Chuuya’s leg. They’d grown taller, taunting that old school uniform they never went anywhere without. Their hair was wild and too long — cut badly enough he would have believed they’d done it themselves, if he doubted Mori would have given them blades not for their arms. “I said it when Boss took it.”

The end of the *Dragon Head Conflict* was a blurred bundle of assignments and preparations for months of travels — but Chuuya remembered that ballroom, and the rising chant of *Double Black* underneath the complicated glint in Mori's eyes.

Champagne in their hands and short, a bit awkward silhouettes pressed together — *you don't mind keeping him company on the wall, until you get your own seat, yes, Chuuya?*, Mori had asked, with his best smile. The framed pictures of all the Executives loomed from the wall — only Rimbaud and Dazai's faces unmovable behind broken glass.

"His face ruined it," he concluded.

"You look like you're about to sneeze," Q insisted. They poked his aching knuckles. "I think Boss does it with a hammer, usually."

"You're very judgemental for someone who isn't meant to be here," Chuuya considered. He let his glove fall, clenching and unclenching his fingers to verify everything was still working. There was a small trace of his blood over Dazai's face; he wiped it with a thumb. "The bastard's not even here to stop whatever evil plan you've got in mind. Does Boss even know you're wandering around?"

Q made a face, gently kicking the ground. "He locked the doll away."

*That's still not entirely comforting*, he didn't say. The kid had always had something unbridled about them — a sort of assuredness that they *would* make sure those blades in their arms were worth it.

"Are you angry?" the kid questioned.

Chuuya thought about it, flexing his head a bit more. "Not really."

They blinked. "That's an angry reaction."

"No," he insisted. He didn't exactly recall how he'd ended up stopping there, after that convo on new transportation deals with Mori — try as he might, even the act of raising his arm to punch was mostly lost in the blur. "Someone had to break it, anyway. It's tradition. I'm annoyed."

"Why?"

"Paperwork," Chuuya's mouth shaped, just as automatic as a breath.

Q hummed. "I don't do that."

"I know. You're a kid."

They directed him an odd look, at that.

After a long pause, still studying the broken zigzag of lines inside the frame, they dared: "Does this mean I can never use my doll again?"

Hushful and intolerable, the persisting itch in Chuuya's arms grew burning.

*More*, Arahabaki begged. There was a tilt to his voice — to the thing that *wasn't* a voice, but that he had learned to translate all the same; to the spike in his heartbeat and the heat in his veins and the crack in his bones, curling around meanings that meant *something* in the way bleeding did — that had lost its snarling, caged edge. Only when it was dark under the sheets, Chuuya dared to think — *it really did sound rather lost*.

But the idea was intolerable, and it itched far more than any locked *Corruption*. Chuuya let his hand ruffle Q's hair, absently, and offered: "I'm afraid so."

On the roof of *Building One*, once Q had been enclosed by hesitating mafiosi and the *glare* they refused to remove from him — accusation and kinship all the same; the childish notion of having been both deprived of something, and the *childish* question of why he wasn't raging about it — Chuuya pressed his lips and blew a bird whistle.

He waited. The city kept moving.

[*"Hummingbird," He tapped on the screen. "Are you there?"*]

No whistling answered.

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He hindered his ineluctable visit to Verlaine for as long as Hirotsu's damned, curled eyebrow allowed him to — and then, he made sure to get shitfaced drunk the night before.

"He's been notified for a month, now," the Commander reminded him, over the buzz of the *Old World's* busiest night. Some of the *Lizards* and the *Guerrilla* were mingling on the stools next to their own — Hirotsu seemed too busy making sure Chuuya didn't start throwing glasses on the ground to pay them any mind. "It's not like you're bringing him any sort of new information —"

"He'll be so fucking *annoying* about it," he interrupted him, sluggish and grunting, slamming his head on the counter. "You don't — *hic!* — you don't understand how fucking annoying he is —"

"He's a man with experience, in spite —"

*“Our death was a mistake, Chuuya,” he mocked, high pitched, rolling in his space like a particularly unbalanced invertebrate. “Don’t you see that there’s no point, Chuuya? Don’t you just want to kill everyone in this building and go live in the god forsaken countryside with your big broth—”*

Hirotsu’s hand was slammed on his mouth. The *Guerrilla* directed him concerned glances.

“Stop it, you —” Chuuya pushed the man off, agitating his finger towards the members of the squad. “You listen to me. You — I’m not going to be your Boss much longer. You guys need to *learn* about *trickster fucking brothers* from *me*, before Boss gives you to my boy Akutagawa —”

“Executive,” one of the *Guerrilla* — he had no confidence in his blurred vision to guess *who* — reassured him, “Boss already informed us that the transfer won’t happen before next year.”

“I *know* that, I’m an *Executive* —”

“The last thing the syndicate needs right now is more changes,” someone from the *Lizards* sighed, downing a glass.

“On that matter, actually,” Hirotsu spoke up, dragging Chuuya’s stool a bit closer. He tried to focus his eyes on him, but that *Lizard’s* remark had agitated *something* in the back of his mind — a response his tongue wasn’t shaping up. Kajii was juggling lemon bombs three tables away.

*[“You have done nothing but work for weeks,” the scientist had complained, right before dragging him to the Old Word. “As your demonic other half would have said —”*

*Chuuya had glared at him. “I told you not to call him that.”*

*“What? Demonic or other half?” His punch had had him yelling. “God — you’re so sensitive!”*

*“Who the fuck is sensitive —”*

*“It’s fine, though,” Kajii had rationalized, one arm around his shoulder, unwisely. “It makes sense. Somebody’s been dumped.”*

*The rest of it had been rather violent.]*

Vaguely, as he reached for his glass, he heard the old man explain: “If you have time, Gin and I would like your opinion on a recruit. Tachihara is rather —”

Chuuya sat up, all at once. “*You’re right!*” He pointed his shaky finger to the *Lizard* who had spoken — a woman, startled by the call out. “You are so — *right*. Changes are the last thing we need. This organization is in *shambles* already —”

“I wouldn’t say it’s *shambles* —”

“And *you know* whose fault it is?”

A collective sigh passed through the men.

“That *bastard Mackerel!*” He slammed his glass down — accidentally spraying Hirotsu’s rusty monocle with his wine. “That’s whose fault it is!”

The commander rubbed his temples, and pulled him to sit down again. “Yes, Executive.”

“— taking all the passwords, and all the god damned data, and my fucking *calculator too*, which makes virtually *no fucking sense* —“

“Elise was the one who took the calculator, actually,” Hirotsu reminded him, gently. “She has it in her room. I told you this.”

Chuuya squinted. “Well — well, *still!* It’s been a shitshow!”

“Certainly.”

“And he’s once again escaped every fucking report that’s on *him*, slacking off —“

The man made a face, tapping his glass. “I’m assuming he might be dealing with something slightly more complicated than documentation.”

It screeched against his brain like a record scratch. Chuuya squinted harder; spat, more than accusingly: “What, ‘you worried about him?’”

Hirotsu’s face turned cautious.

“Of course I’m not, Executive,” he answered, blankly. There was a stiffness to him that mostly spoke of that old respect for authority he’d always carried, no matter the age of his superiors; but a note in it was mere faith — the genuine, unhesitatingly certainly of a matter already dealt with. Hirotsu had always been rather skeptical of Dazai’s worst suicide attempts.

“Good,” Chuuya warned. He spun a finger around. “You don’t want *them* thinking it.”

“I really am not, sir.”

“Good,” he insisted, downing the last of his wine — slamming the glass on the counter again, just loud enough to make every *Guerrilla* and every *Lizard* in the row jump. “Good, ‘cause — ‘cause if he isn’t breaking into a shitty five stars Hotel, then he’s breaking into the disgusting sewers he *belongs* to — and if he’s not doing that, he’s couch surfing at the suburban apartment of whatever poor girl he’s managed to charm into a fuck — because God fucking *knows* girls always end up deciding his pretty face is a worthy price for that fuckass ego he calls a personality, so —“ It had gotten strangely silent. “So —“ Chuuya had forgotten his point. “So *fuck him*, that’s what!”

He grabbed another glass. Hirotsu tapped his fingers on the counter.

*Angry*, Chuuya thought. Of course he was angry. It was all bureaucracy and it was all business and it was all inevitable and it was all his fault. He had *Corruption* under a

bandaged lock and key, and it had been weeks, and Chuuya still couldn't say his name out loud.

*Angry*, he thought, *what else?*

“Of course, Chuuya,” Hirotsu repeated, only a tad kinder. Chuuya wouldn't quite remember it in the morning — but the unusual sound of his name from the man's lips was a shivering warmth, for a few heartbeats.

*Sir*, he didn't correct. He had sweated for it, hadn't he? *Why do you want to be called Chuuya?*, Dazai had questioned. He had sweated his ass off for it. He'd taken Albatross' motorcycle and drove all the way to his parents' house, and he'd scratched the black scar on his wrist from an itch that was very distinctively *not-Arahabaki*, and he hadn't even talked to them. But he'd sweated just for a change to *know* they existed — it just didn't matter half as much as he'd thought it would. *Executive*.

The next morning, hungover and with his toes curled in his shoes, he entered Verlaine's self-reclusion without knocking.

“You know, I have always had a thing for stars.”

He'd tied his hair differently — an intricate braid that involved both paler sides of his hairline, removing any strands from his face. Naked and paler than a corpse, Verlaine's gaze was wider than the world itself — more focused on him than anything else had ever been. Chuuya had yet to understand why being looked at like that never set off his alarms.

“Did you?” Chuuya asked, unimpressed.

“The laboratory I was created in had a glass roof,” his brother recalled, curled up on that horrible chair of his — with the creaking wood. “They were the first thing I saw.”

Chuuya *almost* flinched.

It didn't escape Verlaine's gaze — because it couldn't have. He still wore black, most times he was down there to see him; it fit him better than his hat ever had. Chuuya disliked the thought. A man made for mourning, buried underneath the Port Mafia Headquarters — only one of the horror stories the Sheep used to whisper about the Mafia.

With bone-deep exhaustion, Chuuya sighed. He slipped down the rusty metal door until he was sitting on the floor, and waved his arm. “Come on. I know you've got things to say.”

Verlaine curled an eyebrow. “Now, don't be callous.”

“I'll be whatever the fuck I want.”

“I can hardly believe Ozaki allows you such behavior and language.”

“I can hardly believe she hasn't yet cut your dick off for calling her Ozaki,” Chuuya replied, as he crossed his ankles. “Hurry up. I know you have things to spit at me. Are you vindicated?”

Very neutrally, the man reminded him: “I killed Rimbaud long before you or that partner of yours could even attempt to.”

“Yes, but this is your *gotcha moment*. ”

Something like a malfunction had both his little fingers twitch on some piece of paper he was scribbling on. Perhaps it was the language barrier. Chuuya watched him come up with his own interpretation — then huffed. “You’re really not going to start some spiel on, *the nature of beings such as us is loneliness*, and, *it was merely a matter of time before your inhumanity left you with no choice but me as companion*, and *blah blah* —“

“I don’t talk like that.”

“You do,” Chuuya glared. “All the time. It’s even in your stupid letters.”

*I unlocked your power, Chuuya*, the latest of them had insisted. *How can you blame me for unveiling you?*

*I didn’t want to be unveiled*, he had thought about answering, before reminding himself of just who he would have entertained. *I wanted to be me.*

*This is you*, he could hear him say.

With a snotty superiority that hardly fit a man who had buried himself, Verlaine waved the matter away. “I have nothing to say that you don’t already know,” he scoffed. “And look at you. It is more than clear there’s no need for me to add onto your self-inflicted burden.”

He stared. “What, the burden of the thirty seven *Goodbye, You Asshole* parties I’m organizing as soon as the Mafia stops falling apart in the jerk’s absence?”

Verlaine studied him.

The silence scratched him like a cat — his eyes were a tad sharper. Chuuya refused to feel any sort of discomfort. He tapped the ground with his heels — causing that metallic sound with the buttons he had noticed Verlaine was irritated by. The man kept absolutely quiet.

“Fuck do you all want me to say?” Chuuya snapped, jittery to his very spine. Mori’s glances and Kouyou’s furrowed eyebrows and Hirotsu’s gentler tone and *all of it*, constantly — “That I hate him? That is news to absolutely no one. That I’ll hate the thought of him until I die? That we won’t even be in the same room ever again? That’s news to no one. That’s —“ Chuuya inhaled so fast it burned. “That’s such bullshit. The fuck do you all want from me?”

Verlaine said nothing.

Eventually, very carefully — very vacantly — he offered: “It took me a while.”

“To do what,” Chuuya clipped.

“To figure out being without him.”



Chuuya's mouth fell shut on pure survival instinct. He didn't know what he would have said — he only knew he couldn't afford an honest breath in front of that man.

"I don't —" he managed, once the ricochet of just how loud he'd snapped his jaw shut vanished from his aching head. "That's stupid."

The man hummed.

"*Double Black* was a temporary thing," he insisted, stuck between the anger that was never very quiet in Verlaine's presence and the irritation of feeling like he was missing pieces. Chuuya had never liked being surrounded by people who knew more than he did — he hated the merciless *aware* glint in Verlaine's eye with a child's pettiness, left out of a meeting room again. "It was never going to last."

"Would you have ended it yourself?" his brother asked, like a mock.

Chuuya gritted his teeth until the sound became concerning. "Stop projecting."

"*You* stop projecting," Verlaine replied, still bearing that *fucking raised eyebrow*. "You're the one who came here. You're the one who decided I was going to blame you for this. Were you looking for my accusation?"

He wanted to laugh in his face. The sound wouldn't quite come out. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

The man shrugged. "Do you?"

*Being without Dazai*, Chuuya thought. A ridiculous idea to linger on. *Being without Dazai*. The strand of burned hair fell over his eye again. Chuuya stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Alright," Verlaine said, like it really didn't matter. The urge to punch his teeth in remained where it was — in his chest and unfathomable in its unrealistic pursuit. Then, tapping on those papers of his, he added: "I cannot tell you Dazai's disappearance doesn't satisfy me."

Somehow, it irritated him. "Then we finally have something in common."

"But I am sorry," he continued.

He stared — hard. "Did you hear a word of what I just said?"

"Chuuya," the man said, and how *horrible* it was to hear his name from his lips, every time — how nauseating and unfair, stolen from mouths that had loved him more than Verlaine's fear of loneliness would ever manage to. *The Flags would have understood*, he thought. The Flags would have never asked. The Flags would have looked at him, whole and jittery and caged again, unbalanced and doomed, and they would have never asked a thing.

Verlaine's words seemed stuck on his lips. He erased them, at last. "He's your partner," he morphed them into, utterly, horribly simple.

It sounded so easy.

*Being without Dazai*, Chuuya imagined telling him, ludicrously — three lifetimes away, in a less cage-like room and with less blood between them — *was what an amputee had to feel when they stood up, forgetful and doomed*. He could see the ground getting closer with every breath. He couldn't stop it. He was unbalanced and lungless and it *itched* — itched all the time, like a wound he'd burned again for iniquitous self loathing.

It didn't matter.

"He'd be here if he was," he concluded. He didn't meet Verlaine's eyes — in spite of what the man believed, he felt no need to be blamed. *Unfair*, his mind told him. The dried blood at the *Mimic* base — Mori's eyes as he swore, *Oda Sakunosuke is dead*. Unsure if he was lying, he added: "That's all there is to it."

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Kouyou — *unsettlingly, unavoidably nouveau riche in the very marrow of her bones*, Noguchi would have said — had called them *Opera gloves*, when he had dug them out of a present box from a few years ago. With his jaw set tightly enough to sting, Chuuya studied the jarringly scarlet scratches across his forearms and called them *might as well*.

Snow stained the streets like seeping blood. His shoes sunk awkwardly down that candid hill; Chuuya considered floating, for a moment, and didn't.

He dropped, instead — crossed his legs on that soft, freezing ground, overlooking the sea with his back on Rimbaud's grave. The cold stabbed his clothed flesh like a thousand needles, momentarily numbing even the shivers. *You know when something's so cold you feel like it burns?*, Shirase had once muttered, lamenting all the loose snow to have ended up inside their makeshift beds.

Chuuya slid down. The tender, interior skin of his newly glove-covered forearms was plastered against the snow. Somewhere away from the cliff, where the city restarted, he could vaguely hear Christmas carols.

Oddly gentle, ever so parental — his first, *first* companion — Arahabaki murmured: *burn it all down*.

His fingers spasmed against the snow.

"You're not a god," Chuuya informed him — his own brain, maybe. He kept telling it to people. He had to start smaller, perhaps — closer. "You're not even a *thing*. I'm all you're

ever going to be.” No answer. “And we’re not fucking, *burning it down*,” he added, after a bit. *Talk to the wall and talk to the soul*, Tanaki had said, once. Thinking about her was another stab of ice. He scoffed. “Get a grip. Wait for —”

He trailed off.

Once, Chuuya had activated *Corruption* inside an underground parking lot. Remembering flashes and shattered glass had never been particularly hard; but the whole picture was never there. Nakahara Chuuya did not dream; still, in the nights after, as his skin stitched itself back together, his bruised eyelids had pressed on his pounding eyes, and Chuuya had *felt* — felt all of it, for a moment; his flesh tearing and his bones knocking and his ears whistling from the gravity-less bubble he had destroyed the stone with.

*A sort of enlargement*, he had described it to Mori as. *As if I had spread until I was touching every inch of that place*. Chuuya left his blood in every place he destroyed and every carcass he made. In that voice Chuuya had made up at seven — just to imagine a sound that was not his own starvation — Arahabaki had sworn that was what all deities did: gave and took. Ate and got devoured. Got caged and —

“I’m sorry,” Chuuya heard himself say.

For once, Arahabaki didn’t seem to know what to say.

Perhaps it was on him, like all that concerned the singularity — perhaps Chuuya had no more words left to give. Perhaps self-directed pity was a strange, unusual thing, and Chuuya hadn’t cried over himself since the first time he had tasted bread and it hadn’t smelled of blood.

*I am all you’re ever going to be*, he thought. His first friend had been himself, and had been a killer, so he had given him another name — because children were cowards, and he was no child. *I am all you’re ever going to be*. Chuuya hadn’t minded wrecking himself in two — not when he could pass it off as something he was doing for someone else. He had adored it because Arahabaki did, and he was all Chuuya was ever going to be.

His left arm burned. He didn’t lower his eyes.

He felt his nails scratch — dig and twist and pull. “I’m sorry,” he insisted. Claustrophobic. *Deep breaths*, Doc would have tutted. Empty-bones; lighter than air. *Like a bird*, Virgil would have said. Crawling out of the debris in Suribachi had taken three lifetimes, and stole his own from him. *You never called Arahabaki ‘him’*, before, Dazai had noted, two nights after the first time Arahabaki had cracked his skull against a wall. “I’m sorry,” he insisted, scratching through Kouyou’s gloves — because once he’d been seven and *screeching*, begging for someone to hear. If not pity, he could afford an ear. Chuuya was always stuck, in the end.

*Sorry*, Arahabaki echoed. A child learning new words; guessing by the shape of dancing lips. Chuuya had never done anything but scrape his skin to blood. How could he blame him for doing the same?

*Sorry*, he repeated, with strange diction. His oldest friend.

That was the last time he heard from him.

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Makoto and his Suribachi City gang had allegedly attempted to steal all of Agent Minami's possessions, before Yuan had pulled their ears two times each.

"You'd think they'd know better, with all the eyes on the settlement," she mumbled, as she made sure to fix the mess in her guardian's car — parked in a wider road from the upper levels, and so awfully pricey when compared to the houses being rebuilt it was startling — before the woman could return from her conversation with some Port Mafia-bought work guards. "I get that most of the adults around are Mafia, but it's not like anyone likes Suribachi kids much."

"Oi, I think we were pretty liked," Chuuya said, a bit offended. "The Police Department had our pictures framed and all."

Picking up one of the kids from the gang — a five years old named Komako, he thought — Yuan directed him a glare over her curly head of hair. "That's 'cause they got bored of printing our picture every time they got their hands on us."

"Which was often," Makoto mumbled.

Chuuya ranked a curled eyebrow over his small frame — knees to his chest on the makeshift sidewalk, sporting the disappointed bruises of failed thievery. Intermittently, he directed nasty looks to Agent Minami's impeccable silhouette. "And what would *you* — born yesterday, I'd like to add — know about that, pipsqueak?"

The kid got offended. "I've heard stories! I know *every* story about the settlement —"

"Oh, yeah?" He bent, arms crossed. With a wink in Yuan's unamused expression, he asked: "Do you know about Arahabaki?"

Makoto squinted at him. "That's a myth."

His lips trembled. "Is it?"

"I'm not *stupid*," he muttered. "'s like those stories about the Mafia's *Demon Prodigy*. Everyone knows they made them up to scare us."

Despite the throbbing muscles in his face, he felt his smile slip from his face like a buzz. Only an inkling told him Yuan had paused her rocking of the giggling girl in her arms — Chuuya didn't quite have the guts to look away from Makoto sniffing, genuine grumpiness.

*It had taken them a few months to decide Double Black had retired*, he considered. Perhaps it wasn't all surprising that the underground would choose to pretend its worst fear had been nothing at all in less than sixty days.

Chuuya straightened, huffing. "Fine, then. Stellar marks. Congrats."

Despite hiding it between his knees, it was clear Makoto was pleased. He watched Yuan skip past them to reach her guardian — her bony hip bumping hers only for a second, surprisingly gentle — and eyed Komako, in her arms, with something eerily close to childish envy.

He blinked at him. "What, do you want to be picked up?"

The kid looked at him with pure, unfiltered hatred. "I'm too old to be picked up, *dumbass*."

"Well, do you want to or not?" he scoffed.

Makoto muttered some more. Kicking the ground until his shoes — a pair from the truck of clothing he and Yuan had sent to the settlement months ago, signed off with Shirase's *GO LITTLE PESTS* note — were yellow with sandy ground, he raised both his arms, making grabby hands; all while pointedly not looking at Chuuya.

Promptly, Chuuya kept his snorting all to himself, pretending not to preen at the kid's slight surprise at his effortless carry. "What, were you trying to make me fall on my face?" he huffed, tapping on a bandaid underneath his thighs.

His small face settled on his shoulder, just scorching hot enough to denounce his blushing. "It has to happen, at some point."

The renovation of Suribachi City made for an unrealistic sight — something fifteen years old Chuuya would have either assumed to be a scam or a Port Mafia-sent propaganda campaign. The sheer number of scaffolds and trucks had turned the settlement in a less impoverished sight — less of a disaster-recovery center and more of a location with a promising future. *The Sheepdog* would be rebuilt last, that time around, *per* Chuuya's own orders — *change the name, also*, he'd ordered.

It was — different. Familiar and odd, and just enough of a stranger to feel blasphemous. But the kids trusted them enough not to pierce holes in the trucks' wheels, and most of them were growing skin over their bones, at last — and Chuuya had all the necessary experience with heresy.

"And I want an Arcade," Makoto insisted, in his ear. "*And a konbini*. And one of those cool restaurants from the American movies, with the red couches and the milkshakes —"

"We'll make sure to get you some of them, if the blood money budget allows it," a new voice concluded.

They both stiffened.

Agent Minami sported a pair of sunglasses lined in blue carvings. They hid her eyes, but not the scrutinizing expression she never let go of — not of it, nor of her tailored *tailleur*. Attempting to offer Makoto a friendly smile was fruitless — in a show he wouldn't have dared to call *adorable*, lest the child kicked him hard enough in the nuts to leave him blind, Makoto hid his face in Chuuya's shoulder, pettily blowing air.

"Agent," Chuuya greeted, instead, since he was meant to be an adult. "Perhaps you'd like to remember just who caused the bloodied creation of Suribachi City at all, before accusing?"

The woman's eyes thinned.

She searched for Yuan's silhouette, her gaze softening imperceptibly. Delivering a less kind gaze to the rest of the settlement, she offered: "This is no place for a moral debate."

"No place is a place for a moral debate, if a cop is involved," Chuuya informed her.

"I'm no cop."

"You're worse," Over the sound of Makoto amusement, he raised his hat in goodbye, and set off to walk past her. "See you next time."

Her hand closed around his elbow. Not the wisest of moves — mostly entertained by the pure *offense* in the glare Makoto raised his head from his shoulder to direct her at that move, Chuuya halted and curled an eyebrow. "Yes?"

The woman tapped her fingers on his arm. She was still intermittently glancing at Yuan — a silent check that she wouldn't come and intervene. "We hear the Port Mafia has been going through some changes," she said, careful. "It seems most of the deals and alliances you've maintained for years are suddenly gone. Anything to say to that?"

Chuuya was unimpressed. "You can tell the press to come back in six months."

"Kid," Minami insisted. "If you're planning something that will throw this city in dismay once again, you —"

He ripped himself off her grip. Jolted by the motion, Makoto hung off of him tighter, wide eyes settled on the sudden darkened expression on his face. Mindful, Chuuya made sure to relax his grip on him — directing all his bone-deep dislike to the white-pressed lips on Agent Minami's face.

"I don't know what you think Yuan means you're allowed to do," Chuuya warned — just low enough to erase most dare from her eyes, turning her expression uncertain. "But be careful."

"There's a treaty in place," Minami hissed. "Your *Ability Permit* — it shouldn't allow you to sow chaos all over our city."

Makoto turned, all of the sudden. "Chuuya is *helping* us, you fucking loser!" he snapped, both fists raised in wild motions that almost threw him out of his arms. "You don't know

*anything!* You just want to decide what's wrong and what's right, in a place you don't know anything about, like all of you stupid cops —“

He stared. “Kid —“

“How about you go to Yuan?” Minami cut through, directing a tight gaze to him. “She begged me to get you guys some more blankets — you can go help your friends distribute them.”

Makoto glared.

Biting his cheek, he put him down, pulling his earlobe. “Hey,” Chuuya tutted. “‘S fine. Thank you. You should go. A good leader takes care of the boring business, you know?”

His crossed arms weren't as threatening as he hoped them to be, small as they were — but Chuuya kept his smile on. “We do things together,” Makoto mumbled, still peeved. But he let Chuuya flick his earlobe again, and didn't leave before he'd thrown another glare at Agent Minami — brushing against Chuuya's side on his way off.

“Now you get little kids to guard you?” the woman questioned. He didn't look at her — only dug through his back pockets, searching for what he had gathered during the last shoot out. Still, she insisted: “I suppose you really are Port Mafia head to foot. This whole project — this was never meant to belong to a syndicate whose only aim is to make money off of it. Do you think a *Permit* allows you to do whatever you —“

Chuuya twirled *Tainted*-lit bullets upon his hands, and turned them in Minami's direction.

Her lips fell shut.

The cheerful clump of laughter and voices mixed with the metallic rattles of the work hauling the settlement out of its destruction. Yuan was a shrill of familiarity, her eyes away from the two of them — Chuuya leaned against the fragile wall of some plastic-covered refuge, arms crossed, feeding on the absolute stillness that overtook Minami's frame. Her fingers were stuck by her waist — near the gun in her holster.

“I wouldn't,” Chuuya suggested. “Gravity has the advantage of being faster than most.”

“You can't —“ Minami started. The *Ability Permit* flashed by her eyes, legal and theirs, and he saw it freeze her words in her throat.

Leisurely, he spun the bullets around, vibrating.

“I want you to think about this, and to give me your most honest, *Division-fuckery* answer,” he encouraged. “If I killed you right here, in the open air, with my *Ability* — who would stop me?”

They both knew he wouldn't, perhaps — but the message of it was unavoidable. The Port Mafia had chairs in the City Hall, and it had places in the national market; it had an *Ability Permit* and it had Yokohama in the tip of two fingers, held tight and selfishly — unreachable no matter all the blood dripping from their hands. Chuuya could hold a gun and shoot, and

the most citizens would offer would be a glance. *Who will stop us*, Mori had mused, once, *when they put us here?*

Slowly, Minami let her hand fall from the holster.

“I hear congratulations are in order, if our sources are accurate,” she said, after a bit. Bowing her head, mocking but mostly resigned, she added: “Executive Nakahara.”

Wordlessly, Chuuya threw the bullets in the air, and pocketed them as they landed.

“*Chuuya!*” Yuan called. She was waving — with effort; quite literally *covered* in children from Makoto’s gang, hanging off her like monkeys. Her smile was wider than the sky. “Come help me!”

Agent Minami didn’t speak until Chuuya had turned, making his way to her. “I hear condolences are in order, too.”

Fake corpses littered in drowning bruises and hangman knots fluttered between his eyelids — the smell of rotten; the feeling of hair between his fingers. They’d sent all the corpses without the bandages. Chuuya had covered most of them up, no matter the collective fire they were destined for.

*You could ask*, he considered.

Arahabaki’s voice, perhaps — traitorous even in his inhuman devotion; perhaps unknowing of anything else at all. There was no fixation it could have that wouldn’t turn into obsession — no heartbeat it could love, if not by the honor of being killed first. Yuan could have asked, too, in his stead — he knew her inner workings far too well. Convincing her wouldn’t have been hard. Minami had to know.

If she’d chosen to taunt him — Minami *had* to know.

The encrypted line’s message was heard around less, lately — but it was still a static, buzzing background mafiosi knew. *To to be brought to the Boss’ presence as soon as possible.*

“No,” Chuuya replied, without turning. “I don’t think so.”

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That Oda Sakunosuke had a grave didn’t matter — except it *did*, and it was maddening.



“It was an attempt to mock us, I assume,” Kouyou considered, browsing through dossiers like the one she’d just abandoned on her desk had not stilled Chuuya’s limbs. “Burying his closest friend against our traditions — making him reject our name just as he did,” A smile curled her lips — a distinctively mean sight. “*Two traitors and a dead man leave the Mafia*. Almost a pun, isn’t it?”

Chuuya’s eyes studied the picture one of the goons had taken — a single tombstone, white and new, standing solemn underneath a tree.

*How dare you*, he thought, almost delirious with head spinning *something*, too head wrenching to be mere rage; and he could have *killed* him, he thought, for a moment — he’d have killed him, if he’d seen him in front of him. The Flags’ graves, stolen and never anything but an offense to their name — the grass on his knees, permanent and forever there, because Chuuya was a selfish, terrible friend, and he would be until the end. *How dare you*.

What came out, odd and unrealized until he heard it — *you and I are the same*, Dazai had sworn, hallucinated and all too accurate, because Chuuya had *known him* from the first *second* — was: “He must have loved him.”

Kouyou raised her eyes on him, hesitant.

“It’s a smack, Chuuya,” she told him, after a beat. Something complicated twisted her face — for a moment, she looked at him the way she had when he was fifteen; momentarily, but deeply sure that he would be a difficult tassel to fit. “A dig at Mori, and just another instance of his use of those around him. Nothing more.”

His lips dried. Chuuya tapped his pen on his file — signed the document again. “Of course.”

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The shipping container smelled of what all abandoned places smelled of — with the scent of trash from the mountains enclosing it.

A Calico cat was perched by the makeshift doors, watching Chuuya approach with all the unimpressed sentience of a more human being. It didn’t even make a sound when he climbed on to tear the doors open; but it refused to play with the trash, and it followed his every move inside like it wanted to call him a burglar.

“Fuck you too,” Chuuya grunted, before he could feel stupid for it. “This is free land now.”

The cat only judged him more quietly.

The bed inside still wasn't a bed — only a dangerous-looking metal structure with something like a bundle of sheets over it. Paperwork filled the desk and the freezer over the small fridge, all of it untouched, apart from scribbled smiley faces. The old paint still lingered in some corners of the walls, dried and somewhat ancient, useless to the eye — the broken lightbulb dangled gently, creaking.

Chuuya stood in the middle of it, the roof only one ball-throw from his head; the entire place shrieking and trembling at his every motion. There wasn't a sound to be heard for miles.

"I'll never get you," he concluded, stunned.

The container creaked some more. Behind him, a deep voice considered: "And yet homes are a wonderful indicator of our being, are they not?"

He was a tall man, probably around fifty, barely framed by the door. His shoes were deep in the layer of trash that had accumulated in front of the shipping container, with Dazai's late absence — the most he did about it was move it around with the T-shaped cane in his hands. His bowler hat hid a half fringe of chestnut hair — his suit was Western-looking, and his gloves creaked with use.

"Who the hell are you?" Chuuya ordered, tensing up along the preparing lines of *Tainted*.

When he offered Chuuya a smile, there was something in his eyes that made them golden. "Just a stray," he answered, vaguely. "You could call me *Sensei*, if you wanted."

He curled an eyebrow. "I don't remember you teaching me anything, old man."

"Not directly, no," *Sensei* assured. "But I'm definitely to blame for some things. Now," With a *thud!* of his cane against the container, echoing and startlingly violent, the old man offered him his most earnest look. "Tell me. What happens?"

Chuuya blinked, very slowly.

"What happens when?" he asked.

It was his turn to blink. "Now, obviously. I mean — the story has to go somewhere, yes? This city has finally reached the balance I had hoped for, at last, but I'm not so foolish as to think this could be the end of it. Truly," *Sensei* scrutinized the small space of the shipping container, scratching each side of his eccentric mustache, "Truly, I'm not sure this story could be over without him."

It all felt very cold, all of the sudden. "You want me to believe you know where he is?" was all he managed to ask — torn between caution and absolute speechlessness. "*Who* are you?"

"I don't," *Sensei* assured him. "I have an inkling of where he will end up, but that's all. In the name of all I have taken so much time to create, I have to ask you — would you mind being with him, when the time comes?"

His lips moved around nothing.

Chuuya vaguely wondered if the fumes from the dumping site could get into someone's brain. He wasn't sure if he would have called that old man or himself the victim, though.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he spat.

"The end of the Book," *Sensei* said, with a half irritated shrug that reminded him terribly of *something* — it didn't land until he tapped on his cane, fingers untrembling like only Mori's own had ever been. Abruptly, the air around that old man turned sharper — littered with *intention*. Chuuya had never not known when danger was walking in his territory.

"Obviously."

Chuuya tried to say something rational — a better request than *what the fuck* or *who the fuck*. It sounded wrong in his head no matter the order of the words.

Eventually, because nothing else really mattered, he landed on: "Do you know where he is?"

Something like amusement broke through the severe lines of the man's traits — all thin lines and squinting eyes, unimpressively feline.

"If I knew," he said, "I wouldn't tell you."

That had his jaw clenching. "He might not even be alive," he reminded him.

"You know he is," *Sensei* corrected. "Please, do not waste my time."

Chuuya did know. It was the first time in a while he was believed so swiftly about it, though. "Are you — some weirdo who took him to heart and doesn't want the Mafia to execute him?"

"The Mafia wouldn't," *Sensei* waved it all away as if entirely unreasonable. "That vermin of mine wouldn't be so stupid. And you'd hardly let it happen. I know," He interrupted him, before he could open his mouth and protest. "I know you'd never. I have watched all of it. Do not attempt to lecture me on my own creations."

Chuuya's fists flexed. "You're no creator of mine."

"And you're no creature," the man agreed. "But I *am* Yokohama, and you're certainly hers."

It seemed hard to argue against that.

"So what," he snapped, instead.

"So what?" the man echoed, peacefully.

"What are you telling me? I don't get it."

"You will," *Sensei* assured. "With him or without him. You have a talent for rebuilding from the ashes, don't you? I have faith in you. This is merely another instance of being left behind."

As with all things — there is something to learn.”

Cursedly, it struck a chord.

“Since you know so much,” he hauled out of his throat, between gritted teeth, “I could take you back to the Headquarters and have them take it out of your carcass.”

“Certainly,” *Sensei* confirmed — except he seemed rather tranquil about it. “Your Boss would be more than happy to see me. But you won’t.”

At an *impasse*, they kept quiet.

Uncaring of the tedious affair, the shipping container creaked along to the wind. Chuuya felt his eyes be called by the normalcy of it all — of the pair of socks Dazai had left on the brink of the one stool around; of a hair tie that was Chuuya’s, on the right side of his pillow. Bloodied clothes under the bed — the lingering ghost of an ersatz idea.

*It hasn’t even been two months*, he reminded himself. No pranks and no stitches and none of it. Quiet, too — a different kind than the silent notes carved in Dazai’s skin.

Brusque, and as rude as Kouyou had tried to wrench out of his starved frame, he cut: “Is he, like — alright?”

*Sensei*’s gaze didn’t soften. Something like curiosity nested inside his pupils, though — just deep enough to tell Chuuya that he was taken aback.

“Oh,” he mused, studying him. “I assumed you two would be just like — I guess I was wrong.”

There were few things Chuuya hated more than blabbering without context. “Well?”

“He is,” *Sensei* replied. “He isn’t.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” Chuuya answered, automatically. He didn’t. Then: “Because —“ His hands were at loss with what to do with themselves. *Because*. Because all was inevitable and all was his fault. Because *soukoku*, he recalled, *enemies of the bad guys*. Because Oda Sakunosuke was dead and Sakaguchi Ango was a traitor, and at the very least — if he’d never understood Dazai at all — he did understand *that*. He’d forgiven Rimbaud on his death bed after making it himself. He had carried that blue tourmaline home and he had believed, stubbornly, *it’d go back to normal*.

“He’s mine to kill,” he concluded. That was all that there had ever been — from when his shoe had first landed on Dazai’s chest. “That’s why.”

*Sensei* said nothing. When Chuuya turned to look at him — maybe to nudge him some more; maybe to give up his rationality and just die in an attempt to drag him to the Headquarters —

the man had disappeared.

The Calico cat from before *meow*-ed at him with unbridled taunt. It climbed the mountains of trash with swift paws, and vanished faster than Chuuya could wonder about his own insanity.

His phone was in his hand before Chuuya could wonder about the texture of it underneath his fingertips — he left it on the desk, and then he watched the *Mackerel's* nominative be rattled by the inquisitive *beep* of an attempted call, his arms crossed tight enough to bruise.

He waited.

He waited. *Soukoku*, he recalled, like an itch and a hiccup. *Enemies of the bad guys*.

Chuuya picked up the phone and hauled it against the wall.

He exhaled only when the pieces landed on the ground in a clattering shrill, fragments flying in different directions and white noises ringing over the nauseating pumping of blood in his eyes — only the ghost of his arm motion left, stiffening his muscles into a marble reproduction of what his own foolishness would look like on Dazai's tongue, as he laughed with the sanctimonious satisfaction of someone who had played them all.

“How dare you?” he heard himself say.

*How dare you*, he thought. Chuuya had lost it all and he'd *stayed* — Chuuya was Kouyou's best student and the Mafia's sole shadow left; and Dazai was a coward and he was *alive*, which had to mean *something* in the anesthetized mess Boss had complimented and in the way he'd *known* Chuuya knew nothing — and how nauseatingly, pathetically *abandoned* he had to have looked for Mori to have simply *known*. Chuuya wasn't like them. Chuuya had always known he was going to leave — in a casket or in a passing wind, dragging Chuuya's stupid, *unavoidable* whisper of hope by raw skin — because he'd thought, maybe even just once — since gods did not pray and Nakahara Chuuya did not beg, not ever, not for him — he'd implored, quietly, to his own starved hands, betrayed and alone — *at least him*. At least *him*.

He was so angry he couldn't see. He was so angry he couldn't think. It didn't matter and he'd always known; because Chuuya wasn't like them, not about *him*, and he'd known Dazai would not die *there*; because now he had a seat that wasn't a replacement but *almost* — because all of it was always stained and cursed and haunted by his presence and by second place and by the quietness of *No Longer Human*, never to be felt again; all of it was nothing but Arahbaki, rattling his cage, and Chuuya, *alone*, and *why* did that bastard get to pull him by strings he had ripped out with his own bare hands — and it didn't matter, and he'd never reached him at all, and Chuuya understood, he *understood*, because it was about a *friend* and because Chuuya *always fucking understood*, and he was so angry he couldn't *breathe* —

The shipping container creaked with the wind. He exhaled as if it was punched out of him.

Teeth gritted, he dropped on the bed.

Frame rattled and metal squeaking — there was nothing more to do. The firmament gleamed through the square of the makeshift door. There was a silence that turned that living location into something a bit more sensible — but he knew it had never been about the hush of the wind at all.

*Would you mind being with him, when the time comes?*, the man had asked.

“I am here,” Chuuya informed the empty space. His phone was destroyed on the ground. An ache of absence. The knowledge of not wanting it back. “I have fucking been here.”

Haunted houses had no mouths. Dazai was no foundations and no *welcome* mat; but he’d been something. He’d been *something* enough to leave an empty space behind, and he had been *something* enough to have Chuuya search for remains. *Please*, he imagined himself saying. In another lifetime. In another body; one less scarred and more trusting. Chuuya didn’t beg. It had never amounted to a thing at all. *Forget something where I exist. Come back for it.*

*To do what?*, he heard him ask, amused. *To be killed by the tiniest of slugs?*

His fingers tightened around the rust of the bed frame. Chuuya slid to his side with the languid tentativeness of a thief. His hat landed somewhere on the ground — the chain made a gunshot sound against the metal floor. He hadn’t been tired in a month. He hadn’t thought about the curve of Dazai’s face much either.

He slept until the morning. Mori sent out an official order to demolish the container the next day.

The penthouse was silent.

The lights were turned off, replaced by the gentle rays flooding the room from the floor to ceiling windows — the furniture was nothing but golden outlines; the suggestion of materiality. Chuuya let his hat fall to the ground, fixing his shoes by the door. He had learned to be quiet years ago — his motions were a hush of wind, and the *thud!* of his socks against the pavement.

Chuuya didn't feel the absence of *it* until his hands dragged across the absent dust on the cabinet.

“What the —“ he muttered, squinting at the naked counter.

He turned his eyes to the gray curtains, still shut — ranked them over the ancient carved lines on the doorframe, where his height had always been marked lower than it was. By the golden doorknob of the elevator-doors, the thin scratches of a lockpick pin glistened.

He stilled.

Abandoned by his fingers, the empty space where his stolen blue tourmaline stone had rested seemed to buzz, haunted by leftover quietness.



**On a night a car exploded.**

Despite their worst Mafia-black intentions, Beatrice's office had been mostly left as it was — a more respectful crypt for a long-dead enemy.

Chuuya kept his wine there.

*It isn't yours*, Dazai would tut, occasionally, when they passed by the alleged safe-house and did not stop. The space was wide and the curtains were heavy enough to hide a murder — plus, it had the added advantage of an Arcade stop. Except the Arcade was a dusty, abandoned ghost, and there was no murder bloodied enough Chuuya could put in place that

would overshadow the crime scene the boy had left him to deal with. *You're just worse than a thief.*

"You don't get to fucking talk," Chuuya let the ghosts know, uncorking the *Petrus* he'd left on Beatrice's old desk while he looked for a glass. In the end, he ditched it — going for the neck of the bottle. "Better a thief than a deserter."

Unsurprisingly, the walls stayed silent.

He threw the cork somewhere. With a well done stretch, his hat followed.

He downed a sip that lasted longer than his beating heart could last in his throat — he tried to land on the Victorian couch in the corner, and he landed on the ground, instead. Chuuya sprawled like a star, sighing in satisfaction, and focused on nothing but the sizzling wine spreading through his viscera like more effective blood.

"Fucking finally," he managed, around the mouth of the *Petrus*.

He still carried leftover ashes from the car's explosion on his coat. Kouyou would be mad he hadn't immediately ran to the Headquarters — he tried to focus on the *urge* that thought caused. But it was muffled by the wine, and by the electrifying *something* that had traveled from her whispers on the phone — afraid for a rumor Chuuya *knew* had to have reached every corner of Yokohama — and stuck to the raw skin under his nails.

Dazai had left one of his lockpick pins on the coffee table, near his heel — Chuuya kicked its leg, grunting, until the needle rolled to the ground.

"Good riddance," he added, pleased.

Over the hiss in his bones, Hirose Fumiko played through Beatrice's old turntable, melodic and gentle. Somewhere through his forty seventh sip of wine and the end of the song, the pleasure faded into a number kind of nothingness.

"Want me to fucking blame you?" Chuuya questioned, drowsy. Dazai had been all bones and all blood — eyebags and a hatred that had nowhere to go, and he was *meant* to live and die for the Port Mafia, like all of them. And he'd left. Somehow. "You piece of shit? You fucking *coward?*"

No one left, but he'd left. He had built his underground tunnels, and he hadn't even used them. He was petty even in death, and he was still alive, because Chuuya would have *known*.

No one ever left, but Chuuya always went back to the barren starting point. "Good for you," he heard himself say, distantly.

Chuuya waited for the itch of his arms. Chuuya waited for the irritation — for the forecast of paperwork and a shaken syndicate he called home. For the warmest thing in his veins, be it rage or be it determination. Be it the face Dazai made when he won a game at the Arcade — no matter if cheating was a tool; no matter if in a land where the taste of betrayal had lived

longer than even Mori's best smiles, '*partners*' meant *something*. But the Arcade had been shut down, and he had no partner, and Chuuya felt nothing at all.

Spurred by a wind that was nowhere to be found, his hat rolled down from the couch, landing by his fingers.

Chuuya put it on, and that was it.

***Double Black***

***File Number: 510003***

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[?] [...]

[Continue?] [...]

[Continue?] [...]

**ERROR**

*[You've reached the end of this file]*

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***the end.***

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## Chapter End Notes

me, last chapter: suspend your belief for dazai's miraculous scar-healing techniques

mori: is this thing fucking stupid

Mikko Harvey, from "For M," Foundry. "Please forget your scarf in my life, and come back later for it."

Well. Here we are. I'm not even sure where to begin, I'm not going to lie (which you can probably notice from me dedicating my first end-of-chapter silly omake to myself) but. Well.

I started writing this fic five years ago (almost five and a half, now). At the time, it was completely different — nothing more than a few scenes and the (very) hopeful plan of a 20k words short Mafia Soukoku introspection work. The first chapter you guys see now is the result of *FIVE DIFFERENT* (!!!) rewrites, all of them incredibly different one from the other. Actually, the entire first act was entirely rewritten when I finished the second, because I'd finally understood where I wanted this fic to go, and I wanted to make sure the beginning of it lived up to that self-expectation. I'm hardly ever proud of the things I do, but this fic has been with me for such a long time that I'd feel bad about bad-mouthing it now. So — maybe not entirely satisfied (*not ever*) but glad that I managed to end it.

I can never thank any of you guys enough for all the love you showed this fic. Don't mean to isolate anyone who might read this after it's done (welcome in that case!! and thank you so much!!) but I hope all of you who've been commenting/leaving kudos/even just reading since the very first chapters know that I wouldn't have finished this fic without your support. Genuinely. Like this is a monster of a fic. I needed all the support I could get, and re-reading you guys' comments gave it to me. I can never thank you enough, but I do hope you could feel all my love and appreciation whenever I answered your comments. I hope you can feel it now, too.

The fic is done. I don't plan on writing more for this universe (thought catch me making references in other canon-compliant fics because what am I if not self-indulgent). This fic will forever be my silly little things — you guys might get my playlist for it, though, eventually!! Maybe I'll post it as a chapter, who knows. It's not like I can stay away from soukoku for long. Not even sure what I'm meant to do with my life without blood-bound camellias...

Well. I've already talked enough. If you've read up until here — thank you. If you're reading this as it's already finished — thank you. If you're re-reading — damn, you're brave, but thank you so much. That's all I can say. Thank you for liking it and even for not liking it, and thank you for withstanding my 800k words of repressed homoeroticism, and thank you for being so kind about my first work, and my non-first-language English, and all of it. I hope you have a wonderful day, week, month, and everything.

Stay warm, and I hope to see you soon!

— sapphirestormout.

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